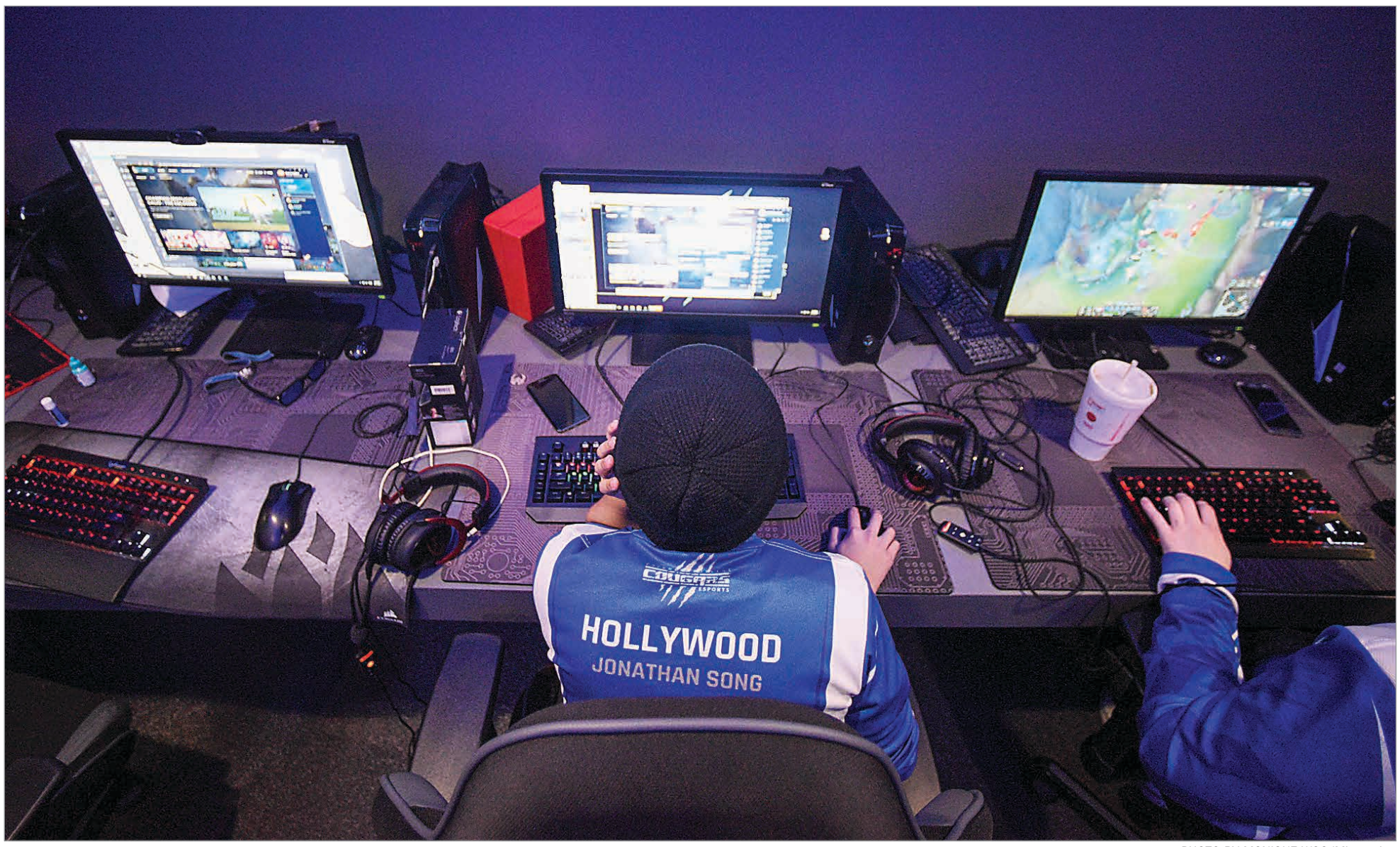

PHOTO BY MONIQUE WOO/Missourian

Jonathan Song of the Columbia College "League of Legends" team considers his next move during a March practice in the game hut. Each player has both his name and team nickname on the back of his shirt.

College esport players dream of going pro

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matches routinely sell out stadiums such as the Staples Center and Madison Square Garden each year, with players competing on stage before audiences of up to 43 million viewers in person and online, according to Riot Games.

Teams in ULoL, the collegiate organization for "League of Legends" in which Columbia College competes, partake in a regular season to enter playoffs in which scholarship prize money ranges from $8,000 per player for first place to $1,000 per player for the bottom three teams.

Being competitive in a game such as "League of Legends" is no small feat. Four out of five players on the Columbia College Cougars are ranked within the top 0.04 percent of the approximate 15 million players of the game in North America. Freshman Ian Alexander was ranked No. 58 on Wednesday out of all players in the region despite being born with only one finger on his left hand.

Ian Alexander, left, watches Connor Doyle play "League of Legends" during a March Columbia College team practice. "League of Legends" is an online, fantasy-themed game that emphasizes fast-paced play style and strong team dynamics.

Life as a Columbia College Cougar

Each team member has a deep history with competitive gaming. Doyle knew he wanted to play professionally when he watched the first League World Championship. Alexander's father raised him on video games and recommended that he attend a collegiate program for esports. At age 8, sophomore Jonathan Song was beating adults at local gaming tournaments and has played various esports at a high level throughout his life.

"Picture a scholarship for 'League of Legends' like a scholarship for any other collegiate program that doesn't necessarily result in a professional sports career," said Mark Zimmerman, former coach and head analyst of esports organization Team Liquid. "Other athletic scholarships rarely yield careers in those sports. Collegiate programs are a great way to pursue that dream while hedging your bets."

