

# CONNECTED

## TRUST IN THE PROS

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**BROADBAND:**  
GAMING EDITION



## ESPORTS TAKE HOLD

Erskine College  
and others  
compete

## READY, SET, PLAY

Broadband  
gives gamers a  
competitive edge



BY SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

## We need better mapping data

Several states have adopted loan and grant programs to help extend service to those areas of rural America still lacking a reliable broadband connection. Beyond its traditional programs, the federal government continues looking for ways to invest in this critical infrastructure.

A challenge associated with deciding where to invest these dollars is identifying where service is or is not already available. The FCC's broadband maps are the determining resource.

The FCC issued an order over the summer that will move away from the overly broad use of census blocks for reporting broadband coverage, instead requiring providers to submit "shapefiles" showing where they actually offer broadband service.

I had the opportunity to appear before a Congressional committee in September, where I shared a few key steps to move us toward more accurate mapping.

First, we need standardized reporting. It is also important to have a back-end validation process.

Finally, a robust challenge process is needed to allow providers and policymakers to do one last "sanity check" on the accuracy of the maps before decisions are reached.

Providers like yours are making great progress in connecting rural America. But if we hope for a future where everyone has broadband access, we must have better mapping data. 📍



## Celebrate rural health on Nov. 21

Despite the challenges of serving rural America, health care professionals are delivering quality care, embracing technology and finding creative ways to encourage wellness among their rural patients. On Nov. 21, rural health offices will honor these providers — along with the partners and communities who support them — by sponsoring National Rural Health Day.

### How can you celebrate National Rural Health Day?

Find free, downloadable resources for many of the activities below by visiting [www.powerofrural.org/nrhd-toolkit](http://www.powerofrural.org/nrhd-toolkit).



**PARENTS:** Prepare a healthy meal for dinner, and talk with your kids about the blessings — and the challenges — of living in rural America. Mention the health care providers who service your rural community.



**PATIENTS:** Write a note to your health care team, thanking them for their help and their commitment to serving a rural population.



**PHYSICIANS:** Display National Rural Health Day posters in your office. Provide a staff appreciation lunch. Visit [www.WalkWithADoc.org](http://www.WalkWithADoc.org) and consider starting this fun, active outreach in your community.



**FACEBOOK USERS:** Share a story about your doctor, a nurse or other health care provider who has made a positive impact on your life.



**TEACHERS:** Give your students coloring book pages. Sponsor a rural health-themed poster contest. Invite physicians or nurses from local hospitals and clinics to speak to students.



**BROADBAND USERS:** Search for health information over your broadband connection. Ask your physician if there are telehealth resources that could help you maintain or improve your health.



**SMALL BUSINESSES:** Show appreciation to your local rural health professionals by providing them with discounts or special offers.



**YOU!:** Make healthy eating choices. Take a walk. Avoid tobacco products. Schedule an appointment to have your cholesterol and blood pressure checked.

Share your experiences across social media using the hashtags [#powerofrural](https://twitter.com/powerofrural) and [#nationalruralhealthday](https://twitter.com/nationalruralhealthday).

# Gaming generation

## Millennials — the first lifelong gamers

The U.S. launch of the Nintendo Entertainment System in late 1985 helped create an entertainment revolution. The oldest millennials at the time were about 4 years old, and that generation would be the first to make gaming a common pastime.

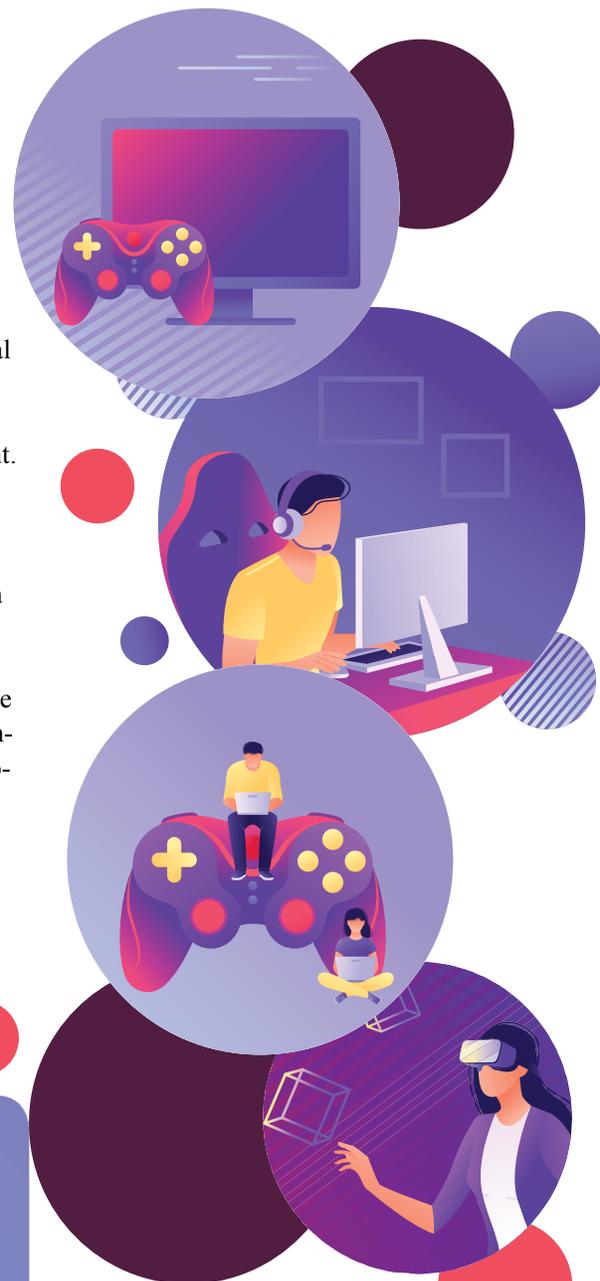
Members of this group, also known as Generation Y, are closely tracked by experts such as The Nielsen Company to monitor entertainment and technology trends, because the habits of millennials shape those industries.

