

GAME



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As esports teams spring up on campuses, one athletics conference is embracing the competition and showing others how it might look

ON



Lander students Ben Miller and Peyton Tolley battle Georgia College in the League of Legends Peach Belt Conference tournament.



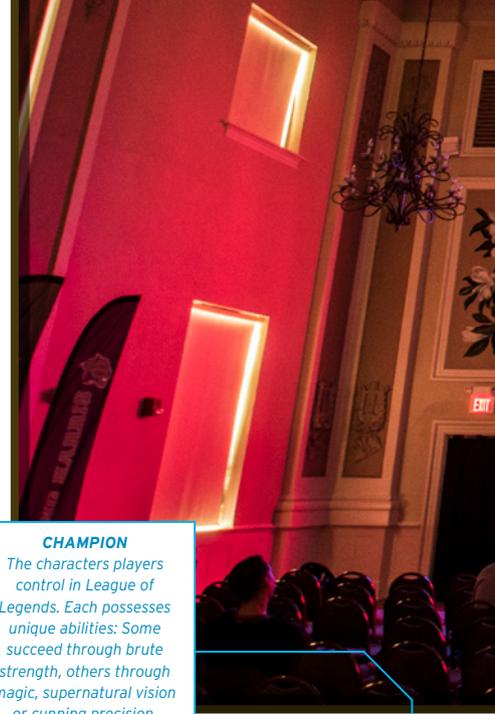
AN UNFAMILIAR FEELING SWEEPS OVER THE PLAYERS.

Many have never competed in a sport — not even in high school, let alone college. Before this weekend, their most meaningful victories have come in quiet dorm rooms or sequestered rec rooms, where they have exchanged congratulations over headsets with peers who know them only by nicknames. They learned to play this game not with teammates but with co-players, who could be scattered across the country — if not the world.

But on this Saturday in March, they feel the spotlight's gleam on their faces as they represent their school with their teammates at a college athletics conference championship. They hear their names called as a crowd cheers and waves. As they step onto a stage in Georgia College's historic Magnolia Ballroom, red and blue LED lights wash the half-rotunda above their heads, casting its Southern colonial features in a technological glow. Awaiting each of them is a \$300 leather Cougar Armor gaming chair, and an ASUS Republic of Gamers laptop pumped with 32 gigabytes of RAM and an NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070 graphics card — high-end horsepower that would make computing connoisseurs swoon.

The setup at the Peach Belt Conference championship looks just like the images they have seen online when they have watched professionals competing in sold-out NBA-sized arenas, each battling for the title of League of Legends world champion — the ultimate accomplishment in the competitive video-gaming world known as esports. The competitions for the League of Legends video game alone have assembled a massive worldwide audience, particularly among today's teenagers and college students, drawing 57.6 million unique online viewers for the 2017 championship match. Those numbers nearly match the viewership for the final games of the World Series, NBA Finals and NHL finals combined. Only the Super Bowl draws more viewers.

Georgia College's Kyle Kibodeaux has played this game hundreds, if not thousands, of times before. Yet during the first game



CHAMPION
The characters players control in League of Legends. Each possesses unique abilities: Some succeed through brute strength, others through magic, supernatural vision or cunning precision.

of the championship, as fellow gamers roar from the audience and crack illuminated thundersticks, his adrenaline surges. His hands shake so badly that he struggles to type his user name. His heart feels like it hurts.

He thinks to himself, "I guess I really want to win this."

A few of Kibodeaux's peers at the Peach Belt Conference's esports championship previously played football or baseball or wrestled in high school. They say they didn't have the size, strength or skill to take those passions to the college level — but they have other skills. They have the analytical skills to read the attributes of a League of Legends **champion** — the characters they choose to play in the game. They can work a keyboard like a pianist. They have the know-how to scale a tank, to wreak havoc in the jungle, to **gank** opponents in the bot **lane**, to take out their towers and inhibitors and, with the right team and right composition, to destroy their **nexus**.



