



# OPERATIONS CHALLENGE 2023



Out of the 55 teams from around the world who participated in this year's Operations Challenge competition in Chicago, three teams emerged on top of their respective divisions: South Carolina's Controlled Chaos in Division I, Ontario, Canada's Sludgehammers in Division II, and Oregon's Poopa Troopa in Division III. The 36th annual Operations Challenge roster also represented more countries and U.S. states than ever before. Kieffer Photography

## WORLD'S TOP WATER TALENTS SKIRMISH IN CHICAGO DURING LARGEST-EVER COMPETITION

*Justin Jacques with assistance from Steve Harrison and Jessica Rozek*

**W**elcoming a record-shattering 55 teams representing seven countries, 25 U.S. states, and the District of Columbia, the 36th annual Operations Challenge competition offered onlookers a chance to see the world's most talented water professionals go hard-hat-to-hard-hat for a shot at global glory.

Operations Challenge consists of five action-packed events testing an array of skills that underpin work on the front lines of the water sector: Process Control, Laboratory, Collection Systems, Safety, and Vaughan (Montesano, Washington) Maintenance. Four-member teams, each representing a Water Environment Federation (WEF; Alexandria, Virginia) Member Association or comparable regional organization, prepare year-round to take on Operations Challenge in one of three divisions based on their competition experience.

Jeff Sober, WEF Operations Challenge Committee Chair and Director of Water Services for Garver (Frisco, Texas), touted the borderless benefits of the program before a packed awards ceremony audience of about 700 competitors, volunteers, and fans on October 3.

"Hands down, Operations Challenge is the best training and professional development program in the world," Sober said. "My biggest takeaway from watching you each strive to be number one is that the level of passion for our industry that exists in this room cannot be matched anywhere."

# HARD WORK AND HUMANITY STEER CONTROLLED CHAOS TO HISTORIC DIVISION I VICTORY



Tyler Waterhouse (left) and Rory Byrne of Controlled Chaos move with lightning speed to complete the Collection Systems Event. The team scored the fastest time in the event out of 55 teams, finishing in just 73 seconds. Kieffer Photography

**C**ontrolled Chaos this year joined an exclusive club of only three other teams in Operations Challenge history that have won three Division I championships:

the LA Wrecking Crew, the TRA CREWSers, and Terminal Velocity.

“It’s an honor to even be mentioned in the same sentence as those legendary teams,” said Controlled Chaos captain Patrick Ross. “They will forever be the teams that set the standard for Operations Challenge competition.”

The team — Ross, Tyler Waterhouse, Rory Byrne, Kevin Ganley, and coach Troy Newton — represents the Water Environment Association of South Carolina and Mount Pleasant Waterworks. They completed the Collection Systems Event

in just 73 seconds, a full 11 seconds sooner than the next-fastest finisher. They also led Division I in the Safety Event, placed second in the Lab Event, and third in Vaughan Maintenance.

Rather than any extraordinary, innate talents, Ross attributed Controlled Chaos’ success to old-fashioned hard work. The intensity of his team’s year-round preparations, he said, sometimes leads to arguments and cursing matches. But “like a family or brotherhood,” Ross described that each teammate is quick to pick each other up and carry on. That same spirit guides their interactions with other teams. Although Ross called his crew “hyper-competitive,” he stressed that Controlled Chaos expects to shake hands and have a beer with their competitors after each outing regardless of its outcome.

Controlled Chaos noted that they already are looking forward to defending their spot at the peak of the Operations Challenge mountain next year in New Orleans.

“Complacency is not where we want to be, and the idea of continuous improvement is always top of mind,” Ross said. “Our strategy for next year is simple: Do better.”

