

UC San Diego

UC San Diego News Center

By Katherine Connor

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‘Defenders of Geisel’ Esports Team Gets a Shot at National Title



The stage is set for the 2017 Overwatch Collegiate National Championship, hosted by UC San Diego. Photo credit Kevin He/ Tespa

UC San Diego is headed to the Fiesta Bowl.

Sounds impossible for a university without a football program, but for the first time the Fiesta Bowl organization, which puts on the eponymous college football bowl game, is branching out to an exponentially growing market: competitive video game playing, or esports.

The UC San Diego team headed to the championship plays Overwatch, which is a video game released by Blizzard Entertainment in May 2016. Overwatch already has its own professional league—raking in 10 million viewers over its opening week—and a highly developed collegiate

league with big time student interest, and practice infrastructure and scholarships at some schools.

The six UC San Diego undergraduate students on the Defenders of Geisel Overwatch team have battled their way through a pool of 318 teams to make it to the final four and the Fiesta Bowl Overwatch Collegiate National Championships at Arizona State University on Feb. 17. They'll face the University of California, Irvine—their rival, and one of the biggest names in collegiate gaming—in a single elimination semi-final game that's expected to draw upwards of 50,000 viewers.

The winner of that game will face either UC Berkeley—last year's champion—or the University of Toronto in the championship. At stake? \$7,000 in scholarship money for each player on the winning team. The Tritons have already pocketed some of the scholarship funds by making it into the top four.

The Defenders of Geisel come from across campus: Eric Huynh and Jason Bao are computer science majors; Andy Chen is studying economics; Ernie Lum is a biochemistry student; Gene Pan studies English; and John Ashton is a mathematics major. They play together as one team, working collaboratively on a shared goal within the game. They've put in long hours of practice on their own time and are prepared for the game of their lives.



The Defenders of Geisel (l-r): Jason Bao, Ernie Lum, John Ashton, Eric Huynh, Gene Pan, Andy Chen, Justin Kerns (substitute), Ming Yue (substitute) and Cody Sargent (coach). Photo courtesy of Triton Gaming.

“UCI is a big favorite to win the whole tournament, and we're facing them first, so an underdog win would really tell a story for us,” said Andy Chen.

His teammate Ernie Lum added that he's excited to represent UC San Diego.

“Although being able to play live on stage is amazing, I'm most excited about being able to represent UC San Diego doing one of my favorite things,” Lum said. “I'm curious to see how our accomplishment can affect the future of esports at UC San Diego.”

A history of success

This isn't the Triton's first time in the gaming spotlight. UC San Diego consistently produces top-ranked competitive teams across a variety of games. This year, the Overwatch team is in the top four, the Starcraft team is ranked second in the nation, the Counterstrike: Global Offensive team is in the top four, and the Defense of the Ancients team is one of the top eight teams in the country. Results like this are no anomaly. UC San Diego's gaming prowess is so well known that it was selected to host last year's Overwatch championship tournament.

Plus, the university's alumni have a reputation for being among the most hireable in the esports industry.

"Students on campuses with active gaming communities, like UC Irvine and UC San Diego, often gain valuable leadership experiences that help them apply for jobs in the gaming industry," said Kevin He, an associate community manager at Tespa, Blizzard Entertainment's collegiate arm, and a UC San Diego alumnus. Kevin He is also a founder of [Triton Gaming](#), the overarching student gaming organization on campus.



The UC Berkeley Overwatch team, last year's national champions, gets down to business at the championship game held at UC San Diego. Photo credit Kevin He/ Tespa

Aaron Kim, another UC San Diego alumnus, plays Overwatch professionally for the Los Angeles Gladiators. Charlet Chung, also an alum, is the voice of one of the characters in Overwatch. There are alumni at Riot Games, Blizzard, HTC Esports—the list goes on.

This community and culture of excellence at UC San Diego is unique among many of the other top-tier collegiate gaming institutions in that it's entirely student run.