Today, millennial gamers are finding new ways to play. There are mobile games and online, community-based games. Some people compete, and others enjoy the movielike experiences of modern games. And for millennial gamers, the male-to-female ratio is roughly even.

Thanks to games that emphasize social features, about 70% of millennial gamers and the generation following, often known as Gen Z, turn to multiplayer gaming for the social component.

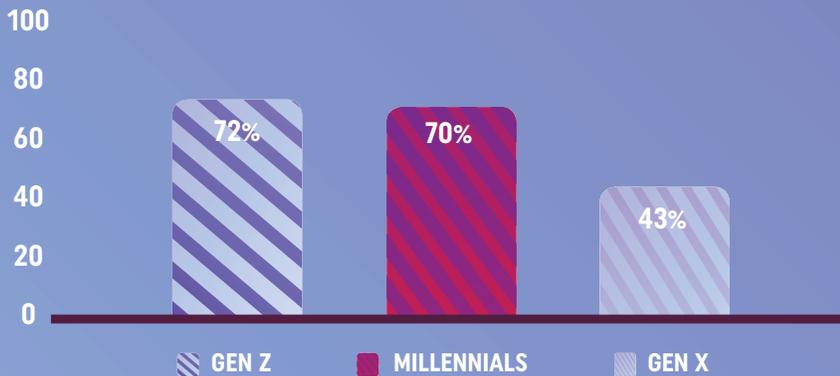
Also, the pastime remains a critical entertainment choice even when the competition ends. About 70% of gamers turn to YouTube or Twitch to watch online videos about gaming. On average, this form of viewing totals nearly six hours weekly. Millennial gamers are willing to pay those who create the content they enjoy, either through subscriptions or by donating directly.

A Nielsen report concluded that millennials will not quickly outgrow this form of entertainment, and they will become the first generation of lifelong gamers. 🗨️



### Games have become a social activity for millennials

Thanks to social features that let connected gamers chat and play with each other, a large share of millennials and Gen Zers play multiplayer games to virtually hang out with their friends and families. Members of Gen X and up are, in contrast, far less likely to play multiplayer titles.



### Millennial gamers are a wide-ranging demographic group

- 54%** with full-time employment
- 76%** pay for a movie/TV streaming service
- 43%** with a bachelor's degree or higher
- 38%** pay for a music streaming service
- 46%** with children
- \$58,000** average household income

# Like Nintendo, we go beyond technology

**A**t first glance, WCTEL and Nintendo don't have a lot in common. Nintendo is a video game giant based in Japan, and we are a small broadband provider in rural South Carolina.



**JEFF WILSON**  
Chief Executive Officer

But a quote I ran across recently made me realize we may have more in common than you'd think.

In the pages of this issue, you'll see a focus on gamers. And though I'm not much of a gamer myself, I know there are hundreds or even thousands of our members who enjoy playing video games on our network. As I hope you'll read, gaming has certainly become mainstream — to the point where there are college scholarships for team gamers.

For decades now, one brand had been synonymous with gaming: Nintendo. It's a company with an interesting history. Like WCTEL, it evolved over the years to meet customer demand. In fact, many people don't know that Nintendo started off in 1889 as a small

manufacturer of playing cards. Nearly a century and a half later, it's changed the world with its electronic gaming systems, handhelds and characters like Mario.

Similar to the way Nintendo developed, we've evolved from party line phone systems to lightning-fast broadband. But a quote from former Nintendo President Satoru Iwata drove home another similarity our two companies share.