This year’s Division I featured 10 teams. Second place in the division went to Centrifugal Force from the Water Environment Association of Texas, who led the pack in Vaughan Maintenance. In third overall came the Rocky Mountain Water Environment Association’s Elevated Ops, who placed first in Process Control. The Technicians from the Chesapeake Water Environment Association placed first in Lab. 🏆



From left, Controlled Chaos’ Rory Byrne, Tyler Waterhouse, and Patrick Ross keep their brains and hands busy during the Laboratory Event. Kieffer Photography

# SLUDGEHAMMERS BANG OUT DIVISION II WIN WITH WELL-ROUNDED PERFORMANCE

**E**merging on top from a field of 23 Division II teams were the Sludgehammers, representing the Water Environment Association of Ontario (WEO) and Region of Durham Public Works Department (Whitby, Ontario). With their win, the Sludgehammers — Kevin Round, Kirk Gonsalves, Matt Moffatt, captain Adam Hubers, and coaches Andy Griffin and Annette Ashton — are poised to become the first Canadian team to compete in Division I since 2018 if they return next year.

“We saw what it was like to compete at the highest level in past years, and we are excited to have our turn,” Hubers said. “It’s an honor to be able to compete for the Region of Durham and WEO. We have been very lucky to receive support from both of these organizations.”

In an Operations Challenge rarity, the Sludgehammers won in their division despite not placing higher than third in any of the five events. However, they finished no lower than eighth place in any trial, a result they attributed to their attempts to devote equal practice time to each event. Friendly competitions with the Division III Highland Creek Rabble Rousers, also representing WEO, as well as allotting ample time to bond as a team outside of practices, also paid off. Still, Hubers described their victory as a surprise.

“To be honest, we thought we would finish around top 5 or 6,” Hubers said. “With so many good teams in Division II and the competition getting tighter every year, we were extremely proud to hear our name called up for first place.”

As they turn their attention toward Operations Challenge 2024, Hubers said the Sludgehammers have one message for their Division I rivals:

“Keep your head up and your stick on the ice — the Sludgehammers are coming for you ... Eh!”

Elsewhere in Division II, Double Duty from the Rocky Mountain Water Environment Association took second place overall after placing first in Vaughan Maintenance. New England Water Environment Association’s Rising Sludge finished third, propelled by a top showing in the Process Control Event. The Water Bears (New York Water Environment Association) placed first in the Lab Event. Team HRSD (Virginia Water Environment Association) won the Safety Event. The Union County Predaturds (North Carolina One Water) netted the top spot in Collection Systems. 🏆



Kevin Round of the Region of Durham Public Works Department (Whitby, Ontario, Canada) Sludgehammers races to cut a horizontal pipe during the Collection Systems Event. Kieffer Photography



Members of the Sludgehammers, who placed first in Division II out of 23 teams, included (from left) Kirk Gonsalves, Matt Moffatt, Adam Hubers, and Kevin Round. Kieffer Photography

# POOPA TROOPA'S DIVISION III SUCCESS MARKS TRIUMPHANT RETURN FOR CLEAN WATER SERVICES

**S**ending a loud-and-clear message that Clean Water Services (CWS; Portland, Oregon) remains an Operations Challenge powerhouse following a 3-year hiatus, the Poopa Troopa outmaneuvered 21 other teams to take home the Division III championship.

The Poopa Troopa, which includes Paul Buckmaster, Emily Desmarteau, Emily Stefansson, captain Skyler Edmison, and coaches Kevin Wegener and Noah Harvey, stood out in the Vaughan Maintenance and Process Control Events, placing second and third, respectively. The team represents CWS and the Pacific Northwest Clean Water Association.

Team members believe their remarkably diverse skill sets contributed to their success. The Poopa Troopa features experts in operations, instrumentation, collection systems, and laboratory procedures, enabling them to “lead and teach each other different portions of events” during practices, described Stefansson. The team also expressed gratitude for the experience of competition veterans at CWS, who not only offered technical pointers, but also prepared them for the atmosphere of WEFTEC®.

