

ESPN, to broadcast Madden eSport matches

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An NFL-inspired eSports competition will be broadcast by the Disney-owned ESPN channel, with players facing off on computers instead of turf

ESPN and Disney on Friday announced a deal to broadcast an NFL-inspired eSports championship series in which players face off on computers instead of turf.

The deal with US videogame titan Electronic Arts marked the first such multi-event eSport agreement by major sports broadcaster ESPN, the company said in a release.

It also comes with the booming popularity of computer play as spectator sport.

The Madden NFL 18 tournament coverage was slated to kick off this weekend.

Unlike eSports games involving teams of human players, the Madden game based on American football pits one person against another, each under the banner of a chosen real-world club.

"We are also thrilled to be the first major professional sports league to have every team represented in a premier eSport event," said NFL chief strategy officer Chris Halpin.

"We are confident our fans will love the competition and action."

The deal will enable ESPN and Disney to showcase the eSport competitions for years to come and to delve into stories about competitors, according to ESPN.

"The Madden NFL Ultimate League is purposely designed to make superstars of our best players, allowing viewers to develop player loyalties and follow competitor rivalries," said EA competitive gaming general manager Todd Sitrin.

An Overwatch eSport league freshly launched by Activision Blizzard boasted drawing more than 10 million viewers during its opening week this month.

Activision announced on Friday that T-Mobile and Sour Patch Kids candy have joined a roster of partners that already included Toyota, Intel, and HP.

Activision set out to create an eSports league of its own with competitive play of team-based shooter game "Overwatch," and a goal of building professional stars—possibly with big-league payouts.

"We're thrilled by the overwhelming response to the Overwatch League's opening week of play," said Major League Gaming chief executive Pete Vlastelica, chief executive of eSport specialty firm Major League Gaming, which is owned by Activision.

"But this is only the beginning."

The number of people globally watching eSports is expected to grow from about 300 million last year to 427 over the coming three years, according to Activision.

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