

UNCAPPED POTENTIAL CABLE ACADEMY 2017

April 19 & 20
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BCAP's 29th annual Cable Academy heads to the Poconos to highlight the direction our industry must embrace to prosper during the most competitive environment in its history. Cable Academy 2017 will showcase the "Uncapped Potential" that exists today, and how it can further expand in the near future.



"WHAT ARE WE IN 2017?"

STEVE EFFROS

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Cablefax Daily columnist
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Members of an Ohio State team in a fast-growing sport gathered recently on campus to review game "film" from a loss to a Big Ten Conference foe.

Led by head coach Peter Ferguson, the players worked to identify their mistakes and hone their strategy for the next match, which won't take place on a field or court.

Rather, it will play out in a virtual arena.

The contest involves "League of Legends," a fantasy video game that's among the most popular in the surging eSports scene.

Ohio State's club team, officially organized into a competitive force less than two years ago, coincides with the online fantasy game's ubiquity on college campuses throughout the country.

This winter, OSU and 11 other schools among the 14 in the Big Ten have fielded teams for a pilot season of "League of Legends" competition. Nebraska and Penn State aren't participating in the arrangement — a partnership between the Big Ten Network and Riot Games, the Los Angeles-based creator of "Legends."

"It's been received extremely well," said Michael Sherman, who oversees the effort for Riot Games. "We're interested in working with more conferences."

"League of Legends," a multiplayer game that attracts 100 million players worldwide each month, takes place in a battle arena, with the action requiring solid strategy, communication and teamwork.

The Big Ten competition pits two five-person teams head to head in a fight to take down the opponent's "nexus," a structure within each team's base on opposite ends of the playing field.

Players compete as a character of their choice (archers, swordsmen and mages, among others) and are assisted by computer-controlled minions as they battle one another and work to destroy the turrets guarding an opponent's base.

"These are players who have to have the same mental fortitude that any athlete will have," Sherman said. "They need to have the right state of mind."

The Big Ten season represents a trial run of sorts for the next level of organized collegiate competition.

For five years running, Riot Games has offered competitive play to university teams nationwide through its Campus Series. Universities, in turn, have begun to sanction organized "Legends" teams, mostly at the club level but some at the varsity level. Some schools even offer scholarships to "Legends" and other eSports players.

Ohio State formalized its club team in September 2015 and last year was among 500 college-based teams vying to qualify for the Campus Series tournament. Thirty-two teams made it — including OSU, which finished second in the North Conference, one of four conferences in the series.

"Everyone's passionate about it, and it's nice that we're getting recognized," said OSU senior Kentaro Ogawa, 23, a team co-manager who helped launch the squad.

The partnership between the Big Ten Network and Riot Games developed from a collaboration in April when they hosted a special invitational game between teams from OSU and Michigan State at a Boston gaming convention.

"We are thrilled to be taking the next step into eSports," Erin Harvego, BTN vice president of marketing, said in a statement.

At Ohio State, players try out for the gaming team at the beginning of the school year. The competition squad consists of six players — two of whom rotate for the fifth starting spot — plus an analyst and a coach.

The OSU club also has a developmental team of seven or eight players who compete in casual scrimmages, which is crucial, given that three of the starters will graduate in May, said OSU senior Nicolas Re, 21, a co-manager of the team.

The 12 schools participating in the Big Ten season are split into two divisions; during the regular season, a team faces each of its division foes once. They play three battles per match, with the top four teams from each division set to proceed to the playoffs.

After starting the season strong, handily defeating Indiana and Michigan State, the Buckeyes lost to Maryland and Rutgers.

They hope to finish the season with a victory on Monday against Michigan, a game that will be streamed on the Big Ten Network website.

"Pressure's on because we did so well last year," said Ferguson, 23, a 2016 OSU graduate who picked up coaching duties this year.

On the line is a berth in the Eastern Division playoffs and a possible trip to Los Angeles to play March 27 in the Big Ten championship in an arena packed with fans — a match that will be televised on the Big Ten Network.

The winner of that game will have a chance to compete in the College Championship against the winner of the Campus Series.

"I would be super-pumped to make it to the finals," said OSU sophomore Alex Williams, 19, a "Legends" team member. "I think, coming in, we thought we were a good school."

Although Re is scheduled to graduate in May, he said, he would be thrilled to see "League of Legends" and other video games soon become recognized as varsity sports — a la football, basketball and many others.

"It's really cool that Riot (Games) and the Big Ten see the potential in this," he said.

"I'm kind of interested to see the path it will take because there are as many competitive games as there are — ***The Columbus Dispatch***