“Our coach Kevin Wegener would continually tell us this conference is ‘Wastewater Disneyland,’ and I now believe this was an accurate interpretation,” Edmison said.

Wegener took pride in his division-dominating squad and was grateful to make a return to Operations Challenge.

“As a former competitor and first-time coach, leading CWS into the next generation was a significant opportunity for me,” Wegener said. “Witnessing this new team take on this



From left, Poopa Troopa members Emily Desmarteau, Skyler Edmison, Paul Buckmaster, and Emily Stefansson work together to tackle the Collection System Event. Kieffer Photography

responsibility and excel has been incredibly fulfilling beyond my expectations.”

Alongside the Poopa Troopa, the River Rangers from CWS also debuted in Division II this year. The two teams cooperated closely, often scheduling joint practices. If both teams return to Operations Challenge next year, they will become Division II rivals.

“The River Rangers were a big part of the Poopa Troopa’s success,” Harvey said. “Practicing side by side with them, bouncing ideas off one another, and just the overall support made the competition a much more enjoyable experience.”

The Illinois Water Environment Association’s Second City Sewer Crew placed second in Division III, followed by the Highland Creek Rabble Rousers from the Water Environment Association of Ontario in third. First-place finishers in each event included the Excrement Exterminators from the Ohio Water Environment Association in Lab, the TRAIblazers from the Water Environment Association of Texas in Safety, Indiana Water Environment Association’s Brownsburg Biohazard in Process Control, the Iowa Water Environment Association Reclaimers in Vaughan Maintenance, and Team Blue Wave from the Chesapeake Water Environment Association in Collection Systems. 🌊



From left, the Poopa Troopa’s Emily Stefansson, Paul Buckmaster, and Skyler Edmison disassemble equipment after rescuing an injured co-worker during the Safety Event. Kieffer Photography

# INTERNATIONAL TEAMS IMPRESS DURING TRANSCONTINENTAL CONTEST



**A**s each team entered the competition area, they passed eight prominently draped flags — one for each of the seven countries represented in this year’s Operations Challenge, as well as an Argentinian flag in honor of recently deceased former competitor Hector Vacarro.

This year saw the return of the Poo Fighters from DWA Germany and the Aarhus Vand Great Danes from DANVA (Denmark). Special Forces representing ACODAL Colombia, the Helsinki Sewer Turdles from HSY Finland, and Severn-Trent Academy from CIWEM (England) also competed this year for the first time.

For Flemming Moller, coach of the Great Danes who competed in 2017 and 2019, this year’s competition was a homecoming. Moller previously lived in Chicago for 2 years before returning to Denmark. The rest of his team — Magnus Hansen, Malte Olsen, Frank Davidsen, and captain Gustav Terp — called their coach an excellent tour guide who “knows every building.” The Great Danes won this year’s inaugural Hector Vaccaro Best International Team Award following impressive performances in the Collection Systems and Vaughan Maintenance Events.

“I feel a lot of similarities when I return this year,” Moller said. “It’s great to see a lot of familiar

friends. It’s the camaraderie between the teams that makes us keep wanting to come back.”

They specifically mentioned the Poo Fighters — Lukas Kohl, Marco Lederer, Sophia Nerrether, captain Hans-Joachim Ziethen, and coaches Michael Doerr and Peter Albrecht — as close friends. This year, the Poo Fighters purchased their tickets to Chicago using their own money.

“You have to find the right people who have the motivation to do this — to be part of one family for a short time,” Ziethen said. “It’s not just buying a ticket, coming here, and drinking beer. You want to do the best job you can during the competition. That’s what it’s all about.”

Some teams, such as the Sewer Turdles and Special Forces, earned an invitation to WEFTEC after winning in competitions modeled after Operations Challenge. That invitation came as a shock for Special Forces, who placed first among 18 teams in this year’s Olimpiadas Sanitarias competition in Colombia.