In discussing his company's success, the late Mr. Iwata stated that in order to be successful, Nintendo had to look beyond the hardware and software it developed. "Please understand, I am not saying that technology is unimportant," he told an interviewer. "But if we are just focusing on technology ... we will not succeed."

In order to succeed, Nintendo had to focus not on the processors, electronics and equipment driving its games but instead on what the games did for people. Similarly at WCTEL, we constantly remind ourselves that the technology our business provides is only part of the equation. What matters most is how our members use that technology and the ways their lives are improved because of it.

Maybe it's when a young adult can enroll in distance learning classes because of our network. Maybe it's when an entrepreneur connects to markets around the world through our services. Or maybe it's simply when a customer gets to play a video game online with friends.

Just like with Nintendo, the bits and bytes of our business are secondary. Our primary focus is on the difference that technology can make for you. 🗨️

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is a member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people of Abbeville, Anderson and McCormick counties.

West Carolina Telephone  
233 Highway 28 Bypass  
Abbeville, SC 29620  
Telephone: 864-446-2111  
www.WCTEL.com

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**WORDSOUTH**  
A CONTENT MARKETING COMPANY

#### On the Cover:



Pro Towels offers more than 300 products, including towels, blankets and flip-flops, across several brands. See story Page 12.

# WCTEL hosts 67th annual member meeting

The annual member meeting for the West Carolina board of directors was at the Long Cane AME Community Development Center in Abbeville on Monday, Aug. 19.

Paul Agnew, WCTEL's attorney, verified the presence of a quorum and announced the outcome of the election to the WCTEL board of directors. Incumbent board members Lee Logan and Mike Thomas were reelected to represent Due West and Iva, respectively. Darren Lewis, running against incumbent Billy Bauman, was elected to represent Abbeville.

Board President Wes McAllister gave a financial overview showing that WCTEL's assets grew in 2019, while liabilities stayed consistent during that same time.

CEO Jeff Wilson described how WCFIBER, WCTEL's subsidiary, expanded into the city of Newberry. He also shared that WCTEL has acquired Etron Solutions, a business solutions technology company. Finally, Wilson touched on WCTEL's investment in the community through its involvement and participation in many local events.



WCTEL would like to thank Billy Bauman for his six great years of service as the Abbeville representative on the WCTEL board of directors. WCTEL would also like to thank each and every member who makes up the cooperative, especially those who were able to attend the meeting.



## HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

The WCFIBER Greenwood office celebrated the one-year anniversary of its opening on Sept. 5. Customers were invited to enjoy drawings for prizes and sweet treats. Thank you to all the customers who made this possible!



## WCFIBER now has an office in Newberry!

**1530 Main St. Suite 105  
Newberry, SC 29108**

Office Hours: M-F 9:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Note: WCTEL customers can also visit this office to take actions such as paying bills or ordering services.

## Holiday closings

The WCTEL offices will close the following days so our employees may enjoy the holidays with their families.

- Thanksgiving: Thursday and Friday, Nov. 28-29.
- Christmas: Tuesday and Wednesday, Dec. 24-25.
- New Year's Day: Wednesday, Jan. 1.

# History comes alive

NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM HONORS SOLDIERS THROUGH THE YEARS

The birth of the U.S. Army Airborne units came about in 1940 with the aid of a batch of borrowed Riddell football helmets from the United States Military Academy at West Point. The helmets, which were used to protect the heads of aspiring paratroopers, came with instructions, however. The team needed them back when football season returned.

With that bit of information, visitors can enter the Airborne & Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Situated just a few miles from Fort Bragg, the museum honors the sacrifices of all airborne and special operations units with an extensive collection of memorabilia and military equipment dating from World War II to the present day.

## WHY FAYETTEVILLE?

Now-retired Gen. James Lindsay led a push for the museum. He served as the first commander of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, which is located on



One of the Vietnam War-era museum displays re-creates soldiers on a rescue mission jumping out of a helicopter.

Fort Bragg and oversees various unconventional warfare units. The Army post also serves as headquarters for the XVIII Airborne Corps, which has long presided over some of the most storied Army units in the nation's history, including the 101st Airborne and the 82nd Airborne All American Division, which is still located on Fort Bragg. "But our museum represents more than the 82nd," says Jim Bartlinski, museum director. "We represent all U.S. Army Airborne troops and Special Operations. So we tell those histories here."

## FROM PAST TO PRESENT

The exterior design of the museum features soaring metal beams that play on the looks of the jump towers paratroopers use to practice. An imposing Iron Mike statue greets entering visitors. Various monuments commemorating American soldiers bear the nickname. This Iron Mike details the look of a World War II-era paratrooper, but it represents all paratroopers and special operations soldiers, Bartlinski says.

Inside the museum, visitors get a chronological look at the world of paratroopers and special forces soldiers — from their first test jump in Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1940 to today's missions in Afghanistan.



