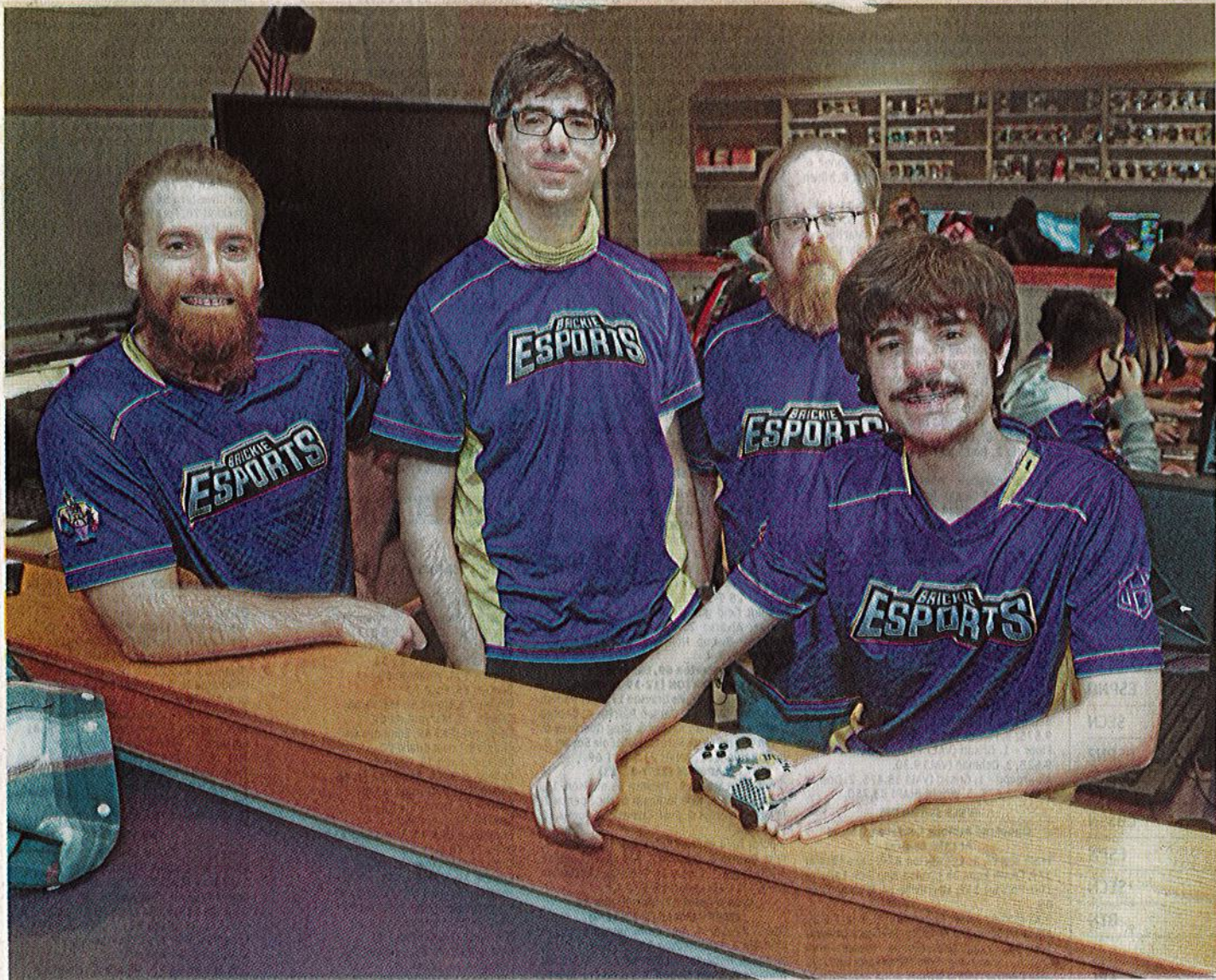


SPORTS

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PREP ESPORTS



JOHN J. WATKINS PHOTOS, THE TIMES

Hobart student Brett Nuzzo, right, is the Super Smash Brothers champion. He is joined by his coaches, from left, Ben Horjus, Chris King and Shaun Doyle.

Video gamers getting their chance to shine

Clubs booming; state recognition could be coming down the road

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Hobart senior Brett Nuzzo has no doubt that winning the Super Smash Brothers tournament title at Manchester University this fall will stand as one of his most treasured high school memories.