Kyle Kibodeaux
"DUCARIUS"

And there are many like them. For all the hundreds of thousands of student-athletes competing at NCAA colleges and universities, there are thousands more finding opportunities in a venue never traditionally viewed as a sport. The past two years alone have delivered a series of eye-popping examples of esports' explosion in viewership and participation. In 2016, the last time the League of Legends World Championship was held in the U.S., it sold out both Madison Square Garden in New York and Staples Center in

NEXUS
A spinning crystal structure that sits in the back of each team's home base. The primary objective of the game is to destroy the opponent's nexus.



The Peach Belt Conference set the stage for its first esports championship with a 276-inch screen, stadium-seating gaming stations and red and white LED lights.

HOURS SPENT ON VIEWERSHIP

Below are the millions of hours spent watching esports on Twitch in February.

80.9
League of Legends

37.4
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

32.9
Dota 2

27.9
Hearthstone

26.7
Overwatch

15.1
World of Warcraft

11.4
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege

4.5
Heroes of the Storm

3.9
StarCraft II

0.5
Halo 5: Guardians

SOURCE: NEWZOO.COM

Los Angeles. The winner of that tournament has taken home about \$2 million of the approximately \$5 million in prize money.

Former NBA stars such as Shaquille O'Neal and Rick Fox have their own professional teams. The NBA, NFL and NHL have announced plans to form or partner with esports leagues featuring the electronic versions of their own sports. In February 2018 alone, worldwide consumers watched 80.9 million hours of League of Legends videos on the streaming site Twitch.

But while those numbers grab the attention, esports at the college level has been erupting with less mainstream fanfare. This year, more than 300 college teams — both varsity programs and

GANK
League of Legends term for ambushing an unsuspecting enemy.

college clubs — competed in the League of Legends collegiate division. A handful are competing as part of their athletics department as full varsity sports. Many more are offering full or partial scholarships, viewing esports as a way to make their university stand out, attract talented students to academic programs or drive overall enrollment. And nearly all of this growth has come in the past six years — so big, so quick, that its supporters wonder not if, but when, esports will be recognized as a major sport on college campuses.

Its popularity has led college sports leaders to ask a key question: Should the NCAA play a role? The NCAA Board of Governors, the Association's highest-ranking committee, began exploring esports last year and plans to continue the conversation, considering such information as how it is growing and the format of the competition. That interest has raised natural questions about this new-age activity and how it might fit alongside the Final Four, College World Series and the other events that traditionally have defined college sports.

LANE
The three main paths on the map that champions compete in. They lead to the opponent's nexus and are called top, middle and bottom (or bot) lanes.

In the meantime, the Peach Belt Conference took a significant first step. Last year, it announced plans to become the first NCAA conference to sponsor esports, establish a

regular season among 10 of its members and host a conference championship. That championship event provided a glimpse into what collegiate esports could look like in the future and what that would mean to everyone involved.

As the senior from Augusta University steps through the black curtain next to the stage, a spotlight's sheen beams over him in the darkened ballroom, and his name sounds over the cheers.



Aaron Chestnut
"FILIMÉALA"

"AAARONN CHESSTNUUT!"

The glitzy announcement welcomes Aaron Chestnut to the Peach Belt's first quarterfinal match, and he raises his hand sheepishly. He takes a seat in the middle of the front row of gaming stations on the stage, pulls on his orange-and-black headset, then picks up a spiral-bound, college-ruled notebook.

His handwritten notes outline the team's game plan and could hold the secret to success in this match. At this level of League of Legends, that plan can separate victory from defeat. After all, this isn't Pac-Man or Super Mario Bros. — the classics of the past with fairly simple goals. This game demands complex strategy, with each player's character bringing

BANNING
The process at the start of each game during which each team removes five champions from consideration for use in that particular game.

unique strengths and weaknesses to the team and influencing how it can play.

At the start of each game, both teams select particular characters — called champions in League of Legends terms — to remove from the game, a process called **banning**.

