

Esports looking to secure Olympic future at Asian Games

Esports events will be contested at the Asian Games for the first time in Indonesia, with players and advocates hoping it will show skeptics that video gaming belongs in the big leagues.

With the stakeholders hoping the demonstration event will help build the case for making esports a medal event in future Olympics, the activity must battle the stigma that it glorifies violence and exacerbates mental health issues linked to so-called gaming disorder.

Game developer Konami Digital Entertainment Co.'s popular "Pro Evolution Soccer 2018" — known in Japan as "Winning Eleven 2018" — and Riot Games Inc.'s "League of Legends" battle arena game are among six titles selected for the event, which will start on Aug. 26 and run for seven days during the Asian Games.

The sports, fighting and strategy card games used in esports have been gaining recognition. Reflecting their entry into the mainstream, professional sports organizations like the National Basketball Association and Formula One motor racing have legitimized gaming by establishing their own leagues and competitions, with prize money attached.

Major companies, including Alibaba Group Holding and Intel Corp., top partners of the International Olympic Committee, have also shown interest in investing in the potentially lucrative marketing opportunities.

"Just like in real sports, we are sending our players in a professional way to the Asian Games," said Hideki Okamura, chairman of the Japan Esports Union, a group launched in February this year to promote the activity in Japan while advocating for its inclusion in the Olympics.

"Steps like this are the best way for the general public to improve their understanding of esports," Okamura said.

Of the three Japanese competing in the esports tournament at the Asian Games in Jakarta and Palembang, only one, Tetsuro Akasaka, is a professional gamer.

"We want to build a foundation on which we can be seen as promoting activities in a socially acceptable way," the chairman said.

Esports tournaments are held in arenas packed with spectators and streamed online. The players and their teams often attract big corporate sponsors, with prize money reaching as high as tens of millions of dollars.

South Korea has long been the epicenter of competitive gaming, but Europe and North America have quickly embraced it. Japan, in comparison, is still in its esports infancy.

According to estimates by market research company Newzoo, esports will be a \$905.6 million industry this year, up 38 percent from a year ago, with total revenue by 2020 likely to reach \$1.4 billion. In addition, the audience for esports is expected to surge to 250 million in 2021 from 165 million this year.

Due to its popularity with young people, esports has already been selected as an official full medal event at the 2022 Asian Games to be held in Hangzhou, China.

The IOC sees esports as having the potential to bring a new type of audience to the Olympic Games, which is what it is attempting to do by including surfing and skateboarding in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

But the IOC's interest remains at the consideration stage so far.

One hurdle to inclusion is skepticism over whether a nonphysical activity like gaming can be considered a sport at all. The International e-Sports Federation remains unrecognized by the IOC.

In a forum in Lausanne, Switzerland, in late July, IOC President Thomas Bach said esports and traditional sports have shared values, like a passion for competition, before greeting pro esports player Jacob Lyon by saying: "Welcome to the Olympic world."

At the forum, the IOC gathered top esports players, executives and tournament organizers for the first time, a sign that Olympic administrators are taking it seriously.

However, Bach was unclear about whether he believes gaming should be part of the Olympics.

"I don't have the answers. We still have to be in contact," he said to Lyon. "The question is also about how the public feels about it and can the public follow this."

He went on: "We have a red line when it comes . . . to a game where it is about the glorification of violence or discrimination. . . . These red lines cannot be crossed by the Olympic movement."

But Lyon, who plays the first-person shooter *Overwatch*, countered that traditional sports can be just as violent as video games. In a pointed remark to former Olympic fencing champion Bach, he said: “Fencers sort of get . . . sport out of violence. The origins of fencing skills were also murderous in the most literal sense.”

The World Health Organization’s announcement in June that it will recognize gaming disorder as a mental health condition in its next revision of the International Classification of Diseases has poured cold water on esports.

A WHO official said that about 2 to 3 percent of the more than 2 billion people who play video games worldwide suffer the gaming disorder.

“I hope more people will actually come and watch (the) esports” tournament before passing judgment, Japan Esports Union Vice President Hirokazu Hamamura said. “Players competing at the global level are athletes with perseverance and mental strength and are different from those who are lazily doing it for fun.”

Some still snicker at the idea of gamers as athletes, but Japan’s Asian Games trio are as determined as anyone else in Japanese colors.

“Because the ‘Winning Eleven’ series is a very popular sports game in Japan, I want to make sure I am worthy of representing the country,” said university student Naoki Sugimura, 21. “It is the first time I am wearing a uniform with the sponsors’ names. I am excited. I feel like a real athlete.”

High school student Tsubasa Aihara, 18, said: “I will be happy if I can spread the appeal of esports to the general public by bringing home the best-colored medal I can.”