Esports interest exploding in Kentucky high schools with college scholarships now in play

David J. Kim, Louisville Courier Journal

Dhylan Maita, like any athlete serious about his craft, studies film, practices for hours and tracks every move made by the greatest in the game.

Only Maita isn't watching Lamar Jackson or Anthony Davis. The first-name-basis competitor he follows most closely isn't LeBron — it's Faker, the most famous and accomplished figure in esports.

In its evolution from niche hobby to a mainstream, money-making machine, electronic gaming has quickly become a competitive option for high school and college students in Kentucky.

Nationwide, more than 100 colleges offer scholarships including California Irvine, Utah, Robert Morris, Missouri and Miami (Ohio). In-state, Western Kentucky, Pikeville, Brescia, Campbellsville and Midway are among the schools with esports programs that

provide scholarship money. Additionally, opportunities for careers ranging from software engineer to game designer are abundant.

Even with the pandemic's effect, Newzoo, a gaming industry analytics firm, estimated that the global esports market will generate over $1 billion in revenue in 2020 and the 2023 revenue to be nearly $1.6 billion.

Three video games — League of Legends, Rocket League and SMITE — are offered by the Kentucky High School Athletic Association, which said that more than 100 teams and 800 students across the commonwealth participated in the spring of 2020. Those numbers are exponentially higher than those from the fall of 2018, when the KHSAA sanctioned esports.

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The participation numbers are slightly down this fall season due to many schools electing Non-Traditional Instruction, but KHSAA spokesperson Joe Angolia said if it weren't for the pandemic, he doesn't "see any reason why (participation numbers) wouldn't have continued to go up."

"If we can get to 50% of the schools playing in the future," he said, "that will be a dream come true."

That dream is already realized for Maita. Before the pandemic, at least three times a week after school, he was in Room 222 at Central High School, where the computer lab is home-base for the esports team.

Hailing from Venezuela, Maita said he wants to become a bilingual online caster and looks up to Ibai, a Spanish-language caster of League of Legends, among the most recognized games.

"I was supported by all my friends because they also play the game, too," he said. "This kind of opportunity that I don't have in my country just made me realize I can do this here now."

Like any sport, only the elite become professional gamers. But esports is nonetheless creating an avenue for students to further their education and is tapping into unique interests.

"Look how many jobs there are today in the world of sports," said Heath Price, Smart Campus associate at the University of Kentucky. "How big marketing offices have gotten, how many accountants work for an NBA team, how many jobs got created out of salary cap alone, and now you have people go work for an NFL team and creating data and analytics in baseball. Nobody would have thought of that 20 years ago."

'Wait, what do you do?'

When the National Federation of State High School Associations partnered with PlayVS, a software company that provides a platform for esports, <u>Kentucky was one of six states involved in the inaugural season</u>. State championships are played twice a year. In January, Lafayette won the League of Legends tournament and Shelby County the Rocket League. The spring season was canceled, like all the other sports, due to the pandemic.

"This is a way for them to make friends, to be involved in teamwork, to learn skills that they can maybe turn into a job or a scholarship opportunity at the next level," Angolia said.

Western Kentucky, which expanded its initial student-run esports club to a much bigger program in 2017, has 32 athletes (one of whom is a caster) who all receive a minimum scholarship of $1,500, which is funded through the Enrollment and Student Experience Division, according to Robert Unseld, the director of esports at WKU.

"We review the tape and their gameplan mechanics, and our members determine a fit and then we offer the scholarship," he said.

Esports is part of the athletic department at Pikeville, Brescia, Campbellsville and Midway. Pikeville coach Nicholas Alverson said all 22 student-athletes receive some variation of scholarships varying from $2,000 to $6,000, with the amount to increase in the future. Campbellsville coach CJ Moritz said the majority of his 35 athletes receive thousands of dollars, too.

"With esports, there's a temptation to play for fun rather than make a serious effort," said junior William Rigsby, who transferred to Campbellsville in 2019 to be part of the school's League of Legends team on a scholarship. "I think that the addition of having a scholarship means you're going to take it very seriously because it's an important part of you having to pay to go to school."

Midway fields 10 players for a League of Legends, Overwatch and Rocket League team, all of whom receive a partial scholarship that vary from $1,000 to $6,000, according to Rusty Kennedy, vice president of admissions and athletics at the university. Esports was newly incorporated into the school's athletic department in the fall.

"If there was any way we could have started three years ago, I would have got us started then," Kennedy said. "I see the value and magnitude of esports and what it can be."

Colleges contact high schools and attend tournaments to recruit. They also look at students' online platforms to review their profile and game footage.

"You still get the initial reaction of 'Wait, what do you do? You play video games for the college?' " said Murray State junior Jacob Mitchell, who plays Overwatch for the school's club team. "But as soon as you explain the passion that a lot of the students like me have for it, and

how it helps us belong to a group that otherwise wouldn't really exist, it really wins over a lot of people."

While esports may not be physically demanding like football, the video games are highly strategic.

"Oh my gosh, they have no idea what it takes," Graves County Rocket League coach Anna Rhea said of naysayers. "There's so much team camaraderie that needs to be there, so much communication. It blows my mind that you have to have both game mechanics and all these communication skills and teamwork. People who say it's not a sport just don't realize how much goes into it."