It might be quite different than how many people reflect on their high school experience, but for Nuzzo, who has been playing Super Smash Brothers since he was in preschool, it was far better.

"All my friends were behind me," Nuzzo said. "Every time I would take one game off of (my opponent), they'd be screaming really loud. Their support was what gave me the confidence to win and perform at my best."

As Nuzzo enjoys his final year of high school — and his last go-round in the Brickies' emerging esports club — he is happy to see that other students around the Region will get similar chances to apply their passion for video games in an organized, compet-



Hobart student Brett Nuzzo, right, chats with one of his coaches, Ben Horjus. Nuzzo is the Super Smash Brothers champion.

itive setting.

Since joining Hobart's fledgling esports club as a freshman, Nuzzo has seen many of his classmates hop onboard. The Brickies' club now boasts more than 50 students as members, and is one of the largest student organizations in the school.

Competing in the Indiana High School Esports Network, Hobart is one of a growing number of Region schools — including Munster, Kankakee Valley,

Portage and Hanover Central to name a few — that have entered the rapidly growing esports scene.

"I don't know if it's because of COVID because most people turn to games as a form of escapism," Nuzzo said. "They're stuck at home. But it's really nice to see a breakthrough of support. A whole different group of people can finally pretty much do what they've always loved to do, and then they're not judged quite as

Editor's note

This is the final story in a three-part series on how esports is growing both in the Region and across the globe.

harshly for it."

Ben Horjus, an English teacher and one of Hobart's esports coaches, is part of a generation of teachers who also identify as gamers, like many of his students. After arriving in the district, Horjus was pumped up when the opportunity to get involved with the Brickies' club presented itself.

He sees his players as far more than people who have a tendency to play video games for hours on end. In fact, with an increasing stream of scholarship opportunities at universities around the country and in Indiana alike, Horjus thinks a new path to success is emerging for his students.

"We want these kids who have good skills to exercise them and be able to actually do something with them," Horjus said. "Because, to be honest, the chances

Esports

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that someone's going to make a career out of that are a low percentage. They might get a college degree out of it, which is great, they save a ton of money, but long-term, a career out of it, it's a low percentage of people."

Nuzzo is one of a few Brickies who hopes to continue his competitive gaming career at the next level, and Horjus hopes more and more students will follow in his footsteps.

The interest in gaming is already there for kids. But now, a changing landscape has materialized for gamers as school administrations warm to the idea of incorporating video games as an extracurricular activity.

"If they can get past the just solo, playing video games in your basement covered in Cheeto dust that people have in their minds, they're actually really likely to be able to use all of this stuff and future careers," Horjus said.

'The demographic is me'

Portage esports coach and Indiana Esports Network president Nate Thompson hasn't waited around for anyone else to carry the flag for esports.

Back when he was teaching at Munster in 2018, Thompson saw so many students who enjoyed playing video games — some of them very talented — go through high school without ever realizing they could do more than just play for fun at home and online with friends.

Young people who are athletic or particularly smart get recognized for their achievements, but Thompson didn't see the same thing happening for gamers.

"We're giving them the chance and opportunity to stand out in their school," Thompson said. "That's one of the things that motivates me the most, it's seeing these kids that weren't part of the school community at all, and now all of a sudden they're like, 'Hi, I'm here. That's me. I'm playing in a state Rocket League match.'"

In the early years of Munster's program, the Mustangs would compete with teams around the country. But Thompson wanted



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Hobart's Brett Nuzzo, right, is the Super Smash Brothers champion. He is joined by his coaches, from left, Ben Horjus, Chris King and Shaun Doyle and the rest of the Hobart esports team.

to provide an experience similar to that which traditional Region athletes get, from area rivalries to showdowns between friends in different districts.

"When you're competing against somebody in Oregon or in California, it doesn't have as much oomph as competing against Hobart," Thompson said. "Now you can get that Munster vs. Hobart rivalry going since they're both Division 2A schools.

"Now we can start building those local rivalries back up just like we do in traditional sports."

Tony Amador, a freshman history teacher at Hammond Central, wants to see the School City of Hammond district join the fray itself.

Recently, Amador surveyed students at Morton and Hammond Central about interest in joining an esports club, which he hopes to launch by the end of the school year — even if the district hasn't started its official program yet. Of 200 respondents, Amador said about 190 kids expressed interest in participating in an esports program.

