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Esports Leagues in High Schools

For all the students present in the country, sports are an important part of high school life. In 2017, almost eight million students participated in sports in their schools. Most of these sports are controlled by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), a body that controls sports and other related activities for high schools present in the country. The NFHS coined new history in high school sports on April 19th, 2018, when it announced its collaboration with “PlayVS” to start high school esports leagues. From Fall 2018, students at selected schools started to join esports teams to play against other selected schools present in the pool and fight for their place in state championships. NFHS CEO, Mark Koski, declared esports an important addition to the sports list for two main reasons: according to him, esports will include those students who are left out in sports activities and he considers esports cheap in comparison to its traditional predecessor as the latter requires a lot of equipment to play.

These above-mentioned factors have fueled the formation of many high school esports teams over the years. Naturally, the schools present in the country started to organize minor tournaments like “High School Esports Invitational”, a tournament for schools present around Chicago. Several organizations were setting up contests, like the High School Esports League, which boast the title of “largest esports league in the nation,” and the Electronic Gaming Federation, which presents itself as the pioneer of high school esports leagues in the entire world. The rest of the high school esports leagues are still mainly self-governed, with their parent companies and schools starting regulations and enrolling schools individually. In accumulation to that factor, collaboration with a well-known sports body gives them an additional layer of acceptability to the thought of video games as a sport, which should help with countering some criticism thrown at esports.

The esports business has come a long way since its beginning, rising from a small and semi-professional industry to a giant one over the years. But there remains a problematic argument against giving video games an equal status to traditional sports, created on the newcomer nature of esports and the absence of physical activity which is “visible” in playing video games. For esports, the debate is central in its outcome on first-person shooters (FPS) like “Counter-strike Global Offensive” which puts players in possession of guns. For high schools, the issue is discussed often because of the widespread school shootings on academic campuses. For this very reason, the NFHS will not contain FPS games in their tournaments. They will offer games like League of Legends (LoL), Defense of the Ancients 2 (DOTA 2), Super Smash Bros and Madden NFL. There is also an argument that the production of world-class athletes will cease and the schools will be a breeding ground for laziness. This is the observation that esports leagues are up against if they are to survive. According to the director of “Chicago Esports & Gaming”, Andre Whitehead, esports can also equip students with skills like any traditional sport. He thinks that esports is teaching students ‘modern’ skills that are necessary for survival in these times, where the world is a lot more dependent on technology than physical skills.

The sudden but gradual growth of high school esports is the newest move to offer acceptability for esports. High school esports tournaments are preceded by college-level esports leagues, such as the National Association of Collegiate Esports, the American Collegiate Esports League and the Collegiate Star League. These tournaments are run like an old college sports league, with scholarships for topmost players. The start of esports leagues in high schools moves to add further charm to esports in the world of international sports. ESPN, a major sports news network, dedicated a section of its website to esports in 2016 and has been treating them as any sport ever since. More recently, news has started to emerge that the Paris 2024 Olympics Committee is thinking of adding esports as a “demonstration sport”. Even though it does not put esports on the same status as other Olympic sports, it would soon lay the basis for full attachment to the ranks of the sport in the future.