A U.S. Army Airborne & Special Operations Museum display re-creates a temporary post in Afghanistan.

There is a special emphasis on World War II, which saw not only the beginning of the Airborne but also the most concentrated use of airborne operations. During that time, paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines to work with groups resisting the Nazi invasion of their countries. They also landed in Normandy just before the D-Day invasion of Europe.

Displays include artifacts, true-to-life dioramas, the various types of aircraft used for missions, specialized Jeeps and other equipment used for airborne drops and specialized missions behind enemy lines. One glass-encased display shows a card with an early version of the special forces' red arrowhead insignia. The cards sometimes turned up conspicuously on the uniforms of dead Nazis as a chilling warning.

*Hooah!*

The Airborne & Special Operations Museum is at 100 Bragg Blvd., about 8 miles from Fort Bragg, in the heart of historic downtown Fayetteville, North Carolina. It is within walking distance of the North Carolina Veterans Park, a variety of local shops and restaurants, and the new baseball stadium of the Houston Astros' minor league farm team, the Fayetteville Woodpeckers. For more information, including hours of operation, visit the museum's website at [asomf.org](http://asomf.org) or its Facebook page.



Interactive displays are also scattered throughout the museum, including one that gives visitors a chance to sit in the hard, metal seats of a C-47 fuselage and then experience a simulation of jumping out of the cargo carrier. In addition, the museum's theater shows movies several times a day, and a 25-seat simulator room offers virtual reality experiences that mimic those of paratroopers.

The museum offers visitors a chance to refresh their history knowledge and see it in the context of the ongoing military operations of the times. But it also gives them a chance to better understand history from the eyes of a soldier, Bartlinski says. "What we do here commemorates the service of all these paratroopers," he says. "It points out all their sacrifices in the past and the ways they've continued to make sacrifices. It's important to remember that our troops are still out there in harm's way." 📱

## VISIT A MILITARY MUSEUM THIS VETERANS DAY

Military museums continue to fill visitors with respect and appreciation for the men and women of the U.S. armed forces. But today's military museums feature dazzling interactive activities, exciting simulations and realistic visual displays that bring history to life and educate visitors about the people who fought. Looking for an inspiring military museum in the Southeast? **Here are just a few of the greats:**

### NATIONAL NAVAL AVIATION MUSEUM

Pensacola, Florida

The National Naval Aviation Museum is the world's largest Naval aviation museum. It explores the rich history of Naval aviation with more than 150 beautifully restored aircraft representing Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard aviation. These historic and one-of-a-kind aircraft are displayed both inside the museum's nearly 350,000 square feet of exhibit space and outside on its 37-acre grounds. For more information, visit [navalaviationmuseum.org](http://navalaviationmuseum.org).

### NATIONAL INFANTRY MUSEUM & SOLDIER CENTER

Fort Benning, Georgia

With thousands of artifacts, monuments, interactive exhibits and video presentations on display, the National Infantry Museum is one of the nation's leading military history destinations. Visitors of all ages can experience firsthand the American infantryman's journey to defeat tyranny around the globe. For more information, visit [nationalinfantrymuseum.org](http://nationalinfantrymuseum.org).

### U.S. ARMY AVIATION MUSEUM

Fort Rucker, Alabama

Life-sized dioramas of aircraft and personnel capture the rich heritage of Army aviation, which started during the U.S. Civil War with hydrogen-filled balloons that directed artillery fire. About 50 different aircraft fill this cavernous museum and tell the wild and uplifting stories of U.S. Army pilots. For more information, visit [armyaviationmuseum.org](http://armyaviationmuseum.org).

# Why TV subscription fees keep rising

## LEARN THE TRUTH

Providing TV service leaves companies such as WCTEL in an unwanted struggle. Each year, content providers and networks demand more money to carry their programming. The most expensive networks charge providers \$5 to \$8 per customer each month. These fees might drop for less popular networks, but they still add up. Meanwhile, subscribers to TV services just want to enjoy their favorite shows on the stations they prefer without feeling as if they pay for rarely watched channels.

At WCTEL, we are committed not only to controlling prices but also to providing you the channel selections

you want. There is more great television programming spread across more channels than ever before, which will continue to cause price increases as the cost for these channels goes up.

That's the source of the struggle, and it's a challenge TV providers such as WCTEL work hard to resolve. The rising prices are driven by ever-increasing demands from broadcast networks, which force providers like WCTEL to pass the costs on to customers to keep from losing money. Out of a monthly television bill, almost all of it is allocated to fees WCTEL must pay the networks, leaving only a tiny sliver for personnel costs and equipment maintenance.

The massive media corporations providing the programming have tremendous leverage when structuring deals with providers like WCTEL. Some argue that it's an unfair game. The key to pricing is in the agreements that networks negotiate to allow companies such as WCTEL to retransmit their programming.

