

UB math students take on NBC's Spartan challenge



left to right, The Mathletes: Trevor Bernard, Zoe Herrick, Kyle “Wooch” Graff, Ellen Lutnick and Chris Komin. (Photo by: Eli Joshua Adé/NBC)

- By [Jay Tokasz](#)
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Chris Komin can't reveal much about how his team of current and former University at Buffalo students performed in "Spartan: Ultimate Team Challenge," an NBC competition series full of muddy obstacles and heavy lifting that kicked off its second season on Monday night.

Expect to see the group featured in four upcoming episodes. And expect to see them giving their all to try and win \$250,000 in prize money.

"I can tell you we will be competitive and entertaining to watch," said Komin, who graduated in May from UB with a degree in math and film study. He now works as a dog trainer and wedding photographer.

The UB squad was not part of Monday's premiere episode, in which six teams battled for three spots to advance to the next round.

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Komin said the team was not told exactly when they would be featured on the show, so three of the four members gathered Monday night at the home of Komin's parents in Grand Island to tune in.

The other team members are: Zoe Herrick, a senior math and biomedical engineering major from Rochester; Trevor Bernard, a junior math major from Long Island; and Ellen Lutnick, a junior exercise science major from Grand Island. The fifth member is Kyle "Wooch" Graff, an elite athlete who was selected by the show to serve as team captain. Each of the 24 teams has two men and two women and a captain, except for one team made up of all women.

Members of the UB team dubbed themselves the "Mathletes" because of their shared interest in mathematics at UB.

Komin said the show's producers tried to play up the braininess of the UB group in competing against brawnier, more athletic opponents.

"They loved that," he said. "If anything, people underestimated us and that was a huge asset."

Among the opponents the Mathletes faced were a team of former Olympic pole vaulters. There are also professional and college athletes, including a professional Highland games competitor.

"A lot of intimidating muscle, that's for sure," Komin said. "We were the least experienced and youngest team by far."

The teams must tackle a grueling, mile-long obstacle course that includes pushing a one-ton steel barrel for 60 feet, hoisting a car eight feet off the ground, climbing a mud-slickened angle wall and trudging on stomachs through a pit of mud under barbed wire.

The Mathletes are no slouches athletically. Komin has been a rock climber for years and teaches the sport at the Niagara Climbing Center in the Town of Tonawanda. Herrick ran track and field and cross country in high school. Lutnick is an ultra-marathon runner and Bernard competes regularly in obstacle course events, such as the Tough Mudder.

The Mathletes were friends before they decided to become a team, often hanging out together at the Niagara Climbing Center and sometimes finding themselves in the same math courses.

Bernard, who someday hopes to win a spot on "America Ninja Warrior," the NBC show that spawned "Spartan: Ultimate Team Challenge," suggested the friends put together a team.

Filming of the episodes happened over three days in mid-April in Atlanta, on the set of "The Walking Dead," the hit zombie apocalypse show that appears on AMC.

Komin said shooting was 5 p.m. to 5 a.m. None of the Mathletes had any experience with the obstacles, other than the slippery tilted wall. But their climbing skills came in handy because many of those obstacles required lots of grip and forearm strength and the ability to limit muscle fatigue.

The Mathletes also had another advantage: They knew each other well and worked easily as a team, while some other groups struggled.

"If anything, competing brought us closer together," said Komin.