

## Feels like a Friday night

*Medford League pulls out all the stops at William Monroe*

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI  
Record Staff

William Monroe High School students, parents, grandparents, siblings and younger kids from the local primary school filled the high school gymnasium with enthusiasm and energy ahead of the Medford League basketball game Jan. 28 against Albemarle County. Although it was 10 a.m. on a Tuesday, it felt like a Friday night as high-energy music blared from the speakers, cheerleaders lined up their signs and rustled their pompoms, parents jostled for a good spot and teachers greeted visitors with enthusiasm.

The school's gym is not big enough to house the entire student population at once, so administrators organized it so a third of the student population could attend each of the home games this season. Many of the teachers came out to see their students play, and some parents and grandparents took time out of their days to come and cheer for their athletes. Additionally, special needs students from the primary school were in attendance with their teachers.

As 11th grade athlete McKenna Donahue (WMHS varsity volleyball) finished her beautiful rendition of the national anthem, the packed gym erupted in cheers from all sides.

WMHS coach Jesse Lamm joined the teachers and students to line up as each player was announced and bounded onto the court, to raucous cheers and high fives from both teams.

"The absolute best part—for me—is when they're sitting on the benches and they announce everyone," Lamm said. "So you know the kids are on the benches with their jerseys on and we're all lined up cheering for them and when the announcer says their name and they get to get up and run off that court ... I have goosebumps just talking about it. I mean I really do because they're excited. And then their parents get to see that and get excited and it's just it feels so good."

One thing's for certain: this is no ordinary Tuesday morning.

The Medford Basketball League started in the early 1970s in Chesterfield County. Named for Zipporah Taylor Medford, the first head teacher (principal) of Richmond's special education school, Hickory Hill, the league began as a one-day field day event between Hickory Hill and Virginia Randolph training centers. Since that first day of games (including basketball), the league has expanded across Virginia, with local leagues popping up across the state.

The 2020 season marks the first year of the Medford League for Greene County, who played against Fluvanna and Orange Counties already this month.

For the past several years, the special educa-



PHOTOS BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FOR THE GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Above, Kyler DeHooge steps up to shoot the ball last week at William Monroe High School. Right, Kyle LaTorre takes a shot as part of the Medford League basketball game against Albemarle County on Tuesday, Jan. 28.

tion program at William Monroe has offered Champions Together, a track and field program serving the intellectually or physically disabled student population. Jesse Lamm and Erin Lam serve as track coaches and also work with the special needs students during the school day. Together with Jess Stafford, girls varsity basketball coach, the three ladies pitched the idea of the Medford League to administrators after hearing of the participation by neighboring counties Fluvanna and Orange in the past few years.

With eight teams in the local league, last Tuesday's game was the second of four home games for 2020. The Dragons will play next at Madison County High School on Feb. 14, against Monticello High School at home on Feb. 18, at Eastern View High School on Feb. 28, at home against Culpeper County

High School on March 3 and at Louisa County High School on March 10.

Stafford heard about the local Medford League from her connections in the world of basketball, specifically Laura Beth Chambers, adaptive PE teacher and coach for Orange County, and Nick Ward, special education teacher and boys basketball coach from Fluvanna. The local league tournament started in Fluvanna in 2014.

"I knew Laura Beth (Chambers) and we were talking and I follow her on social media and she kept talking about the Medford League and having pictures of her kids and how incredible it was and even years ago I was like, how amazing would it be to be a part of something like that?" Stafford said. "You could just see everyone's sheer joy, everyone involved from the players to the coaches to all the



kids that are in the stands. [It] just looked like something that I knew that we needed to be a part of."

Stafford has wanted to bring Greene County into the Medford League for a few years but wasn't sure how to make it all happen until she started talking with the Champions Together track coaches.

"So, at the beginning of this school year we got together and said, OK if we're going to do this, we have to take it seriously. We came up with a proposal, created a presentation, took it to school administration and sat down with them and had

conversations about the logistics of everything and how is this going to work," Stafford said. "It's this grand scheme thing we want to do but there are a thousand little things that have to happen in order for it to take place."

Once the school administrators were on board, Stafford and her colleagues worked tirelessly to make the program a reality for their students. Lamm helped organize the school buses, permission slips and necessary paperwork, and Lam worked with the special education department teachers to be sure

all the students' needs were being met.

