

Inside the 2v2 Universal Open Rocket League

© Psyonix

August 24 · By Andrew Hayward

Go behind the scenes of NBC's TV tournament, and find out when to expect more Universal Open events.

When it was [first announced this summer](#), NBC's Universal Open Rocket League tournament ruffled a few feathers in the pro scene. Not only did it seemingly conflict with other events like DreamHack Atlanta and season four qualifiers for the Rocket League Championship Series (RLCS), but it was also the first major 2v2 tournament — a big shift away from the competitive standard of 3v3.

Ultimately, the scheduling issues were largely alleviated, and many top pros turned out despite some reservations about playing doubles. And we've had seen some pretty strong battles over the last few weeks, as the thousands of initial teams have now been whittled down to the Top 16 squads. They'll descend upon the Esports Arena in Santa Ana, California, this weekend Aug. 26–27, to crown the first Universal Open champion in the televised grand finals.

And that won't be the last of the Universal Open, or NBC's 2v2 Rocket League ambitions: There's plenty more planned ahead. We had a chance to visit Chicago's Comcast SportsNet studio to watch the recent Midwest Regional in person, talk to two of the top teams about playing 2v2 on TV and find out how the Universal Open was created — and what happens next.

Universal approach

esports

operator and executive producer of the tournament. In 2015, he started a team devoted to figuring out how to get the storied network into esports in a way that made the most of NBC Universal's many, many different platforms.

After some early ideas failed to gain traction — "Esports is hard. Everybody knows that," he admitted — they finally settled on the concept of the Universal Open. It's a tournament structure that begins on a regional level with NBC's local sports channels, and then finishes off with a national grand finals event that airs on NBCSN (and all of it streams online, of course). "We were just trying to plug in as many assets from NBCU as we could, to heighten the project," he added. "Whether that was bringing in Telemundo Deportes, or Syfy International — stuff like that."



The first Universal Open is about to conclude

© PSYONIX

"Really, the first thing we did was build up the structure, and then we looked for the game. And that was a big process, to be honest with you," he conceded. "We knew that the high-end, Tier 1 esports like League of Legends and Dota 2 were kind of out, because of huge prize pools plus they weren't really going to translate to TV. And we wanted to bring in TV as an additional platform to esports."

Shooters were nixed because of NBC's family-friendly ambitions, but fighting games were a possibility; Prindiville said they liked the fighting game community's focus on regional events and

esports

League soccer and racing leagues such as NASCAR and F1.

"If you were just to combine those two [concepts] in video game form, it seems like you'd get Rocket League, right? That, combined with the rise in popularity of Rocket League — it's super relatable. As soon as you put it on any screen, people know it," he said. "Really, we zeroed in on that being the favorite a little bit late in the game, I would say."

"Doubles" vision

When the Universal Open was first announced, pro Rocket League players had decidedly mixed reactions to the 2v2 format. Not only does 2v2 require different tactics than 3v3, since there's no third player to cover the back end of the rotation and less of an emphasis on passing plays, but it also meant that existing three-player teams wouldn't be able to compete as a unit.

Why did NBC want to spotlight 2v2 play, then? Actually, Prindiville claimed that it was developer Psyonix's idea.



DapG and Mechanical Gaming practice in the studio

© ANDREW HAYWARD

"Honestly, when we first met with Psyonix, I was thinking 3v3 — just seeing if they wanted to have an additional tournament, not unlike DreamHack Atlanta or the 7-Eleven Summer Series," he said.

esports

think that they saw that as the moment to grow 2v2."

He believes that 2v2 and 3v3 can be complementary competitive formats, and that "one raises the other up," allowing the Universal Open and RLCS to coexist as top-tier events. As for players' concerns, Prindiville chalks some of that up to the newness of high-profile 2v2 play when 3v3 has pretty much been the competitive standard thus far.

"Well, I think it's new. We know it's a popular game mode, but in a tournament format, they're just not used to it," he said. "As a player for Rocket League, I think that it only adds to your skill set. Ultimately, I think it's complementary, but of course, there are going to be growing pains in the tournament format."