“When we were competing in Colombia, we didn’t know what the prize would be,” Special Forces competitor José Joaquín García-Becerra said through a translator. “We were just focusing on winning that event and were really surprised to learn we would be going to Operations Challenge.”

“We’re excited we were able to come here,”

**This year’s Operations Challenge hosted more international teams than ever before, including the Sewer Turdles from Finland, the Great Danes from Denmark, the Poo Fighters from Germany, Severn-Trent Academy from the U.K., Special Forces from Colombia, as well as two teams from Canada: The Sludgehammers and Highland Creek Rabble Rousers.**  
Kieffer Photography



**The Helsinki Sewer Turdles** — from left, Antero Dillström, Kim Nyman, Seppo Lius, and Mauno Pasanen — address blockages in a chopper pump during the Vaughan Maintenance Event. Kieffer Photography

**The Poo Fighters** — from left, Marco Lederer, Lukas Kohl, Sophia Nerrether, and Hans-Joachim Ziethen — align themselves in prime position to complete the Vaughan Maintenance Event as quickly as possible. Kieffer Photography

added teammate Eduar Alberto Villegas-Carabalí. “It’s our first time not only in Operations Challenge but also in the U.S., and we’re overwhelmed but super happy.”



Special Forces — who won this year’s Best Fan Support Award thanks to colorful maracas and a spirited, Spanish-singing cheering section — compared Operations Challenge to the FIFA World Cup™, expressing their pride in representing Colombia among the “champions of the world.” Additional members of the team included Hover Alexander Palacios-Mancilla, Yelson Hinestroza-Caicedo, Diego Pizarro-Quinayas, and Víctor Mario García-Jiménez.

Other teams, such as Severn-Trent Academy, are true newcomers to the sport. The team — Lucas King, Stephen Sims, Simon Pedley, captain Mark Wilson, and coach Carl Whitehouse — met each other for the first time only a week before WEFTEC. Despite their lack of experience, their willingness to learn by doing earned them this year’s Best Effort Award.

“It’s like we’ve been told we’re going to compete in the Olympics, and not been told what sport we’re competing in,” King said.

Severn-Trent Academy joined Special Forces and the Sewer Turdles for a last-minute training session the day before the competition began. The crash course, which was Severn-Trent Academy’s first time seeing the events in action, was hosted by Operations Challenge veterans: **The Technicians** from Chesapeake Water Environment Association, the Water Environment Association of Ontario **Sludgehammers**, 2022 Division I champions **Elevated Ops** from the Rocky Mountain Water Environment Association, and Raudel Juarez,



**From left, Malte Olsen, Magnus Hansen, and Frank Davidsen of the Aarhus Vand Great Danes install an Inserta Tee® into a stretch of PVC pipe during the Collection Systems Event.** Kieffer Photography

coach of the TRA River Guardians from the Water Environment Association of Texas. A similar training session, attended by the Poo Fighters and Great Danes, was held at the campus of Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) a day earlier. MWRD’s Second City Sewer Crew, the Florida Water Environment Association **Bio-Wizards**, and 2023



**Lucas King of Severn-Trent Academy finds time to flash a smile during the Lab Event.** Other members of Severn-Trent Academy included Stephen Sims, Simon Pedley, and Mark Wilson. Kieffer Photography

Division I champions **Controlled Chaos** acted as instructors.

“What always impresses us — but never surprises anymore — is the enthusiasm to learn these very complicated events and rule sets,” said Tyler Waterhouse of Controlled Chaos. “Every international competitor we’ve ever worked with demonstrates this ability. It’s massively impressive.”

## SMOOTH OPERATORS GLIDE THROUGH THREE DIVISIONS IN THREE YEARS

**T**he Smooth Operators, representing North Carolina One Water and Greenville Utilities Commission, made their Division I debut this year following the most rapid rise in competition history. This year’s iteration of the Smooth Operators featured Kyle Meeks, Adam Garris, Chris Hill, alternate Julius Phillips, captain Bryon Orr, and coach Steve Hedgepeth.