Columbia College's players are certainly there to pursue dreams. Each of the five players has his own vision for a future in esports, but their shared desire for competition and improvement means victories — and especially losses such as their semifinal elimination at the hands of Robert Morris University — cut deeply through the entire team.

"It was definitely crushing for me, and one of the hardest things I've had to deal with in a very long time," Doyle said, choking up. "I haven't gotten over it yet, either. I'm still devastated."

However, the players have their sights set on Saturday's Midwest Campus Clash as their next goal. At the tournament, they will get a chance to play Robert Morris once more and attempt to get retribution.

Why choose college?

The odds of becoming a professional "League of Legends" player do not noticeably increase for students who attend collegiate programs, so why would a student with the dream of going pro make that choice?

For the Columbia College Cougars, the answer is simple: maintaining a high level of competition while also getting a degree.

"I wanted to go professional. That's obviously all of our dreams, but I thought about it some more and it just seems very taxing," Song said. "There's not a lot of life options after you retire that you can pursue. I chose college so I could pursue my degree and play 'League' at the same time."

Education rather than going pro is the driving focus of head coach Duong Pham's philosophy.

"What I value is education," Pham said. "I want the players to complete their degree. I don't want them to quit school, play pro and find it's not for them."

Pham's philosophy is apparent in each interaction with his players. As they sit down for practice, he hovers behind their chairs and asks about recent grades, expressing concern at jokes cracked about poor performance. Once per week, the players gather in the game hut for a mandatory study hall.

"A lot of these guys are good enough to go pro," Pham said. "It's hard to be really, really good at something and not be able to do it, but they have to study."

The careers of professional "League of Legends" players are typically short, lasting a year on average. Additionally, most professional players retire before age 30 for reasons varying from burnout to health complications. Since many of these professionals did not attend or graduate from college, they are left without degrees once they retire.

The average salary of a professional player can vary greatly depending on the organization or player. Although few have been made public, player salaries are believed to range anywhere from $25,000 to over $100,000.

"My parents and I knew that having a degree in something like mathematics and economics was something that was going to be important for the rest of my life, and I needed to prioritize regardless of my dreams," Doyle said.

Not only are the lengths of careers short in "League of Legends," but the game requires teams of five, which means each season there are only 80 starting positions available for players in the professional North American League Championship Series and semi-professional Challenger Series combined.

However, almost all collegiate athletics programs have a small yield of players who go on to play professionally. According to the NCAA, only 1.1 percent of the nearly 19,000 male students who play basketball in college go on to play professionally. In football, that number is only 1.5 percent of 74,000.

"You can either bash your head in for football or play a game on your computer," Alexander said.

There are, however, a number of other career options within "League of Legends." Riot Games employs commentators, some of whom are retired players, for the professional scene. Many organizations also hire a large coaching staff and teams of analysts who are often outside hires or former players. Some organizations such as Team Liquid and Team Solomid employ in-house video production teams to create content for their organizations.

> *"The feeling of besting somebody in 'League of Legends' is akin to the feeling I got while wrestling in high school. You get that feeling of actually being better than somebody, head to head. There are no other things in the way. It's pure competition."*
>
> CONNOR DOYLE
> Columbia College junior

Prospects of going pro

Collegiate programs are still fledgling enterprises. As such, the common view within the industry is that the path to becoming a professional player is not through a collegiate program but to build connections through your skill at the game, which will lead to contacts from semi-professional or professional organizations.

Most organizations in the North American League Championship Series, the professional series for "League of Legends," do not specifically look at collegiate talent for recruitment, according to the former Team Liquid coach, Zimmerman.

"We never looked at collegiate programs directly," Zimmerman said. "It is nice to have extra infrastructure and visibility through the collegiate scene, but I assume most teams do not actively track collegiate talent."

Esports are not void of examples of students crossing the gap between collegiate and professional, however. Two players from Robert Morris University's "League of Legends" program have been picked up by professional organizations, but Zimmerman warned that even these deals were reflective of the one-on-one structure of getting recruited.

"From my understanding both of those recruitments came more from personal recommendations than because of the pro organization's relationship with the college program," he said.

Some players for the Columbia College Cougars have publicly expressed interest in offers from outside organizations. The Cougars' Alexander has received offers from 30 amateur organizations and two professional teams.

"I feel like (my hand) would actually help me in the professional scene because it gives me something that stands out," Alexander said. "From my play they can obviously see that I'm just as good or better than the other candidates, but I have something that makes me unique."

The players' individual skill is their best chance at catching the eye of professional organizations, Zimmerman said.

"The skill differentials in collegiate play are too high to be taken seriously until maybe the finals, and even then I doubt many teams are watching that for scouting," Zimmerman said

The reason for the skill discrepancy in games is that though programs such as Columbia College that recruit top talent and have coaches and analysts exist, most teams in ULoL are amateur club teams organized by groups of students who play the game casually.

The players are keenly aware that the skill discrepancy can hurt their chances of being looked at.

"As of right now, the collegiate scene isn't respected by the professional community," Doyle said. "Professional organizations view it as mediocre, and I would tend to agree. There's only four, maybe five actual 'good' teams compared to competitive teams."

Members of Columbia College's "League of Legends" team may well go on to play professionally despite the lack of structure to get them to the big stage, but while they are in the arms of the school, their education seems to be the focus.

For the time being, however, the team and school are focused on the Midwest Campus Clash, which starts at 10 a.m. Saturday at the college's Southwell Complex arena, at 700 Range Line Street near Rogers Street. Admission is free. The hope is to establish an annual event with a reputation for the high level of teams attending.

The Missourian will be covering the event. For updates, follow reporter Daniel Konstantinovic @DannyKons *on Twitter.*

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