Since then, the School City of Hammond has decided to get fully behind esports, planning to hire a coach with a stipend that is comparable to its other athletic programs. Whether Amador or someone else gets the job, he views it as a great sign.

"This gives a lot of other kids who maybe don't go into high school sports with football, volleyball or whatever a chance to shine,"

Amador said.

After a challenging two-year stretch with the pandemic that Amador believes has caused students to feel more isolated, he believes strongly that esports is a positive way to bring young people together.

"These kids just really need something to ground them, need something to feel like they've accomplished something important or something they can contribute," Amador said.

That doesn't mean everybody will become an esports star or a streamer with millions of followers and lucrative endorsements, but that's not what it has to be to make an impact.

"It's like, what if they can look up and see as a middle schooler that one of their possible classmates was able to gain a \$1,000 scholarship to a college they wanted to go to or that was their brother or someone else? It's like this suddenly can become an actual possibility," Amador said.

"Everybody plays games," he continued. "Everybody wants to play games. All of them talk about when they play games, so why not make it to where they can play games from school and actually benefit from it?"

Thompson's and Amador's drive to provide new opportunities for Region students, including embracing logistical challenges and hesitation — or unfamiliarity — from traditional organizing bodies stems from feeling left out them-

selves when they were around the same age.

"The demographic I see with these kids is me," Thompson said. "I want to make sure they have opportunities I did not have, and this is one of the ways we can do that, making sure they have a well-organized, scheduled out esports competition."

'Time will tell'

The Indiana High School Athletic Association has yet to venture into esports just yet, but commissioner Paul Neidig said the organization is monitoring activity around the state.

Neidig could see the IHSA moving to sanction esports competitions in the future.

"I'm aware of the growth and the numbers of participation," Neidig said. "Every article that I read speaks to the the dollars involved and the number of people that are currently participating in esports. I don't think they'd let my Mario Brothers skills come back out to be able to participate. I kind of left off at Pong and Mario Brothers many years ago."

Across the border, the Illinois High School Association is set to host its first esports state series this spring.

IHSA assistant executive director Matt Troha estimated that there are 130 entries in the series so far, and he expects a few more teams to join before the state-wide competitions begin.

Esports are considered to be an activity, rather than a sport in Illinois, similarly to bass fishing, chess and debate.

It could go either way in Indiana, according to Neidig, and perhaps the larger question is whether schools would continue to compete in the IHSEN or push for IHSA recognition.

In 2020, the IHSA passed a new bylaw that could allow esports to begin the path to recognition by first becoming an "emerging sport." The bylaw requires at least 20 schools to sponsor programs, then submit documentation making a case for viability between participation opportunities, health and safety information and other data, along with suggested rules and 10 letters of commitment from schools that either sponsor or intend to sponsor the event.

"We also recently passed a by-law last year that would recognize emerging sports. Esports could potentially fall underneath that world, just like girls wrestling, I think, will in the very near future," Neidig said. "Another one could be boys volleyball in the very near future."

Currently, IHSEN has more than 60 member schools across three divisions, and it sponsors competitions in Overwatch, Rocket League, Super Smash Brothers, Valorant, Fortnite, Minecraft, Forza and even chess and Tetris.

Munster, which also took home the 2021 spring team title in Forza, captured IHSEN's Class AA championship in Overwatch in December.

Mustangs coach Mike Paprstein said his team didn't initially set out with the belief that it could win a state title, but as the results stacked up, the team realized it could do something special.

"It's awesome to see the kids understand what they accomplished," Paprstein said. "At the beginning of the year, it was kind of just like, 'Let's get together and play!'"

Paprstein, who took over the club in 2019, said that its membership continues to grow as esports' popularity rises. And Munster is taking notice, recognizing the club for its achievement on social media and sharing photos as it does for the school's athletic programs.

"This is truly something anybody can play if they have the facilities to play it," Paprstein said. "Anybody can play the video games, it just takes practice."

Munster has participated in esports since 2017, competing in Forza Motorsport 7, Overwatch, Rocket League, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, Tetris and Valorant.

Thompson said IHSEN has not yet spoken with the IHSA about potentially getting esports recognized in the state, but Neidig seems open to the idea even if there isn't a timeline.

"I think it's an emerging sport, I think it's growing, but I still think it's trying to refine itself into what it's going to be in the future," Neidig said. "We certainly want to support opportunities for kids' participation. Time will tell what esports will be like in the state of Indiana."