The American Cable Association, which represents independent cable operators, has pushed back and asked the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to require greater transparency from networks such as CBS, Fox, NBC and ABC. That effort continues.

### PACKAGE PLANS VERSUS A LA CARTE CHOICES

Currently, the content creators require companies like WCTEL to buy a bundle of channels — even demanding that these channels be included in specific packages — for the rights to broadcast the two or three most popular channels a programmer offers. WCTEL is part of a national consortium of cooperatives that leverages its buying power to provide competitive prices to cooperative members. It appears to be a long shot that mandated unbundling will happen anytime soon. It also remains unclear if picking your channels a la carte would have a significant impact on your bill.

### REPRESENTING YOUR INTERESTS

There is a glimmer of hope that the FCC may look once again at the federal rules relating to many of these issues.

Let your representative or senator — someone in a position to represent your interests — know they should take time to listen to companies like WCTEL. We make a point to share our concerns on your behalf, and your voice can only help. 📞

### Since 2010 WCTEL average retransmission fees have spiked more than 1,000%

- 2010 - \$1.71 per month per subscriber
- 2017 - \$10.80 per month per subscriber
- 2019 - \$20.66 per month per subscriber

Note: Rates vary slightly based on geography.



# Getting in the game

## Gaming and esports part of lifestyles

BY JOHN CLAYTON

**R**yan Walton and Jesse Stone, who grew up in the video game culture, have spent more than half of their lives playing competitive video games.

Walton, 32, and Stone, 29, both WCTEL employees, have enjoyed front-row seats to the evolution of video gaming, including the advent of esports at the casual, collegiate and professional levels.

“My first gaming experience was an Atari 2600,” Walton says. “Every time something new comes out, as a gamer, you’re like, ‘This looks amazing. Nothing will ever be better than this.’ Then, the next time something comes out, you say the exact same thing, and they just keep pushing the envelope. Now, it’s pretty much photorealistic.”

As serious gamers, both Walton and Stone depend on WCTEL’s 1 Gbps speed for the connectivity needed to compete in a fast-paced virtual world.

“Definitely, if you’re trying to be competitive in the scene, speed is required, so it’s not just your skills,” says Stone, who, while having an Xbox and PlayStation console, plays primarily on his personal computer. “Basically you have to have the equipment and the connection.”

### COLLEGE-LEVEL GAMES

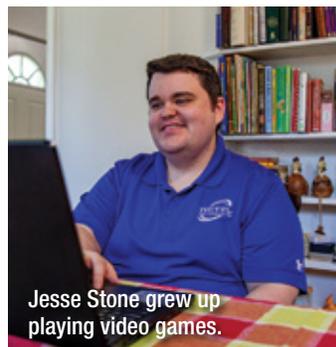
Erskine College, which is dependent on WCTEL’s high-speed service to provide internet to its student body, introduced esports to its athletic program this year. Brandon Oberle, a 2012 Erskine graduate and owner of 1Up Video Games in Greenville, is the program’s first coach.

Oberle says about a dozen players joined the Erskine team for its inaugural year, and he plans for the Flying Fleet to compete in several tournaments and quite a few titles throughout the course of the school year. “We’ve got Overwatch and Super Smash Bros.,” Oberle says. “We’ve got Street Fighter players. We’ve got Fortnite, and we’re starting a Call of Duty team.”

While this is his first year working with a collegiate team, Oberle has experience organizing tournaments for Upstate gamers through his store. He looks forward to offering students at Erskine opportunities to compete in esports. “There’s a few who are interested in transferring in the spring because this is one of those opportunities they don’t want to pass up,” he says.

Erskine joins other schools in South Carolina — such as nearby Lander University, the University of South Carolina Sumter, Coker University and Limestone College — as competitors in esports. Oberle says he thinks a successful esports program will add to the diversity of the student body at the Due West campus.

“You do get a lot of diversity with the type of people who play video games at a high level,” he says. “We’re going to have on my first team a Bible and religion major, a psychology major, a business major, and poly-sci and graphic design majors. It’s really a diverse group of people, and I think it’s going to continue to be down the line.”





# Esports go mainstream

High-speed connections create winners

BY JOHN CLAYTON

A dozen gaming computers provide an ethereal green glow along the stage at Lander University's Abney Cultural Center in Greenwood, South Carolina, as esports competitors prepare for an early round at the 2019 Peach Belt Conference League of Legends Championship tournament.

In traditional sports, the PBC is a member of NCAA Division II and composed of small colleges and universities in the Carolinas and Georgia. But as esports begins to find a larger niche, this is something different and new. While the video game industry has been around for decades, esports continues to evolve with college and professional teams, increasingly stunning games and graphics, and more platforms on which to play.