"I really want to stress just how much it's warmed my heart just how we started this and our school is building it," Lamm said. "That's just been the best piece for me just to see people with and without disabilities who are recognizing how important this is."

"I think you have a hard time understanding it until you go [to the game]," Lam agreed. "We can't really put into words what it looks like and the atmosphere that's in that

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PHOTO BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FOR THE GREENE COUNTY RECORD

From left to right, Paige Hess (#54), Lilly Brookman (#34), Carly Perry (#50) and Triston Bondurant (#23) celebrate a goal.

## Medford

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gym until you experience it for yourself. We had so many people come up to us afterwards or we saw so many people in the stands who were like in tears watching this game because it's just, especially for parents, something they've never been able to see their child participate in."

The team practices during PE class with help from their teachers, coaches and other students. Since after-school commitments are particularly difficult for this group of students, the games are held during the day and the rest of the student body is invited to attend, along with parents and other visitors.

As the buzzer sounds in the packed gymnasium, WMHS #30 Kyle LaTorre scores a quick first basket and the crowd goes wild. Shortly afterwards, the Albemarle team scores, and everyone cheers again just as loudly.

"I think that's the coolest thing that I've seen, one of the coolest things is how much everybody gets excited about every basket, no matter, doesn't matter which side of the score board it's going on they just are so excited about that accomplishment," said Lam.

Stafford's team have been involved in every step of the Medford League, from helping teach students and assisting in practices to pushing team members in wheelchairs around the court or holding a modified basket during the game. Boys basketball players also served as referees, though they were more interested in making sure each kid was involved and having fun than in calling any fouls.

"That's why I really enjoy having my team be a part of it because we teach them a lot of stuff; we teach them about basketball and the technicalities of things, but they teach us how to really love the game that they're playing," Stafford said.

At halftime, the entire gym stood to sing happy birthday to Dragons #11 Kyler DeHooe, whose face lit up in a giant smile. Then the DJ cranked up the music as both teams lined up at the home basket to take turns making free throws. Every player from both teams had two chances (or more) to score a point, with points for every basket going to both teams. Those who needed it were offered a modified basket for their

shot, the entire production being managed by the peer helpers as the coaches cheered along with the crowd and the scoreboard continued to light up. By the end of the break the score was 52-50 with William Monroe in the lead.

"I had a parent of one of the varsity boys tell me the other day that when the young man that's in the wheelchair gave him a high five that he had to hold back tears, that he just was so happy for him and the whole experience meant so much to him that he had to hold back. And I was like oh, that's what this is all about," said Lam.

"You want a buzz when you walk into the gym," Stafford added. "You want a buzz just like it's the biggest game of the playoffs, you want them to feel that excitement; and I think they did."

Some of the modifications to a traditional basketball game were the addition of both a lower basket for players who can't shoot as high and a handheld net brought by the visiting team for their student who was using a motorized wheelchair. This allows the basket to be placed in range for those players to dunk or shoot just like their teammates. Peer helpers, or non-playing athletes from the school's other basketball teams, were on hand to remind players what to do and to push the wheelchairs around the court. The Medford League is all about making sure every student can be involved in the way they want to and are able to participate.

Throughout the game, whenever one player lost control of the ball, a teammate or opposing player would pick it up and pass it back. When one student took awhile navigating down the court, both teams stopped and waited to give him his chance at making a basket. While one Albemarle player practiced dribbling with help from a visiting adult, the Dragons started a slow clap that ramped up into a cheer as the player reached the basket and took his shot.

"We're not calling fouls and stuff like that," Stafford said. "The ultimate goal is for each kid to feel accomplished and a part of the team in whatever way, so it's really kind of laid back."

Parents could be heard calling out encouragement and reminders from the stands as various players took control of the ball. The cheerleaders led a chant of "De-fense! De-fense!" and audience members called out "good



Teammates and supporters put hands in to start last week's game against Albemarle. Students, faculty, family, and friends filled the stands in the Dragons Lair to watch the game.

PHOTO BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FOR THE GREENE COUNTY RECORD

try!" and "Dribble! Hands up!" and various signs were held up whenever a basket was made. One young sibling of a player had brought a handmade sign with her sister's name and jersey number for support.

