

Two AlphaLab firms ranked among best U.S. startups

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By Deborah M. Todd / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A merger of tech and collegiate athletics has two AlphaLab companies ranked as top seeds among the nation's college startups.

South Side team sports scheduling and communications platform [AthleteTrax](#) and Grove City mobile athletic recruiting app [ProfilePasser](#) both made New York-based Inc. magazine's list of [America's Coolest College Startups of 2014](#).

Chosen from a list of nearly 100 startups founded by college students, the companies are among 16 finalists that will be narrowed down to a single winner through readers' votes cast in a March Madness-style bracket. The companies face off against each other in the first round of voting, which ends Monday, and tournament winners will be announced April 16.

Rounding out Inc.'s Sweet Sixteen are companies with concepts ranging from a cosmetics product line, high-tech combat startup equipment and a subscription box of hygiene products for men. The idea that two sports-themed companies made the cut is a testament to the tenacity of company founders, said Terri Glueck, director of community development and communications for South Side incubator AlphaLab.

"If you look at all of the universities with college startups, to have two come out of the same city — or in our case, two out of the same accelerator program — the odds are extraordinary. But it's not actually about us. It's about two extremely bright and passionate young company founders being recognized," she said.

For AthleteTrax, the sudden recognition could be partially attributed to a slight revision in marketing strategy that reached beyond the NCAA for new clients, said company founder Jon Halpern.

When the cloud-based scheduling, communication and fundraising platform was introduced in 2012,

the idea was to focus on high school and college programs as primary users. After the company began branching out to collegiate athletic clubs, adult sports leagues and other more loosely formed organizations last year, membership spiked to 140 teams with more than 2,300 users from 65 different schools and leagues, representing 18 different sports.

Combined with partnerships involving apparel, equipment and travel companies that allow users to make discounted purchases of their products directly from AthleteTrax, the company is positioned to become a one-stop shop for athletes and sports organizations of all sizes. After raising \$185,000 through angel investors and a round of seed funding from AlphaLab, AthleteTrax has already received a commitment of \$100,000 from Innovation Works toward its \$500,000 second stage goal.

"[With collegiate athletic clubs], we saw an opportunity and a need. There was a lot of fragmentation with what people were using for scheduling and communication, so we saw an opportunity to come in there and it worked well," said Mr. Halpern.

Getting the nod from Inc. came as a surprise for ProfilePasser founder Samantha Weber, who said she filled out the application to enter the contest the day of its deadline, thinking, "Some kid from Harvard is going to win."

What wasn't surprising, said the 22-year-old senior, was that two companies out of AlphaLab were chosen. "We're all young companies, and when you get the kind of network and mentoring support that comes from AlphaLab, it really increases the chances for all of us to be successful."

Juggling an interview around a class on finite math at Grove City College, Ms. Weber said the designation is not only a win for AlphaLab and the region, but a solid win for her school.

"It's very cool for people to see a small Division Three college make a list like this, considering who we're up against," she said.

Since the platform that connects recruiters and athletes launched in 2012, Ms. Weber said she has been working to solidify relationships with athletes and recruiters by attending events designed to showcase athletes. So far, the company has partnered with the Fairfax, Va.-based soccer promotion organization Club Champions League and saw its first athlete recruited during the league's February Winter Showcase. Since AlphaLab's 2012 Demo Day, ProfilePasser has grown from 50 users to almost 1,000.

After receiving the initial \$25,000 seed investment from AlphaLab in 2012, ProfilePasser is in the process of raising an undisclosed amount to help toward expansion.

With ProfilePasser facing off against AthleteTrax in the first round of Inc.'s tournament, at least one Pittsburgh company will be out of championship contention by Monday.

But unlike college basketball teams bounced from the NCAA tournament after losses, both Mr. Halpern and Ms. Weber are counting their spots on the magazine's bracket as victories.

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