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'Rocket League' video game goes mainstream this weekend on NBC Sports

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SANTA ANA, Calif. - Those who are channel surfing this weekend might come across a video game competition on a channel usually reserved for traditional sports. On Saturday and Sunday evenings, NBC Sports will broadcast the Universal Open, a tournament for "Rocket League," the competitive game that is essentially soccer with rocket-powered cars.

The Universal Open, presented by "Rocket League" developers Psyonix, the online competitive gaming community FACEIT and NBC Sports, is the first esports venture for the network.

The grand finals will air live on NBC Sports at 12 a.m. Saturday and 9 p.m. Sunday. TV network coverage will only include the final hour of each day. All matches prior to that will be streamed live via Twitch.TV.

Don't be alarmed to see video games where sports are usually found. The world of esports has been booming over the past several years, and it's not just for shooters like "Halo" or "Call of Duty" any more. "Rocket League" was a logical fit for NBC Sport's first esports venture since it doesn't take much explanation for newcomers tuning in. Most sports fans will see the two goals, a ball and a clear objective.

"Rocket League" is easy to play, but difficult to master. The controls will make sense for anyone who has ever played a driving game. Then, it's just a matter of driving the car into the ball to push it toward the opposing goal. Now add more than 3,000 hours of training, and you just might be able to pull off some of the high-level maneuvers to be seen in the Universal Open.

Roughly 5,000 players competed in regional finals across the country over the past month to get to this point. Now there are just 16 teams competing for the \$100,000 prize pool. The action will take place at the Esports Arena in Santa Ana, California.

There are numerous major "Rocket League" tournaments throughout the year, but the format of the Universal Open is what sets it apart from the rest. Traditional "Rocket League" has a 3-on-3 format, while the Universal Open is 2 on 2. The 2-on-2 format usually means higher scoring games because there isn't a third player for defense. One mistake like a missed pass or a hard shot off of the crossbar can result in a goal for the other team.

For those hesitant to watch other people play video games on TV, or for those tuning in by accident, try to give it a chance. Video game competition isn't so different from traditional sports. These are the best players in their field who have trained for thousands of hours to get to this point. Even for viewers who have never played the game before, a close match-up like one that goes to overtime in game five of a five-game series makes for tense and exciting spectacle.

Max Parker writes as *The Game Guy* at communityvoices.post-gazette.com. Twitter: @GameGuyPGH. Check back for tournament updates and interviews all weekend long from the Universal Open in Santa Ana.

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