

Oakland University first D-1 school to add varsity esports team in Michigan

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Oakland University has become the first Division I university in the state of Michigan to formally announce the addition of a varsity esports team to its athletics program. The team will begin competition in the fall of 2020. The University also announced a unique partnership with Team Renegades, a professional esports team based at GameTime in Auburn Hills.



Pictured from left, Greg Jordan, OU director of campus recreation; Chris Roumayeh, co-owner of Team Renegades; Ora Pescovitz, OU president; and Steve Waterfield, OU director of athletics.

Esports is short for “electronic sports” and is defined as competitive multiplayer video gaming. While new, and developing at the collegiate level, esports has grown exponentially among amateur and professional gamers around the world.

“Oakland University strives to be entrepreneurial and open to new approaches to teaching, the student experience, and learning, including novel areas of exploration,” said OU President Ora Hirsch Pescovitz. “The popularity, learning potential and student engagement possibilities of esports places Oakland in the forefront of translating what can only be described as a phenomenon into a relevant educational context, including strengthening the relationship among emerging media and academic disciplines.”

“We are very fortunate to have the support and mentorship of Team Renegades. Based at GameTime, the partnership with a professional esports team will provide support and expertise as the University launches its esports initiatives,” said Steve Waterfield, Director of Athletics for Oakland University. “Plus, the fact that GameTime is so close to our university is an added benefit.”

“I expect the varsity team to collaborate with campus partners, and believe that esports has potential to impact student recruitment to the entire University. Esports requires the same teamwork and skill found in other sports and provides participants with opportunities to develop leadership skills.”

Like traditional sports, esports is a way for students to build school spirit and connect with fellow students. Having a varsity esports team will provide players and viewers alike another venue to share their gaming passion and pride in Oakland University.

Oakland's D-I varsity esports teams will initially compete in three games: League of Legends, Rocket League and Super Smash Bros., with the initial varsity team likely being comprised of up to 12 athletes, open to male and female gamers.

Jonas Jerebko, professional basketball player and owner of Team Renegades, said he hopes OU's launch into esports will help spread the excitement and camaraderie of gaming throughout the region.

"Esports is growing at such an impressive pace and I'm thrilled to see Oakland become a part of this innovative and cutting-edge field," said Jerebko, whose basketball career included six seasons with the Detroit Pistons. "Many people, including myself, already know Oakland for its competitiveness with its current sports. This is a prime opportunity to push the boundaries and bring that energy and enthusiasm to new audiences with a new sport."

More information and media announcements will be coming in the future about the hiring of a varsity coach; the creation of an on-campus gaming location; and details on how current and future students can earn spots on the varsity roster and potential scholarship support.

The market analytics firm Newzoo estimated that esports had more than 380 million viewers in 2018. It predicts that global viewership will top 500 million in 2020 with one significant factor being the development of collegiate gaming. Through the use of online video platforms like Twitch, Shaker, and YouTube, gaming, tournaments and competitions will be easy to follow via livestreaming.

To date, Oakland University has had active club esports teams through the Office of Student Involvement. These organizations have held several competitions in games like League of Legends, Overwatch and Super Smash Bros. in the Oakland Center.

The National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) organization recently reported that more than 170 member schools have active teams at various levels with more than 5,000 student-athletes. Schools have provided more than \$16 million in esports scholarships for their students. In addition, there are now more than 2,000 high schools in North America that have esports clubs or organizations, so the talent pool for collegiate varsity esports teams will only continue to grow in years to come.

"Being a leader in the esports space will also provide many other downstream benefits for the entire university," added Glenn McIntosh, vice president for Student Affairs and Chief Diversity Officer. "We will have the elite esports athletes, room for many more recreational esports participants and engage new fans of the team. In many ways, esports will provide another avenue to help our students get connected and engaged on campus. We know once they get plugged in on campus, it leads to more student success in academic pursuits as well."

For more information about esports at Oakland University, visit oakland.edu/esports/.