

sports

A new type of athlete: how Esports arrived on college campuses

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1972 was a year for the books.

The first-ever standing U.S. president made a diplomatic visit to China, the last American ground troops left South Vietnam, five men burgled the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office, the Milwaukee Bucks beat the Los Angeles Lakers ending the longest winning streak in major league sports at the time and the first ever “pong” video game arcade cabinet was put in the basement of a tavern in Sunnyvale, Calif.

The game consisted of three animations: two lines on either side and a ball that bounces between the two, simulating a game of ping pong. Two players would hit the ball back and forth to try and get it past the other; it was a pop culture phenomenon.

Although simple, the game would attract people for miles. It would go on to be the first major milestone on gaming history’s timeline. Almost 50 years later, gamers have upgraded from playing pong in the basement of a tavern to playing life-like video games from the comfort of their couch.

Since competition over online-networks was introduced to the video game scene, huge competitions occur online where massive amounts of gamers compete for large sums of money.

The Esports environment has slowly made a transition onto college campuses as interest continues to grow. In the short amount of time that Esports has been around, it has drawn in a sizable audience and changed the landscape of athletic programs on college campuses.

“I think you’ll see a ton more schools doing it, I bet in five years there’ll be at least 1,000 schools with programs,” AU Esports head coach Josh Buchanan said. “People

ing costs. Students have access to built-in facilities and professional coaching.

The idea of an Esports program on campus was brought forth by an



Two Esports athletes play Super Smash Bros. Ultimate.

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unlikely candidate, Kurt Melcher, who at the time was in charge of the women’s soccer program. The former collegiate soccer star spent months pushing the message that gaming is in fact a real sport.

“They’re dedicated, they have to be able to learn, they have to be able to work within a team,” Melcher said in an interview with gaming blog website gamingcyper.com. “They want to be competitive at everything they’re doing.”

Melcher is now the head director of Esports at RMU and continues to lead the successful program that now offers scholarships in Rocket League, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, Counter Strike: Global Offensive, Overwatch and League of Legends.

After RMU created their Esports program, many other schools

Power Rankings.

Just like any other sport

“I think a lot of people who play games don’t get into Esports right away,” Buchanan said. “They love playing games and what they used to do for fun, they slowly realized ‘hey I’m pretty good at this, I might be able to compete at a higher level.’”

It used to be like this in the beginning, but now Esports are like football, basketball, or any other “traditional sport,” Buchanan said. Whereas people used to just compete for fun, there’s now a business in it.

“I think for certain games like Counter Strike which is a really great spectator sport, anybody can watch it and understand what’s going on even if they don’t understand the full background,” AU Counter-Strike player Hunter Shrum said.

Shrum and Buchanan both believe that the draw is also due in part to the individual players.

“You have these personalities like LeBron James – everyone knows him even if they aren’t a basketball fan. Well in Esports, we have people like Ninja. There are people who haven’t played a video game in their life and they’ve heard of him, it’s starting to reach a wider audience,” Buchanan said.

Famous streamer Richard Tyler Blevins, known more commonly as his online alias “Ninja,” makes upwards of \$500,000 a month solely streaming himself playing video games on platforms like Twitch and YouTube.

“He’s showed people what Esports and competitive gaming really is,” Buchanan said. “It’s changing the typical stereotype where gaming is a useless waste of time; people are beginning to see these big personalities and competitions and realize that it’s an option for people. A way to make it big or at least something worthwhile to do.”

Esports athlete Kameron McQuillen believes this is why there has been a recent trend in Esports programs being adopted on college campuses.

“Why do schools have other athletics? To bring in money. I think colleges understand the fact that this is beginning to be considered a professional sport and will attract a large amount of people. They’re also realizing that so many people on these campuses already play video games, they don’t have to look too far to search and recruit for people,” McQuillen said.

McQuillen, like most athletes, has been practicing his craft since he was young. “I’ve been playing video games

since I was eight and I’m sure a ton of other casual gamers have too. The one way it’s different to other sports is that a lot of people already have a ton of experience with them

and they aren’t restricted by physical attributes,” he said.

Opportunities for students

“I really didn’t think I would go into an Esports program when I was applying for colleges or even before that,” McQuillen said. “At the end of the day I think we all understand we’re here for a degree and academics come first.”

McQuillen admitted that Esports acts in the same way any other collegiate sport does, it offers a person the opportunity to attend school at a cheaper price through scholarship.

“It’s the same concept, just a different sport,” he said. “For a lot of people this is probably the only way to get that higher education, or at least save some money on it. On the flip side, I think it’s viable to go into a college Esports program with the intent of becoming

a pro athlete if you want to do that sort of thing.”

According to Shrum, Esports also allows students to relax when under the stress of course work and college life.

“I’ve never liked school too much in general, but the fact that I can play Esports and compete for the school makes it 10 times better and more bearable,” Shrum said. “It helps to relieve a lot of stress as well.”

