HCC adding eSports team to its athletics roster

HOLYOKE – Holyoke Community College is adding another athletics team to its roster of intercollegiate sports.

Along with men's and women's soccer, cross country, golf, volleyball, men's and women's basketball, track and field, and baseball, HCC will soon begin recruiting students to play eSports.

In eSports - short for electronic sports - participants play online video games against individuals or other teams. Some of the more common collegiate-level eSports are Overwatch (a multiplayer, first-person shooter game), League of Legends (an arena-style battle game), and Rocket League (a vehicular soccer game).

"They are strategy games," said HCC Athletics Director Tom Stewart, "thinking person's games. Every athletic event is a thinking person's game, but these are more strictly thinking person's games, but they also require a measure of physical coordination and stamina."

According to Stewart, HCC will be just the fourth community college in Massachusetts to create an eSports team, joining Mass Bay, Northern Essex, and Bunker Hill community colleges. The HCC team will be co-ed.

"We're the only community college west of Worcester that's going to have eSports," he said.

Although HCC belongs to the National Junior College Athletic Association, the NJCAA, its eSports team will compete in the Eastern College Athletic Conference, which has an eSports division.

Last month, HCC posted an employment notice soliciting applicants for a head coach to lead the eSports team. Over the summer, a for-

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mer classroom on the second floor of HCC's Bartley Center for Athletics and Recreation was converted into an eSports center and outfitted with 10 eSports stations that will allow two teams of five to play simultaneously. Each station includes a high-performance computer, monitor, keyboard, headset, mouse, and gaming controller. There's a large screen monitor on the wall, where the coach can plan strategy and watch gameplay, and a small lounge area in the middle of the room for downtime. Only members of the eSports team and their coaches will have access to the room for practices and competitions.

With this new offering, Stewart said the college is hoping to capitalize on the increasing popularity of professional Sports, a market expected to exceed $1 billion in revenue in the United States in 2024 and growing about 15 percent annually, according to Statista, an online industry database.

"It's the biggest growth sport in the county," Stewart said. "I think it's going to attract a different kind of kid. When local high schools find out we have an eSports team here, I think it's going to help enrollment."

Like all of HCC's athletic teams, eSports will have academic eligibility requirements, as well as nutrition and fitness components.

"It's not a gaming club," said Stewart. "Team members are not going to be able to kick it in here all day long instead of going to class. They'll have to maintain their grades. It's just another athletic offering to complement their overall educational experience."