"UC San Diego and UC Irvine have a long-standing friendly rivalry because we're two really big esports schools and we're right next to each other," said He, who founded Triton Gaming as a student in 2014 when he noticed the lack of a unified gaming community on campus. "It's funny: UCI has always had school support for esports—it's one of the most school-supported college teams in the world. And UC San Diego has great players, but has always been very community focused. So for UCSD, going up against UCI in major esports competitions like this is a big deal."

The student-centered nature of gaming on campus has its benefits: it makes for a very dedicated community, since everyone is involved because they choose to be.

“I think that here at UC San Diego we have a stronger community in general than other schools with scholarships and esports programs because here it’s all grassroots—it’s led by students, it’s run by students, every person in the spotlight is a student,” said Bhumi “Seth” Sethabutr, a mathematics- computer science major who is president of Triton Gaming. He plans to work in the esports industry after graduation. In the meantime, he is working to raise the profile of UC San Diego esports here on campus.

The Triton Gaming community is now 600-members strong, though major events draw many more students—Winter Game Fest, for example, attracted more than 2,400 attendees. The group encompasses more than a dozen smaller student organizations dedicated to specific games, including Triton Overwatch. Mindy Nguyen, an applied mathematics student earning a minor in math education, is the co-president of Triton Overwatch, and said the club’s Overwatch tournaments typically draw between 30 and 50 players.

Students say having to secure funding and sponsors for their events, handling the logistics of finding a place to host tournaments, sourcing the necessary equipment, and finding time to practice in addition to their heavy course loads can be challenging, but does have some upsides.

“It turns out it’s kind of a crucible for molding good esports leaders,” Sethabutr said.

A future of growth

Esports, as an industry, is booming. Market intelligence firm Newzoo predicts global revenue from esports will hit \$1 billion by 2019, and research firm Ovum has the market pegged at nearly \$2 billion by 2022.

Many current college students don’t remember a time without video games.

“I think for my generation, we really don’t know when we started getting into gaming because we’ve grown up alongside it, and that’s why we feel so strongly connected to it,” Sethabutr said. “Some of our fondest memories are going to a sleepover at a friend’s house and playing video games, or going to an arcade and dropping our entire week’s allowance on video games. I think for us it’s how we’ve come into the world trying to understand it, and how we’ve made connections with people.”

With high schools and even middle schools launching gaming organizations and classes, it’s an important aspect for a lot of students and factors into their collegiate decision-making process.

“Now, with esports booming and actual career paths being built, high school students are more likely to take into account how strong the esports communities are on their campuses,” Kevin He said. “Even when I was looking at colleges, I chose UC San Diego because I was passionate about competing and I wanted to go to a school that had a strong League of Legends team.”



And the crowd goes wild at the 2017 Overwatch Collegiate National Championship held at UC San Diego. Photo credit Kevin He/ Tespa

Nguyen, who plans to be a math teacher after she graduates, said she'll encourage her students to enjoy gaming.

“As a future educator, I would like to promote this hobby among my students because it's a good stress reliever and games make you think,” she said. “And it's not just a hobby—people are making jobs out of it and the industry is growing.”

Today's gamers often don't fall into the common stereotypes of yore, and practice time doesn't have to eat into the rest of college life. Rounds of Overwatch, for example, can be played in less than an hour, which works out well in the context of college class schedules.

“I try to fit at least a few games in each day—half an hour a day on average, but it spikes some days,” said Eric Huynh, a computer science student and Defenders of Geisel team member, who is also co-president of UC San Diego's [Bodyrock breakdancing club](#).

He said there's a strong social and community aspect to the Triton Gaming group, which might be one reason why UC San Diego's Overwatch team is so dominant.

“Teams have to work together really well,” Huynh said. “There's a lot of coordination. A big part of the game is chaos, and managing that chaos—trying to make sure it's favorable for you.”

Luckily for the Defenders of Geisel, team work is something that comes naturally to the Triton Gaming scene.

As Sethabutr puts it, “We're friends having fun. We just happen to be good at it.”