At the same time, they draft the champions they will use for competition. The process can make every game unique. Imagine playing chess, but being able to remove your opponent's rook from the board and choosing to play with your bishop, not your knight. The concept is the same — if chess had 140 pieces to choose from, each with individual

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Augusta
University
JAGUARS



Columbus State
University
COUGARS



Georgia
College
BOBCATS



Georgia Southwestern
State University
HURRICANES

strengths and drawbacks.

In the days before the match, Chestnut and his teammates scoured an immense amount of data and videos on Twitch to get a sense for how Georgia Southwestern would play. They scrubbed the video for tendencies: Did their opponents play strong in a certain lane, the primary routes on the League of Legends map where most of the action takes place? Did they struggle when losing particular lanes? Did they favor particular champions the Jaguars could ban at the game's start?

Chestnut, arguably his team's most accomplished player, anticipated Georgia Southwestern would ban his preferred champions. Two years earlier, Maryville (Missouri), now one of the collegiate powers in

League of Legends, offered him a full esports scholarship, but he turned it down to finish his computer science degree at Augusta University. Before that, he had been sponsored by a local company to compete at tournaments in a different **game**, Marvel vs.

GAME

Besides League of Legends, other popular games such as Dota 2, Overwatch and StarCraft II make up the esports ecosystem.

Kurt Melcher, executive director of esports at Robert Morris University in Chicago, started the first varsity esports program at an American university.

M. SPENCER GREEN / AP IMAGES



A phone call in June 2014 was perhaps the pivotal moment for collegiate esports.

Michael Sherman had been developing the League of Legends collegiate tournament since the first championship in 2012. That year, the teams were loosely organized by college students whose teams were not officially affiliated with their schools. About 500 fans showed up to watch the first live match.

After taking a job with League of Legends publisher Riot Games two years later, Sherman took a call from Kurt Melcher, an associate athletics director and women's soccer coach at Robert Morris in Chicago. "We're forming a varsity esports team," Melcher told Sherman, delivering news that signaled a change in the esports terrain on college campuses.

That fall Robert Morris became the first American university to sponsor an esports team and offer scholarships under the athletics department's purview.

Melcher had been considering the concept for months. While his career had developed in a traditional sports background, Melcher was also an avid video game fan who considered himself an above-average player. But he struggled to improve with League of Legends. The players were skilled — and smart. It required a complex grasp of strategy. And unlike other games, competitors could not gain an advantage by cutting corners: Whenever Riot noticed players finding ways to manipulate the game unfairly — through tactics or manipulating a particular champion's skills — it adjusted the game through updates to maintain fair play.

"This is such a team-based game, why couldn't we go and treat it like baseball, like basketball, like soccer?" Melcher wondered, sometimes aloud to his athletics department colleagues. "Get the best players, scholarship them and bring them to our school."

Eyes rolled.

Explaining the game through demographics and statistics couldn't inspire buy-in. So while presenting his pitch to the athletics department, Melcher picked up an iPad and started playing an online stream of a League of Legends match. Now able to see the action firsthand, his co-workers could hear the play-by-play broadcasters and explanations from color analysts. The strategy revealed itself: Teams tested their opponents'

moves, determined when they could attack aggressively and defend conservatively, and exploited their opponents' territory.

"It just connected the dots in the way of seeing it as a sport rather than a video game," Melcher says.

Six months later, Melcher had funding for uniforms, a facility and 35 partial scholarships. After Riot posted an announcement about the team on its gaming server, 3,000 inquiries poured into Melcher's inbox in two weeks, producing 2,000 applicants to the school. By comparison, Melcher estimates he received an average of two inquiries per week for his soccer team.

Melcher had tapped into a demand that had existed in plain sight.

Since then, dozens of colleges and universities interested in forming esports teams have sought advice from Melcher, who now serves as executive director of esports at both Robert Morris and

Capcom. So as a countermeasure, Chestnut practiced with several champions Georgia Southwestern wouldn't expect him to play, and the entire team practiced with a lineup it had never used before.

