



Full Sail puts on a show at Fortress for high school gamers

Florida esports athletes enjoy camaraderie and 'Good Game' competition in Super Smash Brothers tournament at the university's iconic arena.

By: [Chris Burt](#) | December 6, 2019



High school competitors line up to play at Full Sail University's The Fortress. LRP photos/Chris Burt

At the corner of Forsyth Road and University Drive, a hearty drive north from Orlando's theme parks and the chaos of I-Drive, lie a couple of nondescript, long, mirrored glass buildings. Plenty of parking. An abundance of trees. Their leaves shield a few small signs that let you know where you are: [Full Sail University](#). If you're speeding through the suburb of Winter Park, you might miss it, especially if your eyes catch a glimpse of the Chick-fil-A across the street. But on a recent

Saturday morning, it was hard to ignore the line snaking from the doors at the north end of its second building. Kids, parents, teachers, school technologists, all waiting nervously in the warm November sun. All waiting to get their first glimpse of The Fortress, the largest collegiate esports campus arena in the country.

In May, the 11,200-square-foot \$6 million Fortress was officially unveiled, helping to put this diminutive-but-tech-strong campus on the gaming map. Full Sail, noted for its recording arts and film production work – and yes, esports – already has hosted a number of events there. But its most recent one, this High School Invitational for students across Florida, might have been its most ambitious and its most successful.

That long line of people – more than 520 strong – converged on Full Sail for a final Super Smash Brothers tournament that pitted 174 competitors against each other under the bright lights and big screens of The Fortress. Three winners received scholarships. All of them in some way came away victorious, getting the chance to be spotlighted in a big arena with families cheering them on.

“I am still in awe of what took place on Saturday,” said Andrew Duncan, assistant director of outreach at Full Sail. “It was an incredible experience that I hope will leave a lasting memory for all who were in attendance.



“There was a moment during the tournament when a teacher took me aside to share the positive impact this experience has made to one of her more reserved students. She was amazed at how much her student opened up after qualifying for our invitational. The student even designed esports T-shirts for her entire team. Hearing stories like these make it all worth it and solidifies the importance of providing esports opportunities to high school students.”

That student, Brooke Shainman of Jupiter High School in Palm Beach County, a couple hours south of Orlando, took second place overall and won a \$5,000 scholarship to Full Sail along with a 3D printed medal. Local gamer Sam Delgado of Edgewater High School in Orlando took first place, earning a \$10,000 scholarship, a trophy, a 3D medal and a championship banner to hang in his school's gymnasium. Judah Harvey of Crooms Academy of Information Technology in Sanford, a half-hour north, took third place and also earned a \$5,000 scholarship and 3D medal.

The event was the culmination of a long-planned creative vision, backed by savvy marketing and, of course, the will of students, parents and faculty to get involved.



The inspiration

The idea for the tournament was born as The Fortress was being built.

Duncan and his team dreamed up a multi-site competition and learning environment as part of an outreach to students. The mission: Full Sail team members would go to a variety of high schools throughout The Sunshine State, hitting the big population areas of Jacksonville, Tampa, Central Florida and South Florida, spreading the vision of the university while hosting TechFests at each school. Beyond the games, they wanted to show students career paths through interactive stations that highlighted animation, 3D arts, spatial computing, game design, augmented and virtual reality and emerging technologies.



“I started thinking along the lines of, ‘how can we get high school students involved?’” Duncan said. “So, we decided to combine those two worlds (tech and esports) and plant the seeds with the high school students and let them know about it.

“What we wanted to do was reinforce the importance of STEAM classes in high school. If you take those math classes seriously, that could lead to potential careers in the gaming industry – in augmented reality, virtual reality, simulation and so on – and then end up maybe working for companies like Google or SpaceX and so on.”

Duncan and team members chose 17 schools, essentially four or five from each region, trying to get a diverse cross-section of student gamers to compete.

“Some of the schools already had esports clubs available, which was incredible; some of the schools, it’s very new to them,” Duncan says. “We wanted to make sure that we reached out to a vast variety of schools, not only private schools, but public schools, charter and magnet schools, Title I schools. We wanted to give everyone an opportunity to participate in this. If you’re serious about your dream, we’ll take your dream seriously.”



Opportunity knocks

Full Sail members trekked from North Florida all the way to Miami-Dade County, where esports has a strong foothold in high schools. The visits finished the final week before the big day at The Fortress.

Two of its final stops were in Palm Beach County, which boasts 1.5 million residents, but has done very little in the esports space at the middle and high school level. According to school district officials, however, that's likely to change. Understanding the benefits esports can provide beyond just game play, they are already testing the waters to give kids another outlet in school to cement their futures.



“The big goal is to engage the students who are typically not engaged with school,” says John Shoemaker, Educational Technology Strategist for the School District of

Palm Beach County. “We were awarded a grant from the Pew Foundation to create three teams at three of our Title I schools. We also have three more high schools and middle schools we would like to build teams at. The goal would be that kids can go into middle school and start learning the basics and then look to high school and actually participate in a real team and then be able to get scholarships to college.” Shoemaker referenced the North America Scholastic Esports Federation’s (NASEF) Trojan Horse notion, that esports can be the gateway to much bigger and better things for interested students.