As the gymnasium reverberated to the sounds of "YMCA" and "Final Countdown," the action ramped up in the fourth quarter. Far from one coach's initial fears that non-playing students might just attend the game as a way to get out of class for two hours, everyone in the gym seemed to be focused intensely on the action and cheering loudly for every point scored.

Dragons #22 Jeyda Rogers sunk a basket after a return from out of bounds just at the buzzer, bringing William Monroe's lead to 62-58 at the end of the third quarter. Albemarle tied it up at the start of the 4th. After a brief pause in the action so Dragons #12 Bryce Bowman could get another try at his basket, birthday boy DeHooe brought the lead to 66-64 with only five minutes left in the game.

Dragons #50 Carly Perry scored her first basket, bringing the lead to 68-66 with four minutes remaining. Ten seconds later, Albemarle tied it up at 68-68, then took the lead 70-68 with three minutes on the clock. The Dragons pushed back with two more baskets in the last minutes of the game, and #30 LaTorre scored once more with 1:20 left.

With mere seconds left in the game, Dragons #12 Bowman got possession and took a shot at the modified basket. The clock actually stopped

with just under four seconds left so peer helpers could grab the basket and give him another shot, and the gymnasium erupted as he brought the final total to 72-76. Albemarle may have won the game, but everyone who played was a winner that day.

"It's more about the experience than the competition," Stafford said. "Not to say that the kids don't pay attention to it, because they do, but at the same time, success looks like every kid having a positive experience."

After eight games this season, the final tournament will be held at Orange County High School. The coaches also hope to host an awards banquet at the end of the season to honor all the students who participated.

"Kids from our team are giving high-fives to kids from the other team," Stafford said. "It's a lesson in sportsmanship lived out loud. Like you're watching what sports are supposed to actually be like. Yes, there's competition, yes the score is kept but at the end of the day, you're just two teams playing a sport that you love; and they emulate that."

"That's one thing I think that we don't really understand until we're a part of something like this, is that you can learn way more from these kids than we could ever teach them," Lam agreed.

"Every time we leave an event or even a practice, I always feel like very thankful, very grateful, and like no matter what else happens today, I had a really good day because that hour that I just spent with those kids was amazing," Stafford continued.

The Medford League impacts far more people than just the players on the team.

"The other cool thing, and Jess (Stafford) did a lot of this but on that day, the students are reffing," Lamm said. "The students are setting up our chairs. The students are MCing; we have a DJ. They're doing the scoreboard. Our cheerleaders come out. They're making signs ... they've created playlists for our warm-ups. We've been able to get a lot of students involved."

"Right now it's mainly the basketball team," noted Lam. "So the girls basketball team of course Jess (Stafford) has them on board. There's only a few that are able to attend the practices but they'll come and cheer them on. They're out on the court with them. Those that need pushing of the wheelchair they help with that. They're reffing. So just about anything they can do."

According to Lam, some students in the special needs classrooms were hesitant to sign up at first because they didn't know what to expect. But after attending the first home game on Jan. 21, four more signed up because they wanted to be a part of the fun.

"Being here and seeing the buy-in from our school and our people and the effects that it had ... I didn't think about the ripple effect it would have on so many people," Lam explained. "You think, oh this is going to be cool, these special needs individuals that have never been a part of anything like this are going to be able to be a part of it. And you don't think about the

affect it's having on the peer helpers who are having these life-changing experiences; they've never interacted with individuals with special needs. They were all ready and willing but maybe a little hesitant until they got into it and realized that they're not so different."

Last week's game was only the second of four home games to be held at WMHS this year, and already the teachers and coaches are seeing ripple effects among the student body.

"The really cool thing is because I'm with these kids during the day, now we'll go walk down the hall and these kids are passing them, the kids on the team and they're speaking and say 'hey good game' and they're now more a part of this community than they were before. And moments like that make this all worth it," said Lam. "And then ... the fact that those kids from the primary school came. They're now looking at what they couldn't do that they can now. So I just don't think we had any idea of the ripple effect that it would have on the whole school system, and how it would be kind of life-changing for not only these kids but kids outside of the special needs community."