Just like basketball and football teams, every program in this tournament has scouted its opponent, searching for vulnerabilities and habits. Every move is an attempt to exploit a weakness — or create one.

On this day, the Jaguars' strategy works. As the crowd watches the game on a 276-inch screen above the stage and cheers wildly during key moments, Augusta University sweeps past Georgia Southwestern in two games and earns a spot in the semifinals.



Intersport, the consulting firm that has advised the NCAA on the topic. He says 70 varsity programs were sponsored by universities this year, either through their athletics departments, student-life divisions or academic programs. Next year, he projects, the number will grow to 105.

Meanwhile, Riot has set a goal of helping 10 conferences host championships by 2019. The Peach Belt was the first.

As North Georgia and Columbus State begin their semifinal match, several players from other teams huddle around a television in the players lounge to watch the Twitch broadcast as the battle unfolds.

North Georgia rolled through the regular season, winning every game in all nine matches. The players start discussing the strategy Columbus State is employing against North Georgia like knowledgeable spectators debating at a sports bar. They look at the composition of champions the Cougars selected and debate why they might have chosen that mix.

Is it possible Columbus State found the Nighthawks' weakness?

"Ziggs is interesting," says Kibodeaux from Georgia College, referring to the small, furry champion who lobbs bouncing explosives that get larger and wider ranging as he gains experience and abilities. "I think he's trying to stall, to delay the game. I think that's what their strategy is. UNG's really strong early. No one's ever made them go late. So maybe the strategy to beat UNG is to take it to late game. Maybe they don't know how to play late games."

They examine the lineup Columbus State drafted: Each of the champions they selected starts the game in a relatively weak state, but gold acquired through kills and achievements provides an in-game currency that allows players to buy items that enhance their abilities, a process called **scaling**. A weaker champion early in the game can become virtually unstoppable 30 or 40 minutes into the game — if Columbus State can push it that far.

SCALING
Relative increase in champions' power as they level up and acquire core items.

"If this game goes like 30 (minutes)," Kibodeaux says, "I think Columbus will actually win. Mechanics won't save you at that point."

Such nuances are missed by those who don't play the game, says Sherman, who is now the college esports manager at Riot Games. "The game is 20 percent about your ability to click a mouse and to keyboard, and 80 percent of it is, 'What should I be doing? What's the optimal way that we can do this?'" he says. "You hear the same thing in basketball. ... 'Ten percent is my ability to dribble a ball and shoot a hoop, but 90 percent is knowing where I should be, knowing how to play with my team, knowing what my opponent's going to do.'"

In this match, North Georgia is looking dominant in that 90 percent. Through the first 15 minutes of the first game, North Georgia takes the first eight kills and grabs 6,000 more **gold** than Columbus State, allowing the Nighthawks to enhance their champions' abilities while limiting Columbus State's op-



League of Legends competition requires a complex grasp of strategy along with lightning-fast keyboarding skills.

portunities to scale their champions for a late-game advantage. North Georgia's early strength is too much. The strategy the players mused about in the lounge doesn't seem to be working.

Miles Hammond, a player for Young Harris, recognizes what's happening. The previous day, his team lost to North Georgia in two games. After dropping the first, Young Harris attempted a similar stall strategy to play for the late game. "We knew that they would fall off," he says, "but the second game was even shorter because we didn't have the early damage like they did."

The same fate starts befalling Columbus State. Twenty-five minutes in, North Georgia holds a 14-3 kills advantage, leaving Columbus State at a constant man disadvantage — like a power play in hockey. The later the game goes, the longer the players must wait for their champions to respawn after a **kill**, tipping the advantage to North Georgia. Twenty-seven minutes into the game, the Nighthawks swarm Columbus State's nexus — the crystal structure in their home base whose destruction is each game's end goal. North Georgia is just as dominant in the second game, needing only 23 minutes to knock Columbus out of the tournament and advance to the final.

