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**Championship UW-Stout esports program levels up with new $1M arena**

Teams begin play in state-of-the-art space funded with Foundation gift

Written by Tom Giffey, University of Wisconsin–Stout

UW-Stout’s new $1 million Esports Arena is a real-world example of the expanding impact and importance of virtual sports.

In just five years, UW-Stout’s esports program has grown into a [championship-caliber varsity sport](https://stoutbluedevils.com/sports/esports) with a highly visible, state-of-the-art space for competitors and fans alike. Previously located in a former classroom in Heritage Hall, the esports program now practices and competes in a brand-new arena on the first floor of the Robert S. Swanson Library & Learning Center.

The arena was made possible by a [$1 million donation from the UW-Stout Foundation & Alumni Association](https://www.uwstout.edu/about-us/news-center/surging-uw-stout-esports-program-scores-new-arena-2025-thanks-1m-gift-foundation) and donors.

“Our esports teams have already experienced significant success and growth, and I know that this amazing facility will continue to support our student athletes and the education of other students from a range of academic programs,” **Chancellor Katherine Frank** said.

The new 1,900-square-foot space is designed for gamers and spectators alike. In addition to rows of 34 high-end gaming PCs — 10 of which are on a competition stage at the front of the room — the area features comfortable seating for teammates and spectators, stylish design features such as recessed lighting and textured walls, huge monitors to watch the action, and a streaming booth where hosts can provide commentary for online audiences (who can follow the team at [twitch.tv/StoutEsports](https://www.twitch.tv/StoutEsports)).

**UW-Stout is an esports trailblazer**

UW-Stout esports is part of the Wisconsin Esports Conference, which includes teams from 22 Wisconsin schools, including public and private universities and technical colleges. The program has just under 40 students on its roster, divided into five varsity teams — competing in Overwatch, Valorant, Rocket League, Super Smash Bros. and Marvel Rivals — and one “Academy” team, the equivalent of a junior varsity squad.

**Head Coach Aaron Froelich**, who is starting his third academic year with the esports program, said the new arena raises the program’s profile on campus and among peer institutions.

“Something that’s really special about this new place is that it allows us to have more team camaraderie within our different game titles,” Froelich said. “I like to compare it either to an athletic department or a track and field team, where you’ve got all these subdivisions within it. Previously we didn’t have a lot of cross-pollination between those rosters.”

In 2020, UW-Stout became the first public university in Wisconsin to launch a varsity esports program, which since then has built a tradition of success: Last spring, the Marvel Rivals team won the Wisconsin Esports Conference Championship and placed fifth in the nation across all divisions, while the program won the Wisconsin Valorant Summit LAN championship in 2024. Starting this fall, UW-Stout has a new and thriving [Esports Club](https://connect.uwstout.edu/sec/home/) with more than 100 members.

Gaming and esports are also represented academically at UW-Stout, which offers a [B.F.A. game design and development-art](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bfa-game-design-development-art), a [B.S. computer science with a game design and development concentration](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bs-computer-science/game-design-development-concentration), a [minor in esports coaching](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/esports-coaching-minor), and certificates in both [esports management](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/esports-management-certificate) and [esports production](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/esports-production-certificate).

**Assistant Professor Michael Bird** of the kinesiology, health, food and nutritional sciences department said he expects the new arena will give the esports coaching minor a boost.

“The new Esports Arena allows our esports coaching students the ability to interact and coach with the teams, therefore aligning with UW-Stout’s [polytechnic mission](https://www.uwstout.edu/about-us/our-polytechnic-advantage),” said Bird, who serves as advisor for the esports coaching minor.

“Recruitment of students and esports athletes will be enhanced by the new facility,” Bird added. “It will provide opportunities to showcase the student athlete experience and also attract nongamers who want to work on the production and sports management side of the events.”

**Reaching the top of the leaderboard**

Also launching this fall is a [B.S. game and media studies program](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bs-game-media-studies), which will give students the communication, research and leadership skills to work with cross-disciplinary teams creating interactive multimedia experiences, said **Associate Professor Cody Reimer**, the program director.

“Our program acts as the third leg of a tripod alongside game design and development programs in art and computer science,” Reimer said. “Whereas the B.F.A in art trains artists and animators, and the emphasis in game design in the B.S. in computer science trains programmers, our program focuses on all the other knowledge necessary to study, create and understand games and other media.”

Reimer called the new Esports Arena a “natural extension” of UW-Stout’s efforts to grow and support a culture of gaming that aligns with the university’s polytechnic mission.

“The gaming industry, including esports, is not a fledgling subculture anymore,” he said. “The creation of this arena represents institutional recognition and investment that puts Stout and our esports teams at the top of the leaderboards. It means opportunities for not just student athletes and coaches, but also for academic programs.”

The esports industry is growing in terms of both spectators and financial impact. According to recent research, the [global esports audience is expected to reach 640 million people](https://seekingalpha.com/article/4793649-future-fandom-why-esports-gaming-outpacing-traditional-sports) this year, while [global esports revenue is estimated to be $4.8 billion](https://www.bdo.com/insights/industries/gaming-leisure/the-evolution-of-the-esports-market).

**Championship-level environment**

Esports team members say their new hub will help the program level up by providing a more spacious, welcoming and visible environment.

“I think it’s going to help a lot with the recruiting side,” said **Trey Johnson, a junior**from Barron and a member of the Rocket League Academy team. “We’re going to have more people here in person. It’s going to be a lot more inviting to have people come in and practice.”

The esports program’s previous space didn’t have enough computers to accommodate multiple teams at one time, which meant players sometimes had to practice in their residence halls instead of building strategy side by side with teammates.

Likewise, the new space makes hosting esports competitions easier. It was the site of an Oct. 18 Rocket League tournament, the Red Cedar Rumble, whose eight teams will include Michigan State and the University of Minnesota. The arena will also host the WEC State Championship in December, which will draw as many as 20 teams.

“One of my goals is to become one of the premier hosting sites in Wisconsin but also in the Midwest,” explained Froelich.

**Cody Larkin, a junior**from Hanover, Minnesota, and a member of UW-Stout’s Overwatch team, agrees that the new arena raises the program’s profile. Larkin has witnessed this firsthand as a campus tour guide. “We actually get to walk through the arena, and so many people are interested in it,” he said. “They get to see it and say, ‘Oh my gosh, this is cool.’”

Froelich said the new arena helps dispel any lingering stereotypes about esports athletes being little more than casual gamers. “We’re out here, we’re competing and representing the university,” he said. “Our players practice as a team for 15 to 20 hours a week and put in a ton of time on their own to hone their craft.

“They take it extremely seriously,” he concluded. “They’re highly competitive.”