Inspired to form a team after seeing the **Union County Predaturds** compete at a regional Operations Challenge event in North Carolina, the Smooth Operators debuted as two separate, two-member teams during Operations Challenge 2020 — a virtual competition necessitated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Orr, a founding member of the team, described

that competing in two-member teams was an excellent way to learn the fundamentals.

“When you’re learning basketball, you sometimes play two-on-two because there’s more of a focus on what each person is doing [than with a full-sized team],” Orr said, noting similarities with Operations Challenge. “It helps you learn faster.”

Although scaling to a four-member format was a challenge, the Smooth Operators rose to the occasion. They competed in person for the first time at Operations Challenge 2021 as a single team, where they handily took the top spot in Division III. Last year, they outperformed 16 other teams to earn second place overall in Division II, earning a Division I invitation heading into this year’s competition.

The Smooth Operators, representing NC One Water and Greenville (North Carolina) Utilities Commission, competed in person for the first time in 2021. This year, they debuted in Division I, marking the fastest rise to the top in competition history.

Kieffer Photography



“The competition in Division I is very stiff. It’s the best of the best,” Orr said. “We know the competition that’s here, we’ve battled with them before, and have been following a lot of them for a couple years now at least. We know what we have

to do to be here with them.” The Smooth Operators once again delivered a command performance, earning second place in the Division I Collection Systems Event with a breakneck time of 84 seconds.

## TRAILBLAZERS AND RIVER GUARDIANS INHERIT TRA LEGACY



Two teams representing the Trinity River Authority (TRA; Arlington, Texas) debuted this year in Divisions I and III. Here, the TRA River Guardians — Gary Carr, Billy Ball, Miguel Zavala, and George Garcia — rush forward to begin the Safety Event.

Kieffer Photography

Perhaps no individual organization in competition history has had more success than the Trinity River Authority (TRA; Arlington, Texas), which has sponsored countless Operations Challenge teams, including seven-time Division I champions the TRA CREWSers. This year, TRA sent two teams to Chicago: the TRA River Guardians in Division I, and the TRAILblazers in Division III.

The TRA River Guardians formed from members of two Division II TRA teams that competed last year. The team — Gary Carr, Billy Ball, Miguel Zavala, alternate Justin Mitchell, and captain George Garcia — acknowledges the mentorship of several TRA veterans, including coach and former CREWSer Raudel Juarez. Now that they have assumed the mantle of TRA’s top team, they are already playing an active role in paying their experience forward.



In Division III, the TRAILblazers — Crystal Harness, Crystal Delgadillo, Maria Rubiano, and Gladys Garcia — made their mark by placing first in the Safety Event and third in the Lab and Vaughan Maintenance Events.

Kieffer Photography

“We want to support all the teams — not just in Texas, but nationally, internationally, whatever,” Carr said. “We can be competitive, but all of this is about the fun of the sport and getting more teams involved.”

The TRAILblazers praised the River Guardians for helping them learn the fundamentals during their early days as a team.

“They showed us the ropes, but we learned how to tie the knots,” said TRAILblazers captain Crystal Harness.

The TRAILblazers — Harness, Crystal Delgadillo, Maria Rubiano, Gladys Garcia, and

coach Megan Etchegary — demonstrated their winning pedigree by placing first in the Division III Safety Event this year. They expressed their pride in representing the next generation of TRA and named Patty Cleveland, former TRA Northern Region Executive Manager who recently retired after 46 years with TRA, as their inspiration to excel.

“Patty had just retired, and she was really supporting us when our team formed,” Harness said. “And we said, ‘You know what? Patty paved the way, and we’ll continue to blaze the trail.’ We try to honor all the women like Patty who have paved the way for us in the wastewater industry.”