GOLD
The currency earned in League of Legends used to buy items that provide champions with bonus stats and abilities, one of the main ways to increase power during the game.

Near the back row of the Magnolia Ballroom, Dwayne Hanberry watches the game action in hopes of gaining some insight. The commissioner of Division III's Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference, Hanberry has been hearing interest in esports from his conference presidents. Already one school, Schreiner, has announced plans to start a program. Nearly half

KILL
The champion who beats another champion earns gold for the kill, while the dead champion must wait a period of time before returning to the game. The time a champion must sit out increases the longer the game lasts.

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Tu Nguyen and Sam Ackerman celebrate as North Georgia takes down Georgia College to claim the Peach Belt Conference's first esports championship.



the conference is exploring the idea.

Hanberry understands that esports seems to attract a different type of student than liberal arts schools typically draw. Augusta University's team alone features two medical school students, while many other Peach Belt players are studying computer science and other technical programs.

Esports is also relatively cheap to add: Competitions are mostly online, so competitors don't miss class or incur travel costs, and the only facility needed is a room for computers. The spectator interest also appears to be solid. The Peach Belt drew more than 800 online viewers on each day of its championship, more than it typically draws for traditional championship games.

But it is the environment of this Peach Belt Championship that casts a lasting impression on Hanberry. The players wearing jerseys with their gamertag — the nickname by which they're known in the game — printed on the back; the spotlight introductions; the student broadcasters and play-by-play analysis on the online stream.

"The Peach Belt has hit a home run today," Hanberry says while watching Georgia College roll to a 2-0 victory over Augusta University to advance to the championship match. "They've given these kids a special experience.

"If we do this, I want to do something like this."

Still, complications remain. Many of the SCAC's athletics departments remain skeptical. If they were asked to sponsor lacrosse, they could understand how it fits because of its com-

bination of cardiovascular performance and mental acuity. But League of Legends, where players sit in chairs and the physical demands are quick-twitch movements of a mouse? Many struggle to get past that perception.

College presidents and athletics leaders who worry about adding esports cite other concerns, too. It is now a male-dominated sport; the Peach Belt championship featured only two female competitors. Can that gender gap be closed?

Esports also can conflict with the traditional amateurism principles of college athletics. Competitors can compete in weekend tournaments for cash prizes, gift cards or online credit that can be spent within the League of Legends environment. They can even broadcast their play on Twitch and, for a fortunate few, take a cut of the money raised from advertisements that air during their games.

And esports tangles with those rules in another unique way: Professional gamers — there were more than 545 competing worldwide last year on 109 teams, according to Riot — typically begin their careers before they reach college age and wind them down by their mid-20s. With a long life still ahead, they might look to start college as nontraditional students. UC Irvine, a national power that sponsors esports through student affairs, now has three former professionals on its League of Legends team.

But esports supporters view those issues as workable challenges, not obstructive barriers. Sherman believes technology could provide oversight in key areas. Playing rules already are handled by the game environment. Technology simplifies the

organization of tournaments, and Riot even manages sportsmanship issues by using voice recognition to spot inappropriate language and to ban players who contribute to a toxic environment. Sherman says Riot also could work with schools to restrict player accounts from competing in college tournaments if they fail to meet academic standards.

To supporters who want to see collegiate esports grow — with more schools sponsoring the sport and more conferences holding championships — the complications won't stall the growth.

"The question," Hanberry says, "is if we move forward, how do we move forward?"

On a folding table in front of the stage sits a foot-tall glass trophy with an oak base and the conference's signature peach at the top. The Peach Belt title beckons.

Logan Henderson, North Georgia's team coordinator, can see it from his seat several rows back. But as the championship match begins, he can't stop twitching. He fidgets with his cap; crosses, then uncrosses, his legs; thrusts back and throws his hands to his head, all while staring at the screen. The Nighthawks are one game away from winning the conference title, and in League of Legends, where each move occurs with blinding speed and momentum can swing in seconds, Henderson reacts to each as if the team's doom is about to be sealed.