Telling stories

Since Rocket League is hardly more complex than streamlined soccer with flying cars, it's arguably the most approachable esports around. That makes it an easier sell for a mainstream audience that might catch the Universal Open on a regional network or on NBCSN, but they've also brought in established talent that can cater to newcomers alongside the die-hard fans. Prindiville praised the efforts of RLCS casters, like Caleb "WavePunk" Simmons and Michael "Quinn Lobdell" Behrouzi at the Midwest Regional, for their Universal Open commentating efforts.

"When we're on the stream only and we're on Twitch, it's a pretty high-level analysis. And with the last hour of television we have on linear [networks], they're intelligent enough to start breaking things down for a new audience," he explained. "Having really smart, intelligent talent that's able to toe that line — which is basically don't offend the hardcore, and educate the new — is the best thing you can do."

esports

**Existing CSN sets were given Universal Open flair**

© ANDREW HAYWARD

NBC might be new to esports, but they're trying to bring over their instinct for finding and highlighting compelling storylines from the physical sports world. "NBC prides itself on telling stories. We do it within all of our traditional sports broadcasts, and we were really intent, when we got into esports, to continue that — because there are fantastic stories in esports," Prindiville said. "It's really about recognizing what could be a story and what that opportunity is, and really just trying to turn lemons into lemonade."

There's been one big example so far: at the East Regional in Philadelphia a couple weeks back, player Josh "JumpOnStuff" Russo found himself without a partner on game day, and decided to ask his father, Nick Russo, [to sub in](#) for the televised tournament. That might have seemed like a disappointing turn of events, but the Russos were clearly having fun, and Twitch chat and Twitter alike fell in love with Dad — especially once their opponents, G2 Esports, let him score an easy goal as the match finished up. Now he's a Rocket League meme, and NBC's spotlight on and coverage of the moment helped sell it for the audience.



111 G2-A vs ACTUALLY TOXIC - Universal Open Rocket League

FACEIT TV playing Rocket League
2,010 views

31s

"The first reaction was, 'Wow, this is going to decrease the level of competition,'" Prindiville admitted. "But that was just a split-second thought in all of our minds. The next reaction was, 'This is incredible.' This is a father-son relationship. This father is a fantastic individual for being

esports

A new environment

This weekend, the story will be entirely about the 16 teams still fighting it out for the Universal Open championship, and the the final set of 32 players is largely dominated by known pros from the 3v3 scene. You'll find members of Cloud9, G2, NRG, FlipSide Tactics, Rogue and Mock-It in the mix, and only a couple of players aren't well known within the competitive community.

DapG are big favorites, and the duo is comprised of two of the top individual players in NA: Garrett "GarrettG" Gordon of NRG, and Chris "Dappur" Mendoza of the Renegades (ex-Selfless). They had a rocky start in the first series of the Midwest Regional, but ultimately got it together and went on to win the Chicago event. Dappur said he liked playing in a TV studio, and tried not to psych himself out with thoughts of the potentially large viewing audience.



DapG are interviewed after their first series win

© ANDREW HAYWARD

"It's great. It doesn't seem any different than playing on the RLCS stage, because you don't want that thought — like, 'A ton of people are watching you, play good.' Just try to keep it like, 'Oh, I'm playing at another LAN,'" he said. "Being here in a studio is just crazy. Two years ago, you start

#esports

For GarrettG, the best part of the process was seeing how an in-studio television production really works, although he admits that the silence of the studio setting made him feel uneasy about making too much noise during play. "It's not as hype [without a crowd]," he said. "It's like, I don't even want to talk loud because everyone is hearing me talk. It's a lot calmer. It's hard to get hype, because it's just kind of cringey to me if there's not a crowd backing you up."

DapG defeated Boston Splyce in the Midwest Regional finals, but that team will also head to Santa Ana for the grand finals. Braden "Pluto" Schenetzki, a backup the last RLCS season for Selfless and a past starter for Genesis, said the in-studio sensation wasn't as intimidating as facing the RLCS crowds. Still, it wasn't exactly a breezy experience.



Universal Open Rocket League - MidWest Regional Final

FACEIT TV playing Rocket League

601 views

19s

"It's definitely stressful, but it's not nearly as bad as RLCS with those thousands of people watching within the event center," he conceded. "But it's definitely still stressful with a lot on the line."