For anyone who is does not typically call themselves a basketball fan, Stafford had a simple explanation of what to expect at a Medford League game: "You're going to see it the way it's meant to be played."



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# Local teen to compete in national rodeo finals

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI

Record Staff

High school students around the country have been practicing their rodeo skills at home since the shutdown of all spring sports due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This month, one lucky Stanardsville teen will get the chance to showcase her skills at the National High School Rodeo Association (NHSRA) Finals in Oklahoma.

Rianna Brill, who completes much of her homeschool curriculum on the road and schedules her studies around her rodeo practice and caring for her horse, Reggie, has been competing in three rodeo events for the past three years: barrel racing, pole bending and goat tying.

"We have an arena where I practice regularly with the horse," Rianna said. "It's not something that I can just slack off with ... if I don't work with her she's not going to want to listen and do it properly."

In barrel racing, three barrels are set up in a triangle and the rider must circle each in a clover-leaf pattern in the fastest possible time. Pole bending is an agility event where rider and horse weave a serpentine path around six poles arranged in a line. In goat tying—the girls' equivalent of the calf-roping event—the rider must race toward a goat (tied to a tether) and dismount at high speed, capturing and flipping the goat to tie three of its legs together. Each event has very specific rules and regulations in place to protect the animals and is scored based on speed, with penalties for knocking over a pole or for the goat getting loose too soon.

The 17-year-old first became interested in rodeo after seeing the event on television and started training with Reggie at the end of her eighth-grade school year. A first generation rodeo competitor, she learned everything from her trainer, Tiffiney Sims, who has pushed Rianna to keep trying and to get back up after every fall.

"It takes nerve to jump off a

horse running 20 miles an hour," said Kevin Brill, Rianna's father and member of the Virginia High School Rodeo board. "From kids bull-riding all the way down to the goat tying, there's always injuries. You have to worry and you always worry about it, but you just hope that it's not so bad."

Being a rodeo contestant hasn't always been easy for the younger Brill. Last August, after returning from her first national competition, Rianna suffered a concussion after getting kicked in the head during practice with her horse.

"When we got back from national finals last summer we had very little downtime and getting ready to start the new season, she was down here practicing one morning when she had her accident," Kevin said. "The horse kicked her in the head and gave her a concussion and it was like three or four days before the rodeo."

Kevin, who acknowledges that rodeo is a dangerous sport, says he is proud of his daughter for overcoming the challenges and continuing to push herself to improve.

"She was lucky because the horse kicked her right on the temple and it could have fractured her cheekbone or fractured her eye socket," he said. "The very next weekend was another (competition) in Pennsylvania, and then we went to Gordonsville so if she would have missed two, she would have been out; she wouldn't have had a callback, and it's very competitive. She just had to suck it up and go, and that's just a part of rodeo."

With Virginia Cowboy Association events every weekend and several annual state competitions, rodeo is a year-round sport, typically taking only the months of December and January off due to weather.

"Most states have stalls that you can rent for the horses because half of them are in bad weather whenever it happens," Rianna said. "Like West Virginia, that one's in March so it's either snowing there or it's raining. The



COURTESY PHOTOS

**Above, Rianna Brill competes in the pole bending event at the national rodeo finals in Wyoming in 2019.**

**Right, Rianna dismounts her horse during a goat tying event at the State Fair earlier this year. In this event, riders must dismount their horse at top speed to capture and tie the goat in the shortest possible time.**



first year in Pennsylvania, we had a downpour and the entire arena was a disgusting mess; the goat tie-ers would dismount and just fly; their feet would not stick."

This year, with only two competitions under her belt, Rianna was disappointed by the cancellations of the remainder of the season.

"We didn't have a state finals, we didn't have the rest of the rodeos that we had scheduled, it was really just whoever had really kicked in from last summer to February," she said. "I had a very good year up to February; I'm second in goats and that makes

me the reserve state champion. There's no telling what could have happened if we'd gotten the rest of the season; we didn't have that opportunity."

Because of the lack of a state final, the national board decided to allow contestants who had good scores for the beginning of the season a free pass to nationals this year. After seeing the junior high nationals canceled earlier this spring, Kevin is grateful to the board for ensuring the high school competition still happens this year.