"I grew up playing stick-and-ball sports, and I never saw the difference in intensity between those sports and esports," says J.T. Vandebree, associate college esports manager at Riot Games, the creator and distributor of the battle arena game League of Legends. "In esports, all the competitors play the same games, and they all have the same experiences. And they all get to chase the same dream."

Vandebree spoke during a forum on esports hosted by Lander University during the 2019 PBC tournament. Members of the forum's panel agreed that esports and video gaming are expected to continue to broaden their reach and market shares.

Georgia high schools are now involved in sanctioned esports leagues. Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones bought a stake



Lander University esports competitors prepare for the Peach Belt Conference League of Legends tournament.

in professional esports team Complexity Gaming in 2017 and moved its training center to the Cowboys complex in Frisco, Texas. In 2017, 240 colleges and universities competed in esports. That number grew to 357 in 2019, and many of those schools offer scholarships to promising video gamers.

Despite the growing popularity of esports on college campuses and beyond, the NCAA has not sanctioned esports. Instead, the National Association of College Esports serves as its primary governing body, and the NCSA — Next College Student Athlete recruiting service — has added esports to its portfolio.

ESPN signed on as sponsor of the Collegiate Esports Championship and plans to

continue its support of the genre across its platforms, John Lasker, ESPN's vice president of digital programming, told Cheddar Esports during a regular show dedicated to gaming and esports.

"The conversion is happening right before our eyes," Lasker says. "Sports teams and franchises are evolving into esports franchises and esports teams. As that continues to happen, ESPN expects to continue to be there as we have been in other sports."

## THE NEXT BIG THING

Gaming consoles such as Xbox and PlayStation have long incorporated internet connectivity into its gameplay, but Google is taking gaming one huge



The Peach Belt Conference League of Legends Tournament took the big screen at Lander University's Abney Cultural Center.

step outside of the console. Google was to introduce its much-anticipated Stadia online gaming platform — described as a sort of Netflix for gamers — in November. With the cloud-based Stadia, gamers will not even need a gaming console or PC to play. The cost is \$9.99 per month in the U.S.

“Google may have just unveiled the future of gaming,” wrote Tom Warren, a senior editor for TheVerge.com, following Google’s introduction of Stadia’s beta version at the Game Developers Conference in March.

The cloud-based technology, which relies on fast internet speeds, an array of servers placed around the world and special game controllers that relay commands quickly to the servers, puts more pressure on internet companies and cooperatives to deliver.

High-speed internet connections make it possible for gamers to compete, and the expansion of broadband services into rural areas makes it possible for more people to enjoy the games and to take advantage of the potential opportunities they offer.

In Kerrville, Texas, first-year Schreiner University esports coach Ryan Lucich says he often suffered through frustrating internet speeds and iffy connections while a student and esports competitor at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas.

“Obviously, the biggest challenge in running a wide, multiplayer online game is the internet connection,” says Riot Games’ Vandenberg. “We have dozens of people at our company who work with telecommunications providers to try to figure out the best way to make our game packets work. Anything that makes our infrastructure stronger in our country, and any other country, is good for the game.”



UNC Pembroke’s Crystian Amaya and teammates competed at the Peach Belt Conference League of Legends Tournament.

## Gaming old school in new ways

Using internet connections to play traditional games is an updated take on an old norm. “People used to play chess by mail or by messenger,” says Chris Bellinger, a Staunton, Virginia, resident and avid gamer. He participates in role-playing games with friends and family from across the miles thanks to internet connections and gaming platforms that allow real-time communication and play.

Bellinger says members of his groups, which total about eight people in each, are involved in Pathfinder, Dungeons & Dragons and Star Wars role-playing games. He participates in Pathfinder and D&D games with old friends and runs another D&D game with members of his family. Group members include people in Virginia, Florida, South Carolina and Iowa.

“We’re pretty spread out, so now it’s pretty cool,” Bellinger says. “It allows us to stay in touch. I don’t know that I would have much contact with my friends otherwise.”

One of the current games now played through the popular Roll 20 gaming platform originated from one that Bellinger and his friends started at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. “That game ran for about eight years with different people coming in or going out,” he says.

Roll 20 makes game play smooth and easy when coupled with a communications platform called Discord that allows for group chats and messaging.

While those platforms are relatively new, Bellinger says traditional gamers have been taking advantage of internet connections since the introduction of the World Wide Web. And before that, players used text-based multiuser dungeons, or MUDs, to meet up online for a gaming experience once confined to table tops or living rooms. “So, there’s always been ways to game online,” Bellinger says.

# Making a splash in Abbeville

## Pro Towels products promote businesses



Charlene Brownlee, lead finisher, prepares an order of towels to go out to the customer.

BY ANDREA AGARDY

Advertising takes many forms, from the newspaper and TV ads we see all the time to billboards, YouTube videos and towels.

To you, that beach towel emblazoned with the logo of your favorite baseball team may just be another way to show your team spirit. But for the team whose logo you're wrapping yourself up in, it's an easy and highly effective way to spread the word.

