



# Kentucky High School Athletic Association

2280 Executive Drive ° Lexington, KY 40505 ° www.khsaa.org ° (859)299-5472 (859)293-5999 (fax)

May 3, 2019

TO: KHSAA Board of Control

FR: Commissioner Julian Tackett

RE: Esports Update

This is intended to give you a brief update about our first year with ESports through the NFHS Network. During the 2017-18 school year, on behalf of our schools, I expressed interest in Kentucky being one of the first states to experiment with an Esports championship. This new venture was managed by the NFHS Network, in which the KHSAA is a full partner, and execution was to be through PlayVS, a company based in Los Angeles that was attempting to develop the first national Esports network for the interscholastic level. For day to day operational questions, I assigned Communications Director Joe Angolia and Information Technology Director Rob Catron to work with our member schools.

The original plan from PlayVS was to have four to five games as an option for schools to hold online competitions without the necessity of traveling to another school. Despite their best efforts, when play began in the fall, only one game was available, entitled League of Legends. League of Legends is, by its own definitions, "a multiplayer online battle arena video game." The game was developed and published by Riot Games for Microsoft Windows and macOS.

In League of Legends ("LOL"), players assume the role of an unseen "summoner" that controls a "champion" with unique abilities and battle against a team of other players or computer-controlled champions. The goal is usually to destroy the opposing team's "Nexus," a structure that lies at the heart of a base protected by defensive structures, although other distinct game modes exist as well. Each League of Legends match is discrete, with all champions starting off fairly weak but increases in strength by accumulating items and experience throughout the game. The champions and setting blend a variety of elements, including high fantasy, steampunk, and Lovecraftian horror.

For LOL, staff thoroughly review the information that was being sent out to the schools. For that reason, we were very careful in our September 27, 2018 notice to the schools to include detailed samples of the game to be played as well as detailed instructions as to the procedures to be used. We found both then, and now that most objections to the game content were generational, but we were very careful to ask our school administrators to review everything about the game before making any decisions, particularly since it was the only game available.

In the fall, only five states were able to get up and running, including Kentucky. For the fall, we had more than forty member schools express interest in the game, with twelve schools signing up and competing, using a total of 140 students who set up a total of 21 teams (schools could have multiple teams). This first "beta" season was termed "Season Zero" and afforded our schools, the Association, and PlayVS a chance to experiment, work out the kinks so to speak.

The first season was not without issues, many related to the reliability of internet connectivity for some schools (who decided not to use school computers), schools ensuring that any computer use did not impact school operations as well as the general issues you would expect out of a first-time operation. Boyle County High School defeated St. Henry District High School in our first state championship, a live event held at Collins High School.

Following that event, the second semester saw the beginning of what was termed "Season One" for the Esports initiative. A second and third game was added.

The first additional offering was a game entitled "Smite." Smite is a free-to-play, third-person multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) video game developed and published by Hi-Rez Studios for Microsoft Windows, macOS, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch, and Xbox One. In Smite, players control a god, goddess, or other mythological figure and take part in team-based combat, using abilities and tactics against other player-controlled gods and non-player-controlled minions. The game has multiple player versus player modes, many playable characters, A review of Smite by our staff and many others revealed that the level of "battle" and violence was likely too great to even be considered as an alternative. Therefore, the KHSAA and nine other states declined to use Smite as one of its offerings. To date, only New Mexico participates in Smite.

The second additional game was the Rocket League. Rocket League is a vehicular soccer video game developed and published by Psyonix. Described as "soccer, but with rocket-powered cars," Rocket League has up to four players assigned to each of the two teams, using rocket-powered vehicles to hit a ball into their opponent's goal and score points throughout a match. The game includes single-player and multiplayer modes which can be played both locally and online, including cross-platform play between all versions.

Unfortunately, an implementation issue arose with the Rocket League from its manufacturer as there was a request (to minimize cheating) to change specific port settings within the network configuration of the local schools. This caused quite a bit of implementation issues as schools were very hesitant to make this change. We have long worked cooperatively with the Department of Education to help support the outstanding network infrastructure that is built among our public schools. As we did a few years ago with an experiment in file sharing technologies related to football scouting, we have encouraged any technical questions related to the state data network to be referred to the local Chief Information Office for our public schools. And while we are very cognizant of our desire to treat all our schools alike, we have also tried to manage the school data questions with "kid gloves" encouraging an open line of communication, late in the day usage (if that was viewed as an alternative), and no alteration of security settings.

Nationally, ten associations have now participated in Season One, offering both League of Legends and Rocket League. We are up to 37 schools with a total of 48 League of Legends teams as well as 34 teams with Rocket League, a 290% growth in participation from Season Zero.

Alongside this participation; however, we were also active and supportive participants with efforts in the 2019 General Assembly to help with school safety measures. That participation coupled with even the slightest chance that a "battle game" could be perceived negatively has led me to re-think our continued participation in League of Legends, at least for the foreseeable future. Despite its popularity and growth, it is likely the better course that for the fall of the 2019-20 school year, as preparations are made, that they are made without League of Legends as an offering.

We will continue to pressure the NFHS Network and PlayVS for additional offerings. We also understand their delicate balance. The three games currently offered have no manufacturer upcharge for participants, and are therefore able to be offered at a very low rate to our students. But the price cannot be our only determinant. We must be good stewards of all of our partnerships, education, legislative and business.

I am hopeful that recent developments with the network will lead to additional offerings. And while it is unlikely that the demographic participating in the current offerings will settle solely for sports games, we will continue to push in that direction for at least one offering. The challenging part for us is that this is the very demographic, somewhat disengaged from normal athletics, that we seek to get involved and need to get involved. Some of the very individuals who have been at the heart of some of our most tragic occurrences are those who have felt disconnected, and this may offer a connection alternative.

Thank you for your continued support.