## TEAMS NAVIGATE THE FOG DURING VAUGHAN MAINTENANCE EVENT

A new restaurant has opened in a bustling commercial neighborhood, and the nearby pump station is experiencing unprecedented buildup of fats, oils, and grease (FOG). When these blockages reach a critical mass, this year’s Operations Challenge competitors are first on the scene to complete emergency repairs.

The 2023 Vaughan Maintenance Event tasked teams with servicing a pump to ensure it continues to meet the needs of its community despite threats from FOG, replacing an impeller, cutter bar, and flanged nozzle, reinstalling the pump inside a wet well, and ensuring it functions as intended.

Stefanie Vaughan, a fourth-generation member of the Vaughan family who has followed Operations Challenge since she was 12 years old, described the joy she took in designing this year’s Maintenance



Stefanie Vaughan, who has followed Operations Challenge for decades, collaborated with WEF’s Operations Challenge Committee to devise this year’s Vaughan Maintenance Event.

Kieffer Photography

Event alongside event coordinators.

“It was really a team effort to figure out what this event would look like from the 30,000-foot level all the way down to every torque, every lift, and every yank of the chain,” Vaughan said.

Specific event procedures change from year to year in order to ensure participants are familiar with emerging challenges and keep the competition relevant to problems operators face during their

day-to-day work. As FOG represents a worldwide water-sector threat, Vaughan was eager to incorporate these into Operations Challenge.

“Buildup from FOG is becoming more prevalent and a bigger problem,” Vaughan said. “We do have the equipment that can break it up, and this is a great opportunity to show that our products can assist with this issue that’s only becoming more common.”

## NEW HURDLES PLANNED FOR 2024 COLLECTION SYSTEMS EVENT



Collection Systems Event Coordinator David Briggs (left) and Vice Coordinator Kevin Fleming (right) described that next year’s redesigned Collection Systems Event will require more strategic thinking by competitors. Kieffer Photography

Changes are in the works ahead of next year’s Collection Systems Event, according to Coordinator David Briggs and Vice Coordinator Kevin Fleming. The event currently tasks teams with programming a sampler. As the sampler departs next year, competitors must instead navigate a series of flanges and couplings to build a tall, vertical pipe tower provided by new sponsor Victaulic (Easton, Pennsylvania), following provided schematics. Other

aspects of the event, including PVC pipe dissection and replacement, will remain unchanged. Fleming described that the revamped Collection Systems Event will require more strategic thinking by competitors.

“It’s going to be even more hands-on,” Fleming said. “Instead of one person handling the sampler, to be competitive, at some point it’s probably going to require two people to build the tower together. This is going to completely change the order of how teams will run the event. They’ll have to figure out whether faster is better, or if going slower to avoid mistakes is actually the better approach.”

The updated Collections Event already has been trialed by teams at various regional competitions during the last year and will continue to undergo procedural tweaks in response to team feedback in the coming months. Briggs confirmed that the event will retain its energy as the “100-yard dash” of Operations Challenge, and expressed confidence that teams will quickly take to the new rules.

“We know from experience that these teams are going to adapt,” Briggs said. “They’re going to figure out how to do this well.”

## VEOLIA’S Foothold GROWS AMONG OPERATIONS CHALLENGE RANKS

As Veolia North America (Milwaukee) is demonstrating, the Operations Challenge learning experience benefits more than just the public sector.

The multinational environmental services provider, which supplies municipalities with full-service, contract-based water workforces, sponsored four Operations Challenge teams this year: MASS Chaos, Rising Sludge, and Storm Surge representing the New England Water Environment Association,

as well as Mississippi Deep South Madness representing the Mississippi Water Environment Association.

Kelly Olanyk of MASS Chaos — which placed second in their division last year — said that at least three other Veolia-based teams are either established or in the early stages of forming. He added that the visibility of Operations Challenge complements Veolia’s ongoing efforts to spread the word about the benefits of working in the water sector.