His partner, Boston Splyce captain Jaime "Karma" Bickford, didn't have previous RLCS finals experience, so she was just excited to have a chance to play in a live setting. "I've played sports before, so I'm kind of used to an audience — and I stream. So I felt pretty natural once that first series was out of the way," she said. And how was her first LAN-style competition? "It met all of my expectations," she added. "It was fantastic."

Added challenges

esports

have to worry about qualifying as the NA regional champions from last season, but Renegades still have to — and in both cases, the players are practicing with their regular teams. As a result, DapG haven't really been preparing together for the Universal Open.

"Practicing with different people makes it way too hard. At this point, we're not even practicing, we're just kind of playing — because we both have RLCS to focus on, and we're not even on the same team. We don't necessarily talk all the time like I do with my teammates," said GarrettG. "It just would have been a lot better if it was 3s, and it would have been really good practice leading into the RLCS. But I really appreciate the opportunity that NBC has given us."



Splyce and DapG prepare for battle in Chicago

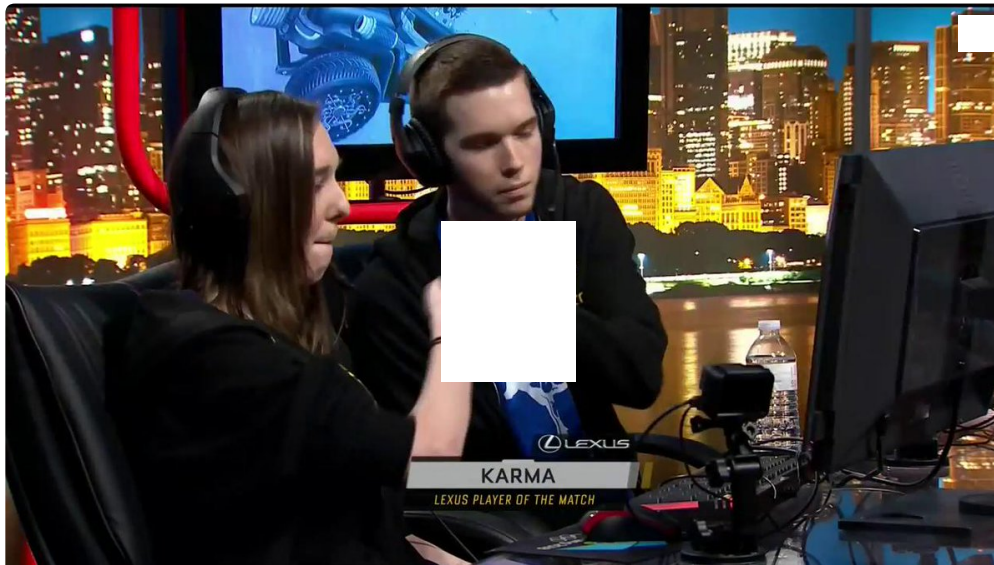
© ANDREW HAYWARD

Dappur echoed the call for 3v3 play, but said that high-level 2v2 play is "still good enough" to entertain viewers. On the other hand, the Splyce players seemed more optimistic about the shift away from standard action; Pluto called it "a nice change of pace, honestly, from regular RLCS 3v3."

But like DapG, it's throwing a wrench into their schedule. Karma and Pluto recently formed Boston Splyce with a third player, Chandler "HotWheelsSid" Higdon, and are trying to get in sync to qualify for the RLCS this season. With both [RLCS qualifiers ahead](#) and this weekend's Universal Open grand finals, they're splitting their practice time between the two formats.

esports

focus on those qualifiers, get our practice going, and then worry about California after we've figured that out. Basically, it's back to the grind."



Telemundo Deportes
@TelemundoSports

[#RocketLeague](#) Karma es la estrella de la Rocket League del Midwest

9:17 PM - Aug 12, 2017

3 16

"They're like right at the same time," added Pluto about the conflicting events. "We've got to pick and choose: play with Sid for a few hours, and then play 'til 4 a.m. in 2s."

Even with that added challenge, both teams said they were excited about the finals — not only to see their fellow pro friends and win a bit of money, but also for the excitement, atmosphere and opportunity to prove themselves on a large stage. "We worked so hard, and it's a nice feeling to know that what we put into the game, we're getting back," Karma said. "To see Rocket League go where it's going, and have us be a part of it, is special."