“I really love that analogy because it’s true,” he said. “It’s not just a video game club. It’s really academically focused ... using this as the catalyst to let them see that they can be engaged in their school, especially those students who are disengaged and absent a lot and just don’t want to be here. Yet, they’re going home and doing the very thing that we’re trying to build here. So, the kids, especially in our CTE classes that are interested in this field, can actually see how they can make this a career for their lifetime. Each of the different booths were really hands-on, which I like.”

One of Palm Beach’s competitors, Shainman, proved that students can come from any program, startup or established, and find success in a county that is just scratching the surface with esports on the scholastic level. Her second-place finish and the positive vibes of those competing were apparent at both Jupiter and Wellington, where high-fives, fist bumps and shouts of “GG (for good game)” were ever-present.

“Just the whole diversity of this [tournament] is great ... any student can actually win this!” Shoemaker said. “A lot of times it’s the shy, quiet student that wins, someone who barely says a word, but the students are cheering for them. They get to see that what they do can be validated, that this is something that is a reality and not just on the cutting edge anymore.”

Duncan adds: “They get very excited when they come in, especially when they see the Smash Bros. portion of the event. But I would have to say, my favorite part is when students qualify; maybe they haven’t had an opportunity to play in any sporting field before and now they have what it is that they enjoy the most and they’re getting a chance to compete against other high schools. To see their excitement, they are literally shaking when they’ve won and qualified. They’re so excited for the opportunity.”



Continuing to grow

In the end, Full Sail got more than it bargained for when it signed up 294 kids to compete. The Fortress hosts 500 people, so it had to accommodate an overflow crowd on a busy weekend. That made for a bit of a logistical snarl, but it was, admittedly, a nice problem to have. It shows that there's a lot of interest in esports in Florida.

Full Sail's goal reached, it is looking ahead to next year's competition and looking closely at what's happening on the high school landscape.

"We want to make sure we provide schools as many free resources as possible, whether it's professional development or just connecting them with the community," Duncan says. "A lot of the conversations that are coming up now are centered around starting an esports club. We want to kind of step them through that and give them as many resources as possible."

A good number of students probably hadn't heard of Full Sail before the on-campus meetings. Some probably never put on a VR headset. Many likely never realized there were opportunities beyond the controllers in their hands. A trip to the Fortress probably changed that for the kids and their families.

"We want to inspire these students; we want to show them what the end game is, if they actually focus and pay attention to their classes," Duncan said. "This is a great way to kind of get the ball rolling for them. This is the next generation that is going to create that tech for us. Who knows what's possible from them in the future?"

Young gamers make Forbes list

Esports stars **Kyle ‘Bugha’ Giersdorf** and **Soleil ‘Ewok’ Wheeler** were among those to be named to *Forbes* magazine’s “30 Under 30 Games” list for 2020. Giersdorf, 17, won \$3 million at the Fortnite World Cup as a high school junior. Wheeler, a 14-year-old deaf Fortnite player, has become one of the world’s most popular streamers. The two were the only teens to make the list.

Across the map ...

The New England Collegiate Conference, comprised of eight schools including Becker College and New England College, announced this week it will start sponsoring esports in the 2020-21 season. ... The Big East Esports Invitational, in conjunction with EGF, is being held Saturday and Sunday in New York City. Butler, DePaul, Marquette, Providence, St. John’s, Seton Hall, Villanova and Xavier will compete in the tournament, which can be seen on [Twitch.tv/officialEGF](https://www.twitch.tv/officialEGF). ... SUNY Polytechnic Institute became the latest school to join the Eastern College Athletic Conference in esports. It will compete in the spring in Fortnite, Overwatch, FIFA, League of Legends, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, Hearthstone and Rocket League. ... Washtenaw Community College near Ann Arbor, MI, is launching a new business elective in the winter of 2020: *Introduction to Esports*. The course will feature guest speakers, as well as hands-on and collaborative learning experiences for students. ... Missouri Western has hired **Christian Konczal**, a former gamer and professor from Champlain College in Vermont, to head its new esports program that will open in fall of 2020. ... SUNY Canton is hosting an open house today for women in esports. “We hope to encourage women to take part in esports by showcasing our incredible facilities,” said **Courtney B. Bish**, vice president for student affairs and dean of students. “The demographics for competitive gaming show a large discrepancy in participation between men and women. We are offering an opportunity for both serious women gamers and beginners to come and enjoy themselves in a welcoming atmosphere.” The co-ed SUNY Canton Overwatch team has finished first and second, respectively, in the past two seasons in the ECAC. ... The University of Delaware, which has an astounding 900 members in its video gaming and casual gaming clubs, is opening an esports arena in its student center in the spring. According to reports, esports will be a varsity sport though the university says it will not fall under the athletics department.

Academic Esports Conference Call For Speakers



The deadline for submitting proposals for the Academic Esports Conference & Expo is fast approaching. Those who are influencers in education and esports who would like the opportunity to speak at next October's show in Chicago should go to the Call for Speakers page on LRP Media Group's website [here](#). The deadline is Dec. 31, 2019.

<https://universitybusiness.com/full-sail-puts-on-a-show-at-fortress-for-high-school-gamers>