

OBSERVER-DISPATCH

Holland Patent students start esports team

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HOLLAND PATENT — Ryan McGahey stood in the center of a group of teammates at Holland Patent High School one recent Thursday, updating them on what lies ahead for their team's first season.

But these young athletes weren't gathered in a locker room or a gym. They were standing in the middle of a computer lab.

McGahey, a junior, is one of 11 students who formed the school's new esports team as part of the larger High School Esports League (HSEL). It is thought to be the first high school esports team in the state.

Twenty-one other students also have declared an interest in the team, which will hold its first game later this month against a team to be determined.

"I used to play a lot of (traditional) sports," McGahey said, talking about other extracurriculars at the school. "There's not a lot of stuff for people that don't want to play sports."

Esports (electronic sports) are a type of competition utilizing video games. Outside of the high school arena, tournaments — for groups of varying sizes and skill levels — are held at varying times throughout the year. Much like more traditional sports, esports has seasons and offseasons.

Holland Patent began its team by electing officers. McGahey was voted in as president, with Nicholas Foley being named vice president, Logan Baker as treasurer and Aaron Terbanic as secretary.

For the first season, the team is only playing the game "Fortnite," due to the game's popularity and the ability to play it cross-platform, they said. "Fortnite" is an online, third-person battle royal shooting game. It was developed by Epic Games and released in 2017.

“We’re hoping to expand,” McGahey said, noting the team hopes to include more games in its second season, including some that might convince more girls to join.

Playing video games in a league is quite different than casually playing with friends. The Holland Patent team breaks up into groups of four or so people to play, practicing for a handful of hours a week.

“I’m not going to play laid back,” Foley said, describing how it is to play in a league game or practice.

The Holland Patent team is hoping to grow the team at the school and provide a blueprint for other interested schools in the state. There is also the possibility of earning scholarships to college, something that was unheard of years ago.

In New York, a handful of colleges, including Canisius, Siena, Keuka and Iona, already offer esports competitively.

Officials in the Holland Patent school district are treating the new esports team like they do any other sports team at the high school. All students are eligible to join, but they must maintain a 2.5 grade point average, have good attendance and follow the same behavioral code applied to every varsity sport.

“We’re treating it just like an extracurricular,” said Principal Russell Stevener Jr.

Stevener said the esports league was completely driven by the students. He further stated that he was looking forward to the time when the team would host its first tournament.

Esports is rising in popularity. Video game companies are starting their own leagues and various tournaments have been shown on cable television. There also has been a move to include the sport in the Olympics.

Regionally, those interested in esports can visit businesses like LAN Mob in Rome to play. Located on North James Street, the business opened in September 2015 and is home to rising esports players.

LAN Mob owner Aaron Wade has offered to help Holland Patent with the new team.

“Holland Patent is the first high school I’ve seen in Central New York to establish a program and it would be great to see Utica, New Hartford, Rome and other school districts step into the arena,” Wade said. “I think this is a natural progression for high schools, as many colleges are now offering full esports scholarships for ‘League (of Legends),’ ‘Overwatch’ and other games with established pro scenes.

“Keeping a robust esports program is not only creating a popular option for students but also allows school districts to reach many more youth and help teach important life skills like strategy, communication, teamwork, dedication, synergy and perseverance.”

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