Esports Arrive

High school athletics have been on hold, at Saint George's and across the state, until COVID-19 levels drop. But that hasn't stopped the newest Dragon teams from practicing and playing matches – all online.

Just a year ago in January 2020, a conversation about college video game "esports" teams by then ninth graders Gabe Gustafson and Gibson Montgomery got them thinking about a high school equivalent. Gabe promoted the idea to fellow students, Technology Director Thomas Hurst signed on as their advisor, they scheduled time in the computer lab, and the SGS esports program was born. The 12 students who signed up chose teams to focus on one of two games – Minecraft or Valorant.

When in-person classes ended in March, the teams shifted to online practices from their homes (since matches against other teams were online anyway) and the program has barely skipped a beat.

Some aspects of esports are similar to athletic teams. Practices for each team involves a warm-up period for mechanical skills and to get the players hyped up for a match. Then they go into an intensive performance time to work on game skills or to review game strategies. Once a week or so the teams will scrimmage in a practice match against other Minecraft or Valorant teams.

In other ways, esports teams are very different from typical athletics. "It's more stressful from mental exertion than physical effort," says Gabe Gustafson. Coaches also have to be personal trainers, tailoring activities to individual players and their play styles. "Players also have to choose one game to focus on, since they are so different," he says.

For example, Valorant has attacking and defending teams with one side planting a bomb and the other trying to defuse it before it explodes. The game tends to be play oriented, similar to football.

Gibson Montgomery in a practice match

However, Minecraft is more complicated with many different 'mini-games.' "One is styled after Hunger Games where you win by being the last survivor. Spleef is a game where you dig a hole for your opponent to fall into. Our team plays Bed Wars most often, where you try to eliminate your opponent's bed on one of several islands," says Gabe. Minecraft games tend to be more free flowing, like soccer or basketball.

The Minecraft team has competed in one tournament so far. "Even though it was on short notice and in a mini game we weren't familiar with, we managed to place within the top 15%," says Gabe. "Our main goal for the teams is to compete in one big tournament each and do as well as possible. Other goals are obviously self-improvement in esports skillsets, such as physical and mental health, gameplay, organization, focus, and work ethic."

"We teach people to think for themselves and apply what they have been taught to the game."

Which also applies to the college esports teams that inspired Gabe and Gibson to begin Saint George's program in the first place. Some colleges offer esports scholarships, although gaming communities can feel isolated on campuses. "Gamers can be great students, often majoring in graphic design or computer science," says Gabe. "It's good for the colleges, that can gain visibility with a successful program, and good for the players."

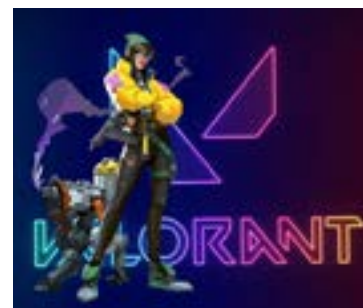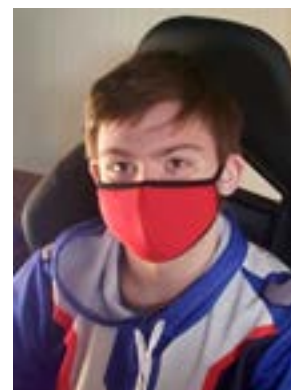"Overall, if you are interested in video games, then you have to be interested in esports."

— *John Carter, Communications Office*

> **"We teach people to think for themselves and apply what they have been taught to the game."**
> **Gabe Gustafson, SGS Esports Organizer**

Above: Gabe Gustafson, Valorant graphic identity