

Turning videogames into a school sport

Written by By: Molly Adamson Sun Correspondent
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Parents can breathe a sigh of relief. Not all children playing video games are ignoring their studies.

With many colleges beginning to offer esports scholarships and gamers making millions of dollars for streaming while they play, the popularity of esports may rise above even the more traditional sports like basketball or football.

Janice Spiros, Miyamura High School's librarian and building test coordinator, used to be one of those parents who worried about the amount of time her children spent playing video games. But that's all changed.

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Now she coaches the school's esports team.

In an interview with the *Sun*, she laughed at a memory of the time she threw her sons' PlayStation out a door because they weren't getting their homework done.

Her perspective on video games has changed.

When asked why she stepped up as the coach when the program started in the fall of 2019, Spiros explained that she could see the benefit of esports. She said that students who participate in esports need that type of competitive activity.

"Esports kind of fills a niche that hasn't been there," she said. "These are kids who don't go out for traditional sports, who are actually able to enjoy working in a team and [they've] never had that teamwork opportunity before."

Spiros started the program at Miyamura in the fall of 2019 after the New Mexico Athletic Association began recognizing esports as an official high school sport. She said that Miyamura's assistant principal Josh Adams really supported the program and helped get the district to recognize esports as a sanctioned sport, not just a club.

The librarian said she really doesn't have too much experience with video games.

"I don't necessarily know the moves, and they have tried to get me to play the games," she chuckled. "I can accidentally make a goal and that's about as good as I am."

Spiros is retiring next year, but she hopes that students take on more leadership roles in the future. She mentioned that some colleges have student coaches, and she wondered if Miyamura would be able to do something like that.

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Chemistry teacher Jeremy Jensen will be taking over for Spiros next year. In an email he said he was excited to learn how the competitions are set up and the logistics of the games. He acknowledged that there would be a sharp learning curve for him, but he's interested to see how he can support the students.

This year the school only had one Rocket League team with four players on it. Last year they had seven Rocket League players and 10 League of Legends players.

Spiros noted that the pandemic made it hard to recruit students when she wasn't seeing them at school during the pandemic.

The students were able to practice together online at home though, which is something traditional athletes couldn't do. They were also able to compete in matches.

The team did make it to the state championship, which was held virtually on April 22. They lost in the first round, but Spiros said she was still proud that they made it that far.

Part of the reason the team made it that far was thanks to senior Brittany Armijo. Spiros said Armijo helped lead the team in a big way.

"She could see what they needed to do and she would tell them 'Ok, this is how we need to fix this. This is what we need to do,'" Spiros said.

At first Armijo joined the team because her brother, a sophomore, was on it. But then she realized she could use the opportunity to get to know other people at her school.

"The team was very open to hearing what they needed to change or hearing compliments," Armijo said.

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“I tried to encourage people where I saw they needed it and then I tried to tell them what they could work on,” Armijo stated. “But I also tried to ask people what I needed to work on so everyone could discuss it.”

Armijo will be going to the University of New Mexico’s Gallup campus next year, and while it doesn’t have an esports team set up right now, she said she would be open to joining one in the future.

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