Because players compete online, teams do not need to travel for an "away game," but the battles begin even before the games start.

For instance, in League of Legends, each team, consisting of five players, is allowed to ban five of the more than 140 champions, or characters, in the game. Players comb through opponents' previous records to see which characters they are prone to use and ban them. This forces them to be flexible and not get too comfortable with just one champion while quickly thinking of different combinations of characters to use and counteract.

Even on the professional level, banning characters is one of the most exciting parts of the game, as Midway coach Alyssa Tinker called it "a chess match."

At the high school and college level, coaches act more as managers. Some even admitted they don't know how to play the games, meaning the students are working together to brainstorm strategies.

"There's a lot of strategy in basketball and football, but usually it's the coaches that are working that out and telling the kids what to do versus the kids solving for themselves in esports," said former Central athletic director Ryan Bringhurst, who presented the benefits of esports at the National Athletic Directors Conference last December.

Every sport has a risk

Competing in esports presents potential risks, such as addictive behavior, health complications from being sedentary and vision problems.

It's the first thing Jodie Mack thought of when her son told her he wanted to join Shelby County's Rocket League team.

"I thought, 'Oh gosh, they're never going to leave their bedroom,' " Mack said. "We have to have a balance for sure."

Several esports coaches at the high school level acknowledged most kids on their teams would be playing video games at home if there were no school teams. Participants also practice at home

online with their teammates. Many gamers admitted to playing several hours per day, with a few saying they play eight hours or more on some days.

Staring at a computer screen — or any other screens like tablets or phones — for that long has hazards.

"It can cause kids to have some negative behavior when there is too much time on any kind of video game," said Amory Haley, director of adolescent outpatient programs at the University of Louisville Health-Peace Hospital. "As we can see through research, kids get an increased stimulation in their brain that keeps them wanting to play more.

"It basically creates an addiction to the game because of the continued internal reward they're getting. When you try to remove that, we see kids get very aggressive, hostile, angry, really emotional. There'll be reports of crying fits demanding to get the games back."

She added if an individual doesn't isn't responsive while playing a game, it could be a symptom of addiction.

"That would be a sign they're becoming more neurologically into the game than maybe someone who may not have that type of addiction," Haley said.

In a 30-minute documentary on "Faker," the 24-year-old whose real name is Lee Sang-hyeok, shed tears when he recalled his defeat in the championship game and discussed with a sports psychologist the pressure of living up to the hype and his own standards. He has said the sessions have helped him become more mentally and emotionally stable. Like other sports, Faker advocates the importance of mental health in esports, too.

"The way you think about yourself can be quite different to how others think of you," Faker said in the documentary. "The professionals are there to give you direction and guidance at times. They can really change the way you get to know yourself, so I think anyone can benefit from some consultation from an expert."

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Playing for long periods of time can also damage the eyes.

"A lot of complaints that we see from patients are eye pain, burning in their eyes, eye strain and even sometimes headaches from prolonged screen use or video games," said Dr. Rachel Cooley, an ophthalmologist with the University of Louisville Physicians-Eye Specialists and an assistant professor and division chair of Pediatric Ophthalmology.

The World Health Organization released a guideline regarding screen time and the American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends taking a 20-second break after 20 minutes of screen use for children.

Jon Holland, a physical therapist and supervisor of Rehab Services Sports Medicine at the University of Louisville Health-Frazier Rehab Institute, recommends playing video games standing up to avoid being sedentary. Research suggests sitting for long periods increases risks of obesity, blood sugar, cholesterol imbalances and more.

To ensure students are well both physically and mentally, Tinker said she is incorporating physical fitness into practices, including jogging and possibly light weightlifting.

"We're going to be physically and mentally fit," she said. "I'm not saying we're going to throw heavy weights around, but there's a lot more that goes into it than just sitting and playing a game."

The future is here

Erin Ashley Simon, a host of "The Download" at Venn, recommends students not hesitate if they're interested in pursuing a career in the industry.

"Start now," she said. "You don't have to wait until you graduate college in order to have some sort of résumé or career in this space. You should be starting as soon as possible to build the necessary skillsets."

And there are signs all around that enthusiasm is taking hold.

Dakota Ogden, who formerly played on Pleasure Ridge Park's League of Legends team, livestreams his games on the video platform Twitch and said he wants to make money off his stream after graduation.

Former Manual athlete Tyler Sullivan was on one of his high school's three League of Legends teams last year. He now attends the Speed School of Engineering at the University of Louisville where he wants to go into software development in gaming. He said he would join Louisville's esports club team.

"Ever since I started playing games, it's embedded in my mind," he said. "This is what I love, this is what I do, and why not have a career that you love being in."

Maybe they don't become the Faker, who rose from the esports hotbed of South Korea to become a national icon. But they still want to pursue their passion in some capacity.

Nicknamed "god," he was named to the Forbes' 30 under 30 Asia 2019 list. He's featured in a Chinese textbook. On his birthday last year, his fans purchased an LED screen in Times Square to wish him a happy birthday.

It's no wonder Maita looks up to him. Maita may not be the best in the world or even in Louisville, but because of esports, his world has expanded and future outlets created.

"It's something I always wanted to do and participate in," Maita said. "Having the opportunity is really important to me."

David J. Kim: DKim@courierjournal.com; Twitter: @_DavidJKim. Support strong local journalism by subscribing today.