Pro Towels works with organizations big and small who want to increase their name recognition while providing their clientele with beautiful, high-quality and useful products like golf towels, blankets, flip-flops and more. And since 2006, the 120 Pro Towels team members working in Abbeville have been a vital part of that process. The company's impact on the community has not gone unnoticed. In 2012, the Abbeville County Rotary Club named Pro Towels its Business of the Year.

Pro Towels President Kevin Nord recently responded to questions about how the company has evolved to meet its customers' needs and about Pro Towels' place in the community.

### Q: WHEN AND WHERE DID PRO TOWELS START, AND HOW HAS IT GROWN IN TERMS OF BOTH THE NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES AND THE PRODUCTS?

**A:** Pro Towels was established approximately 15 years ago in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It is a family business that started with only 20 employees and now has grown to over 200 employees across the four North American locations to become known as the Pro Towels Family. Pro Towels has grown organically and through acquisitions, which has allowed us to diversify our product line into four categories: Pro Towels, Kanata Blanket Co., Superior Decorating and Neet Feet. Our emphasis is bringing a family atmosphere to our workforce, along with teaching and communicating to enhance our employees' expertise, learning and overall growth.



Tanya Chrisley works in the embroidery department.

## Q: WHO ARE YOUR CUSTOMERS?

**A:** Our customers are large corporations all the way down to small local businesses. They are all distributors and decorators in the promotional product industry. We work with some of the most well-known top brands in a variety of industries like education, health care, entertainment, hospitality, financial, etc. Some big brands you may know are Maui Jim Sunglasses, State Farm, Aflac, Hilton, top beverage companies and professional sports leagues like the NHL, NBA, MLB and many more!

## Q: WHY TOWELS?

**A:** Towels are the perfect promotional item for so many reasons. First, no sizing issues with one size fits all. They are loved by all ages and genders. Not to mention, it has one of the largest imprint areas in the promotional industry with sizes up to 25 by 50 inches — like a small, walking billboard! And compared to other promo items, the average cost per impression for a towel is 10 cents, since they have a 15-plus-year life span. Overall, towels are versatile for any event or reason — no beach or pool needed.

## Q: WHAT OTHER SERVICES DOES PRO TOWELS OFFER ITS CUSTOMERS?

**A:** Not only does the Pro Towels Family offer more than 300 products ranging from towels to blankets to flip-flops and more, but we also offer other decorating services.



Tanya Chrisley is part of the team creating promotional towels, shirts and other items.

With our Superior Decorating brand, we offer apparel decorating on clothing and accessories with embroidery, screenprinting, foil printing, four-color process, glitter, laser etching and many more. Plus, we have a creative art team on staff to help customers with creating a great design on their next project.

## Q: WHAT MAKES PRO TOWELS STAND OUT FROM ITS COMPETITORS?

**A:** Pro Towels stands out from the competitors for several reasons. We are one of the few — if not the only — towel suppliers that has locations coast to coast, which allows us to provide faster production and quicker shipping for our customers. We are also one of the largest towel suppliers in the industry with a bigger product offering and inventory standpoint than our competitors. We also have only specialized in selling towels, so we have superior product quality standards and knowledge, award-winning decoration and the best team on staff. That's why we put the "Pro" in our name.



Plant Manager Phil Rosenberg cleans a printing screen.

## Q: HOW IMPORTANT IS RELIABLE BROADBAND SERVICE TO YOUR BUSINESS?

**A:** Reliable internet service is crucial to our business, the workflow between our locations and within each location. We use the internet and technology daily to allow everyone to stay up to date on orders, communicate with customers and for our overall workflow process. Not only does it allow us to communicate more effectively within the company and with our customers, but it also allows us to easily market our brands and products to anyone in the promotional industry through our websites and by transmitting product information online to our distributors. Without the internet, we wouldn't easily be able to send over quotes to our customers and receive their orders back in return. The flow of that information is within seconds, compared to the manual process of a paper trail or taking orders by phone or fax only.

## Q: HOW IS PRO TOWELS ACTIVE IN THE COMMUNITY?

**A:** Pro Towels is an active member in the Abbeville community. We show continued support every year to our four-time state champions in football, along with frequent donations to area programs like the Abbeville Promise Program. Many of our Pro Towels Family employees live in the Abbeville community, so we will continue to show support for a community that we are proud to be a part of. 🗨️

# A holiday delight

## Baking Christmas cookies makes for a strong tradition

It's the most wonderful time of the year, when cooks around the country take to their kitchens to bake Christmas cookies.

"It's a tradition in families," says Stephany Houston, baker and owner of WildFlour Bakehouse in Sevierville, Tennessee. "Ours was that we would go to my grandmother's house — all of us girls — and make cookies. Then we would have them for the whole week before Christmas."