“Veolia liked what we did and what this competition is all about, the level of energy involved,” Olanyk said. “They put out a companywide objective to get 10 teams to WEFTEC, and we’re already nearly halfway there.”

Mississippi Deep South Madness captain Brent Shelby emphasized that private-sector water professionals are as well-prepared for the pressures of Operations Challenge as any team that works directly for a utility.

“We pretty much perform under pressure every day in the field,” Shelby said. “We’ve always got people watching what we’re doing. Performing under pressure is our strong suit as contractors.”



Members of Mississippi Deep South Madness, one of four teams comprised of Veolia North America (Milwaukee) employees, work frantically to remove a pump from a wet well during this year’s Vaughan Maintenance Event. Kieffer Photography

## NO ‘HOME-FIELD ADVANTAGE’ FOR SECOND CITY SEWER CREW

Although MWRD’s Second City Sewer Crew did not have to purchase plane tickets to attend Operations Challenge, this year’s second-place Division III finishers still had much ground to cover.

The debut of the team, which features Andre Almaraz, Dave Garza, Lynn Kohlhaas, and Thomas Sinickas, marks a return for MWRD, which has not fielded an Operations Challenge team since 2019. Sandra Matual — part of a collection of coaches including Matt McGregor, John Kargbo, Conor Heffernan, and Sean Salmi — previously competed on MWRD teams.

“The competition has changed, but the people are still great,” Matual said. “It’s a lot of fun meeting people from other states and countries and learning how they do things differently than us.”

Members of the team described benefiting from the experience of Matual and the other coaches

but were quick to emphasize that “home-field advantage” does not exist in Operations Challenge.

“The only advantage is that we don’t have to travel too far, but it still takes me an hour to get here in Chicago traffic,” Kohlhaas said.



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago’s Second City Sewer Crew, including (from left) Dave Garza, Lynn Kohlhaas, Thomas Sinickas, and Andre Almaraz, size up the Collection Systems Event. Kieffer Photography

## BIO-WIZARDS STRESS COMPETITION’S MAGICAL VALUE FOR PUBLIC OUTREACH

On the day before Operations Challenge kicked off, Cody Diehl of the Florida Water Environment Association’s Polk County Bio-Wizards co-hosted a 10-hour workshop for WEFTEC attendees on best practices for public facility tours. He described tours as an excellent way to attract attention, investment, and talent to



Public outreach is at the heart of the Bio-Wizards’ mission. They frequently practice in public settings and currently are working on a custom comic book featuring their team. The Bio-Wizards include (from left) Dave McGrothy, Cody Diehl, Ed Clark, and Jeff Goolsby. Kieffer Photography

the water sector — and contended that Operations Challenge teams have a unique opportunity to net similar results.

In between more than 100 practice sessions this year, the Bio-Wizards — Diehl, Dave McGrotty, Edward Clark, captain Jeff Goolsby, and coach Chuck Nichols — kept busy with a full slate of outreach activities. They demonstrated Operations Challenge events at schools, community festivals, and even comic-book conventions. They convinced one of the secretaries from their home facility to dress as a mascot in purple wizard garb. They recently purchased a 7-m (24-ft) trailer outfitted with Bio-

Wizards branding elements to make it easier to transport event equipment to their various outings.

“For our next comic con, we’re actually going to have our own comic books,” Diehl said. “In Florida, operators just got reclassified as essential first responders. So, because of that, we’re going to produce some comic books that are based on our team that show us assisting the other first responders, because in reality, we all work together.”