Increasing Support

As Esports continue to grow in the public eye, colleges and other institutions are continually finding new ways to integrate it into their programs and departments.

On March 12, 2019 ESPN Events announced a further commitment into the world of Esports with the first-ever ESPN Collegiate Esports Championship (CEC).

The competition took place May 10-12 and competitors in the tournament came from hundreds of schools across the nation.

“As universities continue to grow their esports programs at the varsity, non-varsity and club levels, we’re proud to be providing a platform for national exposure and recognition of some of the most talented players in the collegiate space,” John Lasker, vice president of Digital Media Programming for ESPN said in a press release. “Through our collaboration with top publishers in the industry, players will be able to showcase their talent in high-level competition on some of the most prominent esports titles.”

Many colleges are following suit, shelling thousands of dollars into these new endeavors. AU in particular spent approximately \$85,000 in 2018 on their state of the art gaming space.

“I think we’re definitely making progress as a society towards being accepting of people doing non-traditional careers,” Buchanan said. “Collegiate Esports is gonna keep growing and hitting a wider audience.”

Erin Sievers makes her mark

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“She wants to win at everything,” pole vault head coach Dennis Steele said. “If we’re lifting weights, she wants to lift the heaviest. If we’re doing a conditioning workout, she wants to finish first.”

Freshman pole vaulter Erin Sievers is a newcomer on the Ashland University track and field team, but she’s already making her mark on the Division II landscape.

In her first meet of the season, Sievers tied for second in her event at the Findlay Oiler Opener on Dec. 7, 2019. This initial placement would give Sievers a provisional mark for the NCAA Division II Indoor National Championship, beginning on March 13 in Birmingham, Ala.

So far, the AU men’s and women’s track teams have amassed a combined total of 21 provisional and six automatic qualifying marks for the championship.

“This season I really want to get 13’,” Sievers said. “The mark to go to nationals automatically is just under 13’ 2” (4.01 meters) so that would be the dream. That’s the dream.”

Sievers’ provisional mark of 12’ 6.75” is just slightly higher than her highschool personal record of 12’ 6”, a mark that carried her far in the event.

While at highschool in Strongsville, Ohio, Sievers destroyed the competition meet after meet.

“During my junior year, I actually never lost an event,” Sievers said. “Every single meet I competed in, I got first place.”

In fact, Sievers won the Ohio

Highschool State Athletic Association state tournament both her junior and senior year as a Strongsville Mustang.

“I never intended on doing pole vault until my dad suggested doing it my freshman year,” Sievers said. “He figured my gymnastics background would help with it and I’ve been hooked ever since.”

Siever’s attributes much of her success to the Eagle team as a whole and getting her foot in the door early.

“I had gone to the Ashland track camps since I think my sophomore year,” Sievers said. “I’ve known the team for a while now and I’ve known my coach for awhile which helped a lot with the transition from highschool level to college level.”

According to Steele, Sievers’ talents were recognized early on.

“When I first met her, it was obvious that she had a special takeoff,” Steele said. “It’s very different from normal collegiate athletes. She’s not as tall as your average vaulter, but she has Division I women’s elite speed.”

Steele compares Sievers to Ashland alum Katie Nageotte, who took first place in both the indoor and outdoor 2013 Division II National Championships. Nageotte is also a two-time USA Indoor National Champion.

“She really just has a great drive,” Steele said. “She’s got another three years ahead of her and I don’t doubt she’s going to keep developing and getting better.”

Both Eagle teams will hit the track next on Feb. 7 at the Akron invationals.



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One of the games on the AU Esports catalog is Fortnite, a game popularized worldwide by professional gamer Richard Tyler Blevins, AKA “Ninja.”

are more productive when they’re doing something they love to do. Video games are no longer seen as something you can just do casually, it’s something that is legitimate now.”

Humble beginnings

While large-scale competitive gaming has been around for about two decades, the online Esports environment has only recently made its way onto college campuses. During the fall semester of 2014, Robert Morris University out of Chicago, Il., became the first university to offer athletic scholarships to players of the video game, “League of Legends.”

RMU offers hefty scholarships for students involved in competitive gaming, specifically in League of Legends. Their scholarship program has been in place for almost five years now, and covers up to 50% of tuition, room and board-

followed suit. Esports were typically implemented in smaller, private schools until early 2016 when the University of California announced that it would be the first public university to launch a League of Legends Esports team.

Colleges across the country continued to add Esports to their athletic departments, while major athletic associations began to take notice.

The NCAA has been mostly quiet on the subject of Esports, aside from subtle jabs at the prospect of adding video games to a national college athletics organization.

“We know that some of the content is really violent,” NCAA president Mark Emmert said in an interview with USA Today. “We don’t particularly embrace games where the objective is to blow your opponent’s head off. We know there are serious concerns about health and wellness around those games.”