Houston recalls her grandmother, Alva Dell, using an old pastry press to create beautiful shapes for her German spritz cookies. That press is now long gone, but a new "old" one has taken its place. A friend found it at an antiques auction and brought it to Houston so she could re-create that experience she fondly remembers in her grandmother's kitchen years ago.

Spritz cookies are just one confection filling bakery cases during the holiday season, tempting customers as they walk through the bake shop doors. This is only WildFlour's second year in business, but as word spreads, a



Baker Stephany Houston re-creates the experience of making cookies with her grandmother.

growing, loyal customer base has taken root.

"Most every neighborhood has their baking lady," Houston says. "That's what I am — the neighborhood baking lady, who also has a storefront." In a previous life, before opening WildFlour, Houston was a 911 operator and "had a lot of downtime," giving her the opportunity to watch YouTube videos about cookie decorating.

"I pretty much taught myself," she says.

Now, she teaches others at classes at the bakery and makes cookies for customers who bring in their own recipes. "Everybody has their own little cookie recipe they want to have in their homes over the holidays," she says.



### Tips for GREAT COOKIES

Stephany Houston, owner of WildFlour Bakehouse, teaches baking classes, where she stresses important steps to take before getting started:

- ▶ Read the entire recipe before you begin. A lot of people don't, and they skip important steps.
- ▶ Always cream the butter and sugar together. That's very important. Then, mix the dry ingredients and incorporate the two together.
- ▶ Do not overmix the batter, which will result in tough, dry, crumbly cookies. Stop mixing when the ingredients are just mixed together.



FOOD EDITOR  
**ANNE P. BRALY**  
IS A NATIVE OF  
CHATTANOOGA,  
TENNESSEE.

## STEPHANY'S GINGERBREAD MEN

- 3/4 cup butter
- 3/4 cup brown sugar, packed
- 3/4 cup molasses
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon Chinese five spice
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 1/4 teaspoon cloves
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 3 3/4 cups all-purpose flour

In a saucepan over low heat, melt butter, then stir in brown sugar, molasses, salt and spices. Transfer the mixture to a medium-sized mixing bowl, let it cool to lukewarm, then beat in the egg.

Whisk the baking powder and soda into the flour, then stir into the molasses mixture. The dough will be very soft and sticky, but don't be tempted to add more flour. It will firm up once it's chilled.

Divide the dough in half and pat each half into a thick rectangle. Wrap well and refrigerate for 1 hour or longer. The dough may be sticky and hard to roll if not thoroughly chilled, so make sure it's chilled before continuing.

Heat oven to 350 F. Once the dough has chilled, take one piece of dough out of the refrigerator and flour a clean work surface. Roll the dough to a thickness of 1/8 to 1/4 inch. The thinner you roll the dough, the crispier the cookie. Flour both the top and bottom of the dough if it starts to stick.

Cut out shapes with a floured cookie cutter, cutting them as close to one another as possible to minimize waste. Transfer cookies to ungreased cookie sheets. Bake the cookies until slightly browned around the edges — 8 to 12 minutes — or until they feel firm. Let cookies cool on baking sheet for several minutes until set. Then, remove to a wire rack to cool completely. Repeat with remaining dough. Decorate cookies as desired.



## ALVA DELL'S CHRISTMAS SPRITZ

*As you can tell by reading, Alva wrote this recipe for her family.*

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
- 1 large egg
- 1/2 pound unsalted butter at room temperature, cut into small cubes
- Decorations of choice

Heat oven to 350 F. Whisk together the flour, sugar and salt in a large bowl, then sprinkle with vanilla and almond extracts. Crack the egg in the center of the bowl, then dot the flour mixture with the pieces of butter. Mix everything together with your clean hands until you get a dough. Try not to knead too much, as this makes tough cookies. You just want the dough to come together cohesively.

Press the dough through a cookie press to make traditional spritz. Put on the die of your choice — star and snowflake

patterns are good for the holidays. Then, load the press with the dough. Ratchet out the dough onto an ungreased cookie sheet. This takes practice, so be prepared to mess up at first. Just return the not-so-good ones to the dough ball and start again. Some people like larger cookies that require two or three cranks. Others like a more dainty cookie that requires just one crank of the cookie press. My mum sometimes twisted her wrist a little when making these to get a swirly pattern going on.

Bake the cookies at 350 F for 10-12 minutes. As they bake, get your decorations ready, because you'll need to act fast once they come out of the oven.

The cookies will not brown, so don't wait for that to happen. As soon as they come out of the oven, start decorating them. My favorite toppings are colored sugar and pieces of walnuts stuck in the center of the star pattern.

Cool the cookies on the sheet for 5 minutes, then carefully remove them to a rack. Let cool completely before putting them away. These cookies freeze well. 📺



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