North Georgia has emerged as the New England Patriots of this first season, delivering a spotless season record. The Nighthawks swept their first two matches in the Peach Belt championship, as well, and as Henderson twitches, they are up 2-0 in a best-of-five championship match against Georgia College.

Yet none of those facts seems to comfort Henderson. His role is to prepare the team's strategy for each game — to know which champions to play and ban, and how to press each opponent. He carries a 2-inch, three-ring binder packed with scouting reports as he walks each player through the draft and directs each move until game play starts. Then he watches it unfold, like Bill Belichick relegated to a spectator.

QUADRAKILL
The act of killing four champions within 10 seconds of one another. Similar League of Legends terms include double kill, triple kill, pentakill and hexakill.

And for once, it isn't going well. Though the trophy sits 30 feet in front of Henderson, it feels farther away than ever.

A key win 12 minutes into the third game has thrust Georgia College into control early: A **quadrakill** — in which

the Bobcats defeated four North Georgia champions in a series of flash-quick fights that last barely 15 seconds — has thrown North Georgia into the unusual position of having to come from behind. The cheers from the crowd mark a recognition of the moment's significance.

"This game's going to give me a heart attack," Henderson gasps as Georgia College presses toward the Nighthawks' nexus.

Henderson hopes his team can prolong the game, scale its champions and swing the game back in its favor. At that point, one key battle could turn the game. Henderson's speech gets quicker, anticipating the moment.

But in a battle near their nexus, three North Georgia players go down. The Nighthawks are defenseless and exposed.

In 11 multigame matches this year, this is their first loss.

Henderson leads his team into a back hallway for a 20-minute intermission. The players huddle in a circle, the intensity in their eyes belying the cool focus of their discussion. Quietly, they talk about adjustments they will make for the fourth game.

Ten minutes into that game, North Georgia already is pulling away. And in another four minutes it holds a 15-4 kills advantage and a 10,000-gold lead — a significant edge to scale its champions. "Georgia College is just getting demolished right now," the online broadcaster says.

Less than a minute later, Georgia College's nexus starts drawing in a swirl of blue-and-white light. The blue crystal explodes.

The responsibilities of a champion come with some well-practiced traditions. Among the most timeless: hoisting a trophy above their heads in triumph.

North Georgia's Tu Nguyen appears to have never seen this tradition in action. As his team celebrates, he cradles the Peach Belt championship trophy as if it is an infant. When someone suggests he raise it high, he pauses awkwardly, hesitating as if he does not know what to do. "I never won anything before," he says.



Both the champion of the Peach Belt Conference tournament, North Georgia, and the runner-up earn an automatic berth in the North American Collegiate Championship play-in round. For a team like North Georgia, which just formed in January, it's a lifetime achievement.

So is this a sport? The participants gathered in the Magnolia Ballroom have one answer. Other groups will have a different one.

But on this March day, one similarity is striking. The trophy the North Georgia team holds is the same one the Lander men's soccer team received in the fall, when it won the Peach Belt title after the longest penalty-kick shootout in the history of the conference title game. It is the same one the North Georgia women's basketball players posed with, index fingers raised to signify "No. 1," when they gathered at midcourt after beating Lander for the league title. It's the same trophy every Peach Belt champion received this year.

North Georgia's players exchange high fives and back slaps while posing with their trophy, index fingers raised. They, too, are **champions**. 🏆

VICTORY



In photo from left to right

Logan Henderson
Team coordinator

Sam Ackerman
"Spirit Animal"

Edgar Roman
"Quick Crit"

Tu Nguyen
"ImRegretz"

Chris Chheang
"aBudgetBox"

Bryce Davis
"Hirai Momo"

Taekyo Park
"Nimoret"

CHAMPION

1. A team, or person, who has defeated or surpassed all rivals in a competition, especially in sports.
2. A team, or person, who fights or argues for a cause or on behalf of someone else.