

## Can new Counter-Strike league be esports' WWE?

By **Noah Smith**

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It's WWE meets esports. Kind of.

That's how organizers of a new Counter-Strike: Global Offensive league are billing Flashpoint, which launched Wednesday.

The new league hopes to bring a different, nontraditional sports-based approach to what has quickly become an established genre, thanks to esports leagues run by Riot Games (the League of Legends competitive series) and Activision Blizzard (Overwatch League and Call of Duty League).

Unlike those other leagues, the game's publisher, Valve Corporation, neither owns nor runs Flashpoint, which is funded by a consortium of esports organizations including MiBR (Immortals), Cloud9, OverActive Media, Gen.G, Dignitas and contact Gaming. It is operated by FACEIT. The total prize pool will be "over \$2 million" for 2020, according to a league statement. Flashpoint will have an open qualifying element, for which competition began Thursday.

"We want to break the box that esports has been in the over the last couple years," said Kent Wakeford, co-founder of Gen.G Esports, which fields teams in both League of Legends and Overwatch League. Wakeford is also a founding member of Flashpoint.

"We are very used to seeing the players just behind the monitors and sometimes doing an interview onstage, but we really know very little about their characters and personalities, and who they are," said Michele Attisani, Co-founder of FACEIT, referring to the current esports production aesthetic.

Attisani said that WWE is a "big piece of inspiration" for the league's planned shows, and referenced how viewers getting to see wrestlers in the locker room, backstage and elsewhere in the venue is something they hope to implement.

However, according to Attisani, regular season matches will "most probably not" take place in front a live crowd.

Careful to say that the league will not go so far as to script scenes, Wakeford said Flashpoint will feature, "inherent tension points that will cause people to be a lot bit more face-to-face," which will be "fueled by casters."

One such opportunity for conflict will be when teams select who they compete against in a tournament, which is a part of the complicated, tournament-based competitive format the league has created. Attisani said team captains will have a chance to explain the reasoning behind their choice, as well as "banter" with opposing teams.

Organizers are banking on these moments as a way to help distinguish Flashpoint from an established, Valve-supported CS:GO competitive scene. The league is also highlighting its endemic name-brand casters — as announcers

are known within the esports community — including Christopher “MonteCristo” Mykles, formerly of the Overwatch League (and who is employed by Cloud9, which competes in the league) and Duncan “Thorin” Shields, a longtime esports journalist.

Shields is a controversial figure in the esports community as a result of his defense of a streamer’s use of an anti-gay slur. He was fired in 2018 by Germany-based ESL, another esports organizer, for comments disparaging Poland.

“ESL does not stand by or tolerate acts of racism, xenophobia or other forms of discrimination,” said at the time. Mykles has defended Shields in the past.

The competitive space Flashpoint enters has been built to this point around Majors. These events are run by various organizers, which have included ELEAGUE, ESL, MLG, DreamHack and FACEIT and take place around the world. ELEAGUE was an early mover in trying to mainstream esports in the U.S., with a series on TBS starting in 2016. That show, which features a variety of games, does not have any current plans to feature CS:GO.

ESL is the biggest CS:GO tournament organizer and recently announced its new Pro Tour with DreamHack, which seeks to streamline the competitive landscape. The Pro Tour has a total prize pool of \$5 million across 20 tournaments and leagues, including its multicontinent ESL Pro League, resulting in two “Masters Championship finals” annually.

Beyond other more established Counter Strike events, the new league will also have to bang it out with another esports league that features a realistic, first-person shooter video game. Activision’s Call of Duty League is based on one of the best-selling video game franchises of all-time, even though it has struggled with viewership. CDL has pinned its hopes on geolocated franchises, pop culture cache and an appeal to nonendemic audiences.

Flashpoint will be for “hardcore” Counter-Strike fans, Attisani said, pointing out that the game’s appeal provides a large target audience. According to Steam Charts, the game hit a new record for the average number of players on the Steam gaming platform last month at over 500,000 players.

“We’re not afraid of the size of the audience. We know the audience is there,” Attisani said.

Wakeford said the league will not shy away from the violence inherent in CS:GO and will be aimed more at adults.

“If you take the Overwatch League, which we’re a member of and we love it, but their broadcast partners are Disney XD, they need to have something that fits for a Disney XD audience and is very plain, vanilla, ESPN-like,” he said. “That is not who we are. ... This is a game that has blood.”

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