Diehl urged other teams to practice in public wherever possible, and to engage onlookers about what they are doing and why. 🦄

## LONG-BELOVED VOLUNTEERS CELEBRATE THEIR RETIREMENT

**P**erennial volunteers Stacie Crandall, Steve “Junior” Johnson, and Reggie Morgan are each retiring from their respective careers this year. The three Operations

Challenge mainstays, who together have had a hand in nearly every aspect of the competition, reflected on their tenures and shared their post-retirement plans. 🦄

### STACIE CRANDALL



**First Female Operations Challenge Committee Chair**

**CAREER STATS:** Laboratory Chief for Hampton Roads Sanitation District (Virginia Beach, Virginia) – 30 years’ experience

**OPERATIONS CHALLENGE STATS:** Lab Event Coordinator, Committee Chair – 18 years’ experience

**RETIRING FROM OPERATIONS CHALLENGE:** Unsure  
**RETIREMENT PLANS:** Helping develop standards to accredit environmental laboratories

**IN HER OWN WORDS:** “Operators are not wrench-turners. They are frontline protectors of human health. And I think that Operations Challenge as it’s grown, we’ve really been able to push that message ahead. Whether you’re competing or you’re on the judging side or the coordination side, you’re contributing to education, collaboration, and moving the industry forward.”

### STEVE “JUNIOR” JOHNSON



**Three-Time Division I Winner With LA Wrecking Crew (1997, 2000, 2001)**

**CAREER STATS:** Superintendent of Treatment Plant Operations for Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts – 43 years’ experience

**OPERATIONS CHALLENGE STATS:** Competitor, Coach, Safety Event Coordinator, Committee Member – 26 years’ experience

**RETIRING FROM OPERATIONS CHALLENGE:** No  
**RETIREMENT PLANS:** Already preparing for Operations Challenge 2024 in New Orleans

**IN HIS OWN WORDS:** “This is a program I believe in. It’s done really well for my career, and I know a lot of the guys that have been on our teams with Los Angeles, it’s done a lot for them as well!”

## OPERATIONS CHALLENGE COMMUNITY HONORS STEVE HARRISON

**W**hen WEF Director of Operator Services Steve Harrison took the reins of Operations Challenge in 1997, the young competition featured only a handful of teams who battled in a small, secluded corner of the WEFTEC exhibit floor. Over 26 years, Harrison has shepherded the program to once-unimaginable heights. The Operations Challenge community took a moment to thank Harrison for his leadership during this year’s awards ceremony.

Current and former members of six Division I teams spanning three decades — the TRA CReWSers, Terminal Velocity, the Blue Ridge Brawlers, the LA Wrecking Crew, Controlled Chaos, and Elevated Ops — each presented Harrison with a custom jersey from their respective teams. Many offered remarks describing Harrison’s transformative contributions to Operations Challenge.

“Steve Harrison is Operations Challenge,” said Lacy Burnette of the Blue Ridge Brawlers. “I honestly believe that Steve would sell his soul to a street vendor on Bourbon Street if in return this competition would be guaranteed for the next 100 years.” 🦄



Steve Harrison has led efforts to coordinate the Operations Challenge competition on behalf of WEF since 1997. During an awards ceremony on October 3, the Operations Challenge community surprised Harrison with a token of recognition for his ongoing contributions to the program. Kieffer Photography

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### REGGIE MORGAN



**2023 Favorite Volunteer Award Winner**

**CAREER STATS:** Quality Assurance Manager for Hampton Roads Sanitation District (Virginia Beach, Virginia) – 39 years’ experience

**OPERATIONS CHALLENGE STATS:** Lab Event Coordinator, Maintenance Event Judge – 9 years’ experience

**RETIRING FROM OPERATIONS CHALLENGE:** Yes  
**RETIREMENT PLANS:** Flipping houses and “keeping [his] hands busy”

**IN HIS OWN WORDS:** “The big thing I like about Operations Challenge is that it’s strong competition, but there’s also a lot of camaraderie between the teams. You always see these teams helping out one another, showing each other tricks that work for them, recording each other, and asking questions afterwards. It’s really like a brotherhood, with a lot of collaboration.”

### Deeper Dive

See the Ops Challenge competitors in action at <https://bit.ly/OC-2023-video>.