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## Rodeo

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“We were supposed to be going to Lincoln, Nebraska, and they had gone through thousands of new COVID precaution release forms, and then just like that the city of Lincoln informed the national association that sorry, you can’t come,” Kevin said. “I give them credit because they didn’t take no for an answer; they were like, we’re not going to cancel this, we’re just postponing it. The class of 2020 really got hammered because they lost so much, and (the board) really wanted to be able to do something for the kids.”

Unlike some other high school sports, rodeo involves a lot of responsibility as the athlete is responsible for not only themselves, but also the care and welfare of the horse.

“You don’t want your horse to get hurt because you can bounce back and recover, but if a horse breaks their leg and it can’t be fixed properly, you’ve either got to put them down or they’re going to be limping and can’t do anything for the rest of their life, and that’s not fair to them,” Rianna said. “So our main priority is that our animals are our partners. We do everything we can—the horse comes first.”

When arriving at a competition, Rianna will first tend to the needs of the horse, making sure Reggie has shavings in her stall, that she has food and water and her blanket.

“(Reggie) is the most important thing. Without her, I wouldn’t be doing

anything,” Rianna said. “They’re the most important part of the rodeo and everyone takes extreme caution with the animals because while they may trust us, horses can get scared by anything like a paper bag or a loud noise, and you want to be able to trust yourself to calm your horse down and make them understand that you’re not going to put them anywhere that will hurt them.”

“Her horse is her partner, and they’ve got to work together,” Kevin agreed. “In the timed events, the barrels and the poles, it’s just the two of them.”

When she is not practicing, caring for her horse or working on her schoolwork, Rianna enjoys connecting with friends she has made through participating in the sport around the country.

“There’s a lot of competitiveness but it’s more like a friendly rivalry; there’s no spite,” Rianna said. “Last year we hauled a friend’s horse and her down to Georgia because her mom couldn’t get off work, so we took her horse and all the feed that we needed and we hauled her down to Georgia even though she was competing against me because friendship comes first. We’re just in it for the fun and to push each other to be better.”

“Last year was a perfect example,” Kevin said. “One of her really good friends qualified in goat tying, but it was the only event in which she qualified, and I told her dad if you want she can use (Rianna’s) horse for the goat tying ... so here’s someone that was competing against Rianna and we let her use the horse so she could compete against her.”

The national competition will now take place at Lazy Arena in Oklahoma.

“It’s one of the first big arenas that was built just for the sole purpose of this sport,” Kevin said. “So it’s very well known, and it’s kind of like the ‘Yankee Stadium’ of rodeo. I have no idea how they pulled the strings to get us to go there. With 1,600 kids competing, 2,000 horses, 1,200 trailers ... it’s the world’s largest rodeo. It’s a monumental feat for them being able to put it together and I tip my hat to them for being able to put it together and do it.”

As they prepare to travel to the competition, both Brills say they have been receiving a constant stream of emails updating participants on the new COVID precautions being put in place to protect the safety of all in attendance.

“I haven’t seen my friends since February, and it’s going to be awesome to go to nationals with them and actually rodeo again like we did before this entire mess happened,” Rianna said. “We love this sport, and we’re doing it because we want to make the people proud that have worked hard to let us do this. And I’m just thankful that they put this on because I can go places that I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to do otherwise.”

The competition will take place July 17-23 and will be streamed live through [www.ridepass.com](http://www.ridepass.com).

# Esports are safe to play—even in a pandemic

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI  
Staff Writer

Even with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there is one high school sport that was permitted to compete this fall. The Dragons compete in three different games—Rocket League, Smite and League of Legends—since late October. Whether playing against classmates or teams across the country, this is one activity that does not require any physical contact between players.

“Students are able to compete virtually from home or I offer to have them come in to my classroom to compete together with all COVID-19 protocols being met—masks, social distancing and sanitization,” said coach Jess Shifflett, who also teaches media courses through the tech center and coaches women’s basketball and high school robotics. “This is a sport that’s conducive to being able to continue play during a pandemic; there is never a need to be closer than six feet with another person. Even if all players have to play from home, the game goes on.”