Finals and beyond

Prindiville attended the [RLCS World Championship](#) back in June, and was awed by the passion of the fans and the sense of spectacle. "I saw what Rocket League was all about. I saw what the U.S. vs. Europe rivalry was all about," he recalled. "The noise, the chants — I equated it to being at a European football match, which is something that I'm passionate about."

NBC and the Esports Arena team have hired set designers from the Super Bowl and Olympics to try and nail the look of the Universal Open Rocket League grand finals. He hopes to capture the

esports

atmosphere that Rocket League fans are really going to enjoy," he said. "I think they will."

Since the Universal Open format was designed before NBC picked Rocket League for its initial esports effort, the company could very well extend it to feature different games in the future. "Could other games plug in? I think so," said Prindiville. "But it would probably be some derivation of the Universal Open. We're not really ruling out what could happen in future years."



The Universal Open will return in some form

© PSYONIX

Rocket League has not yet been confirmed for future seasons, according to NBC [note: see update below], but the Universal Open will continue on. Prindiville said that the event will definitely return next year, and depending on timing, they might even squeeze two seasons into 2018. He pegged the return sometime between March and August next year, and said they'll begin working out logistics shortly after this season's Rocket League grand finals.

"Certainly, in 2018, we'll be coming back — whether it's one or two [seasons], that'll remain to be seen," he said. "But we'll certainly be back."

Furthermore, Prindiville suggested that they're working to try and expand Europe's role in the Universal Open in future seasons, since only four teams (out of 16) came from European countries this time around. And if Rocket League does return, Prindiville says that NBC will stick with 2v2

esports

"We're definitely focused on Rocket League and the 2v2 scene," he asserted. "We want to continue to grow that as large as we can."

UPDATE: NBC reached out to inform us that Rocket League has not been officially confirmed for future Universal Open events, and that Prindiville's comments about future Universal Open seasons do not pertain specifically to Rocket League's inclusion. However, if Rocket League does return as a Universal Open game, NBC plans to stick with 2v2 play. We have amended the original piece to clarify NBC's position on Rocket League's future inclusion.

For more Rocket League features, follow [@redbullesports](#) on Twitter and Like us on [Facebook](#).

esports

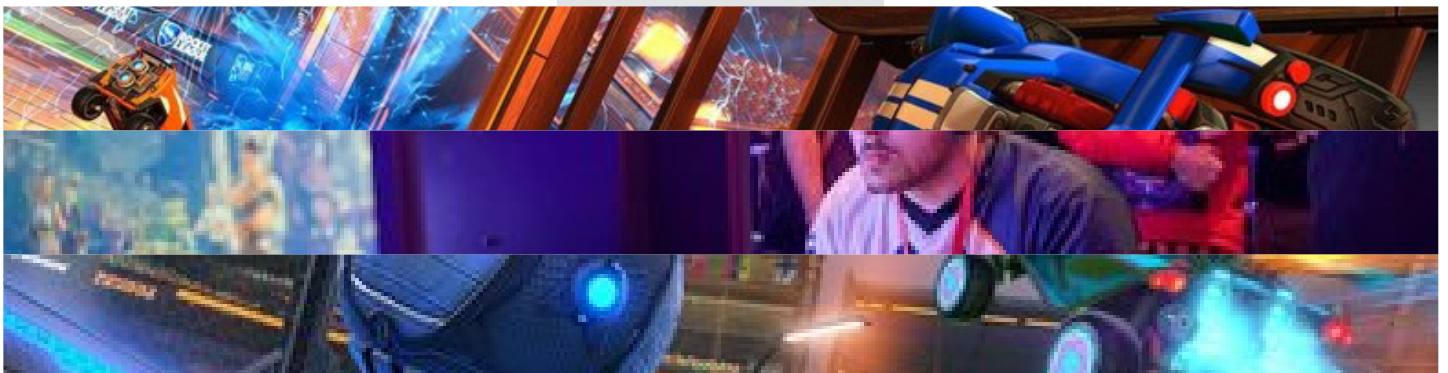
SHARE THIS STORY



WANT OUR LATEST AND GREATEST?

GET OUR NEWSLETTER

MORE LIKE THIS



LOAD MORE