

Asian Games landmark for eSports fires Olympic dreams

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South Korea and Vietnam do battle in League of Legends ahead of the Asian Games.

ESports' debut as a medal event at the Asian Games starting this week will change attitudes and be a major step towards Olympic recognition at last, gamers and experts say.

Gaming was a demonstration sport at the 2018 Asian Games but gold medals will be up for grabs this time in Hangzhou in seven different games.

Players will battle in EA Sports FC, PUBG Mobile, Arena of Valor, Dota 2, League of Legends, Dream Three Kingdoms 2 and Street Fighter V.

For Mayank Prajapati, India's medal hope in the Street Fighter beat'em up game, the Asian Games opening on Saturday will mark how far he and eSports have come.

He recalled how his father would beat him for sneaking off to play video games.

"I played my first game in the late 1990s at an arcade machine at a market with the two rupees I had," the 33-year-old said.

"It was my first exposure with Street Fighter and I fell in love with the game.

"I got addicted and often lied to my parents, saying 'I am going for tuition', but spent hours playing."

Prajapati, a 3D designer, recalled how his father once tracked him down out playing video games at night, surrounded by half a dozen cheering children.

"I got a lot of scolding... I think I got beaten up," laughed Prajapati, himself now a father to a two-year-old boy.

Prajapati's tale is a familiar one among gamers from different countries.

Kim Gwan-woo, who will represent South Korea in Street Fighter V, told AFP in Seoul: "My parents absolutely hated me [playing video games](#)."

They remain "dubious" about him going to the Asian Games, he said, but added, "I think they will be very happy if I actually win a medal."

South Korea, together with hosts China, are expected to be the dominant force in eSports at the Games.



South Korea hosts a team launch for their Asian Games team.

Olympic dream?

ESports events at the Games are expected to play out to bumper crowds at the futuristic-looking China Hangzhou Esports Centre—a far cry from players slinking off to dingy arcades against their parents' wishes.

Its inclusion at the Games is a milestone for eSports in its quest for recognition as a "real" sport, said Professor Kang of Shingu College, who was one of the first generation of Korean professional gamers under the alias "H.O.T Forever".

"When I was a player in the late 1990s the initial reaction was, 'Why is a video game on TV?'" Kang told AFP.

"But with the hard work of the players and staff, I think we're about 90 percent there in becoming a real sport," he added.

Lokesh Suji, vice-president of the Asian Electronic Sports Federation, called the Asian Games a significant step towards the ultimate goal.

"The dream will eventually be realized once it gets included into the Olympics as a fully fledged medal sport," said Suji, also director of the Esports Federation of India.

That does not look like happening in the near future, certainly not in time for next year's Paris Olympics.

The International Olympic Committee is desperate to attract younger audiences, hence there will be breakdancing for the first time at the Games next year.

But even though the IOC officially recognized eSports as a sport in 2017, there is currently no plan to include video games in the Olympic program.

One stumbling block is the type of games which would be included because the promotion of violence goes against Olympic values, so that immediately rules out some popular eSports titles.

On the sly

The Olympic dream may still be out of reach, but gamers say that eSports at the Asian Games will result in more fans, players and recognition.

Sanindhiya Malik, 21, who is in the Indian team for the League of Legends, used to pretend to be studying on his computer when in actual fact he was competing online.

"Sometimes during a tournament I had to hide and play from my parents so that they didn't know," Malik said.

"But after I graduated to representing India, my parents have noticed the recognition that this game can give me.

"Even my relatives and friends who earlier questioned my [game](#) time have congratulated me—and it feels good."

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