The Virginia High School League (VHSL) officially approved a one-year pilot program for esports in 2019 and it is on its way to becoming fully

sanctioned with tournament championship events. A platform called Play Versus (PlayVS.com) runs all the competitions and schedules teams for matches through its online system in collaboration with VHSL and participating teams.

“We have been glad that several schools have been able to make the decision to participate this fall,” said VHSL Assistant Director for Activities Darrell Wilson. “We are pleased with the growth of esports and imagine participation will only increase after we are back to normal operations following Covid.”

The William Monroe team was launched in February with guidance by middle school world geography teacher and videogame enthusiast Alan Causey.

“Alan did an amazing job getting the program up and running in its pilot year,” said Shifflett, who took over as coach for the fall 2020 season. “Our goal now is to continue to grow the sport and inch forward in respect to how we run our program as well as how we are represented in the community.”

The season began Oct. 19 with Shifflett scrambling to find players and get technology to set up a play space. Shifflett and

the students were excited for the opportunity to play since so many other activities have been canceled or postponed this year due to the pandemic.

“We needed to find a space that would work with social distancing measures as well as harness the necessary technological requirements,” Shifflett said. “Within the first two weeks, a couple of the more experienced players and I had gotten together and formulated a plan to make everything work. This included installing Windows on Mac computers, working closely with IT to work out firewall kinks and finding enough students to field three teams competitively. I am incredibly proud of how far we have come in such a short time, and in the middle of a global pandemic.”

In addition to formatting the computers in Shifflett’s classroom to operate the Play Versus system, the team is working to obtain necessary equipment to stay competitive against teams across the country.

“Right off the bat, we had coach [Shifflett] as our champion between the team and the school board,” said League of Legends team captain and senior Tyler Powell. “Through her, we’ve



COURTESY PHOTO

**Tenth-grader Maya Anderson plays both Smite (pictured here) and League of Legends. Smite is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) where players control a god, goddess or other mythological figure and take part in team-based combat.**

gained access to materials and we are being allowed a budget to buy headsets, mice and keyboards for our ‘arena,’ although we most likely won’t be purchasing anything until COVID restrictions are lifted as it’s difficult to clean mechanical keyboards and ergonomic mice.”

Powell, who played League of Legends for three years before joining the team as captain, said the factors which lead to success in esports are what set it apart from

physical sports.

“When I was in my freshman and sophomore years, I tried playing traditional sports,” he said. “My dad threw shotput in high school and my granddad on my mom’s side did pole vaulting as well as javelin throwing in college. I ran distance for Monroe’s track and field team ... even though I was injured halfway through due to overexertion and was out for six weeks, something was very obvious to me: there are two things which

define an athlete, those being natural-born talent and skill gained through hard work. I only ran in a total of two meets over the course of 20 weeks.”

Powell said he felt that while physical abilities prevented him from participating fully on the track team, in esports a different set of skills are crucial.

“You put in the time and improve, which is not always how traditional sports work—sometimes

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## Esports

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natural talent simply beats hard work and dedication,” he said. “In esports, players are only limited by their own knowledge and thought processes. I would say reaction time is key for most cases; if you can foresee what your opponent will do and how you can avoid or counter it. Esports relies on practicing two to three times a week as a team as well as (video) reviews of past games and individual playing or training ... I normally put in around 20 hours a week.”

Aside from being team captain, this year Powell is also doing an esports internship with Shenandoah University's Director of Esports Joey Gawrysiak as part of his senior project for the Blue Ridge Virtual Governor's School. Along with a research paper, community service and a final project presentation in the spring, Powell has been meeting with team members at Shenandoah to learn more about what esports is and what it can be.

“I always bring a notebook and I tend to leave with 10-15 pages filled to the brim,” said Powell of his visits to the university in Winchester. “I've worked with Chris Kumke, one of the original esports competitors from the early days of the program ... and coach Brett, a behavior analyst who helps monitor and focus the League of Legends team. One of the biggest things I saw from their League team is how slow they are to become frustrated, even when behind.”

Gawrysiak, who played Halo 3 as a kid and later co-hosted the Press Start radio show about the video game industry and wrote a chapter arguing the validity of esports for the book “Defining Sport,” became director of esports at Shenandoah after several of his students formed the school's first team to become endorsed by the school.

“There is not a better mentor I could hope for to student and

learn under for my internship,” Powell said.

Powell hopes to work with students from several Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in 2021 to expand the team's capabilities to stream and commentate games, part of the internship program's commitment to make a lasting impact on the school community.

“I'm planning for the team's expansion post-COVID with interactions through many of our school's trade departments such as video media or IT fundamentals,” he said. “We've also talked about interacting with the sports media department to help the more out-of-shape players learn healthy habits as well as looking for what are the most optimal chairs or positions to reduce cramping and risk of arthritis later in life ... esports and video games are played more by youth today than any other activity so I'd like to use them in a positive way to teach lessons like teamwork, communication, sportsmanship and adaptability.”

Smite is a new addition to the WMHS team this year. Jacen Northcutt, who is now team captain, recruited several new team members in order to ensure his favorite game could field a team this year.

“It seems like esports in general is going to get a big boost in popularity, I think, and accessibility because it's the only (sport) that can be done right now,” Northcutt said. “The esports programs are going to be a lot bigger and there will be a lot more of them.”

Smite is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) where players control a god, goddess or other mythological figure and take place in team-based combat. During a match, five gods from each team are spread out between three main lanes of traffic filled with computer-controlled enemies, player-controlled characters and defensive towers.

With 111 different playable “Gods” in the game, players have a lot of choices to focus

their playstyle.

“They span over a ton of different mythologies,” Northcutt said. “The majority are from ones you know like Greek, Roman, Hindu, Chinese, Japanese ... but then there'll be some voodoo gods and Cthulhu is in the game. I have a few favorite characters, but if I had to pick one I'd say it's probably Pele, or Thanatos.”

According to smitegames.com, Pele is the goddess of fire, dance, wind and volcanoes, and is highly regarded in Hawaiian culture. Her character in Smite is an assassin who uses fire-and-lava-based attack skills. Thanatos is the Greek god of death, whose Smite character gains power and heals whenever it kills an enemy, wielding the iconic scythe in combat.

“We worked a lot, especially at the beginning, figuring out what type of characters we wanted to play and how to combo their strengths together to make a team that's going to work really well as a cohesive unit and not just five individual parts,” Northcutt said. “You have to function well with four other people or you won't succeed.” During a match, players chat with each other (if playing in the same room) or use headsets and in-game chat functions to convey important messages about what the other team is doing.

As for how esports compares to other “traditional” physical sports, Northcutt says it's all about teamwork and collaboration.

“The esports games are just as competitive as traditional sports would be,” he said. “A common vein through almost any sport is that it requires discipline and training to actually improve at, and esports isn't any different. You can't just mindlessly play the game and expect to get better; you have to put thought into it and figure out what you're doing wrong ... what can you do better? You have to actively train and use discipline, because if you only play once a week you're not



COURTESY PHOTO

**Jeffrey Wallace plays Smite, the team-based online battle arena game where players take on the guise of gods or mythological figures. The Dragons play on Mondays at 4 p.m. in one of the high school computer labs or remotely.**

going to really improve. Even though it's not physical training, it's still training and it still takes discipline.”

The 2019 esports World Championship consisted of 120 games across Berlin, Madrid and Paris, and fans watched more than 1 billion hours of content during the competition, according to nexus.leagueoflegends.com. The final, between G2 Esports and FunPlus Phoenix, was the most-watched match of League of Legends history and was broadcast in 16 languages and across more than 20 platforms.

With more than 100 million viewers, the League of Legends World Championship in 2019 boasted almost as many viewers as the Super Bowl and the FIFA (soccer) world cup.

“Our goal moving forward is to host live webcasts with run-

ning commentary during our matches,” Shifflett said. “We hope to be able to produce professional quality live gaming broadcasts by the end of our spring season. We also hope to be able to fundraise enough to purchase more high-tech gaming equipment like keyboards, mice and gaming chairs ... and to purchase uniforms as well. Most importantly, we hope to garnish equal respect to the other more mainstream VHSL sports.”

Playoff games are scheduled to begin for all three games on Dec. 12. To follow the team's progress, visit @MonroeEsports on Twitter or Instagram or watch a match at twitch.tv/monroedragons. Weekly games take place at 4 p.m. with Smite on Mondays, League of Legends on Tuesdays and Rocket League on Thursdays.