

T: So I'm putting together an article for VICE, and I was kind of interested in the rise of I dunno, university esports. I know obviously you're the first school, or were the first school to offer varsity scholarships for esports, so you're a super important note on that map. But I'm kind of interested in what that means in terms of your role in the school, how you feel connected to the college itself and also what it's like to be a coach in a sport that is so new to the scene.

F: Sounds good.

T: So, what's your background? Do you have a background in esports yourself?

F: Yeah, so, I've been around in esports since, right around 2009 was when I started playing competitively, previous to that I was involved in some esports things, but not the top tier competitive level. When League first came out was when I started getting competitive. And my background in it is I've worked as an analyst, I've worked as a manager, I've worked as a coach both with semi-professional and then professional teams. So I've had a chance to work with amateur teams and then as LCS – League competitive scene – developed, and when Riot released LCS I worked with [inaudible] in LCS and with cloud9 in LCS also for a period of time. I've been around since the League competitive scene first started getting developed and since then, I fill various roles and various positions. I work closely with players now, besides working collegiately, I work with a lot of players and represent a lot of players as their agent, so that's kind of the relationship I've been able to develop with players, and with team owners and with various other people over the past several years.

T: Oh, that's really cool. I'll definitely ask you about being an agent. I don't want to get off topic too early, but I definitely want to ask about that. It's fascinating to me, and definitely relevant to my interests, I'm fascinated by the financial side of this all. But anyway, uh, you were saying you worked with amateur teams and professional teams. College is sort of that middle ground, and I don't know if you're familiar with a lot of the debates going on with like NCAA sports in general, but the idea that are these professionals are these amateurs playing these sports? For you, as a coach, does it feel more like an amateur team or like a professional team?

F: So, at the point at, every year at the beginning of the year when I bring in players. The first year of our program for sure, I recruited high end what you call semi-professional players, players who were still trying to make it in the pro scene, but were not at the level yet of where they could be picked up by a professional team, so, when I brought those players in they were already somewhat developed, but they didn't have the experience of working in the type of environment we have here, with our coaching staff I mean, very specific schedules made out for them all those things. Every year when I bring in new recruits, for them, I work with them and they don't have the background yet of working in a team environment, so working with those players it's definitely almost like I'm bringing amateur players into what we've now established here as almost like this professional type system that we've put in place with our college program. The past few years for sure I think we've developed it into being a professional environment similar to professional teams, but the very interesting thing is that – unlike professional teams who do development, but for the most part it's very rare to sign an amateur player without having worked with that player extensively over a period of time and then just incorporate them into your team – we take in players as well and kind of develop them here both as individuals and as part of a team. We have various teams here, we have system players for, we really look to develop a player and kind of from that progress them through our system and to that point so he can get an opportunity outside of what we provide here. So it's very, we have a large number of students, and each

year is a very different goal. Not all players here are looking for that kind of professional level schedule, or I guess, work that's required to play at that level. So we have a mix of coaches and various systems that we use with our players to tailor to what their goal is. Like some players come here and their only goal is really to be part of this experience, be on a team, be part of that kind of environment. And we also have players come in and their goal is they want to come to our school, they want to work towards a degree, but at the same time, they want to develop their skill as a League player or whatever game they come in for and hopefully with what we can provide them, they can develop and get an opportunity with a professional team. So, that's how we work things over here. It's kind of a balance between having a professional environment, but we have to tailor to amateur players, and not all of our players are necessarily looking to making it to the pros.

T: Yeah that's very interesting, it's much more – well you have to forgive me, I'm very new to esports in many ways. I first noticed it when I saw it was a thing I could write about, and I like sports, and video games and so I decided to learn about this. But one of the things that's really surprising to me – maybe not to others – is that it's very similar to other college sports, right? Like, you actually have this mix of players where some people aren't expecting to get drafted at all, it isn't even crossing their mind, and others, they're just as much of a goal as the degree is to get picked up professionally. And that's what happens organically right?

F: Organically, yeah, and also we do recruit those type of players. So like, for our program we're trying to be competitive always, at least with one of our teams. We want one team to represent the school at the major collegiate competition. So we do go out and actively recruit those type of players, whose goal really is, they want to make the professional scene, right? But the professional scene takes a lot of time outside. Like, they have to really commit the system right now is they have to commit a year, half a year of their time to try to make it professional. And the amount of people who make the professionals here are a very very very small percentage, so by doing that they put all their eggs in one basket. Whereas starting at our program or any other collegiate program being set up, they can work toward a new career, have that safety net, and get the college experience in general which has a lot of benefits, like there are a lot of stuff that happens outside the game that wouldn't happen in a typical amateur team environment. So that's kind of what we, we and other programs try to provide is that we want to provide that kind of type of opportunity for these players.

T: So in terms of your role as a coach, how does it...does it feel like you're more so talking tactics or strategy with these kids? Or is it more like being a mentor figure? Or is it somewhere in between?

F: Uh, it's, so as I built my staff, and the program has been growing, I've had to take on a larger role. When we first started, my main goal the first year of the program was pretty much, I recruited a couple players, enough for a team, and my goal was simply to work with those players. But my first year role with that was kind of start get stuff set up and the past couple years, we've grown significantly and I've added staff who I very much trust to be able to work with players on the strategic level. I've kind of been able to expand my role to focus on other things as well, like being there as a mentor figure, teaching them various things they could use outside the game. And also finding opportunities for all the players with other partners. So my goal in the program has gone from basically just focusing directly on the individual level working with these players on the strategy part of the game to kind of trying to find other opportunities for these players while they're here to kind of be able to achieve their goals and get their goals. So I've kind of gone – I still very much do coaching stuff – but I have people that I can rely on

to give them very specific, focused, even individual level stuff to provide those things to our players. My role's kind of grown to encompass coaching, mentoring, and managing the program as well.

T: Great. So in terms of tournaments – you're preparing for one now – I found you by looking through the structure of ULOL and the various ways in which Riot and other groups as well try to codify university competitive systems that either – I don't know? Do they correspond or do they go parallel to the more professional competitive scenes?

F: So, I mean in the sense the way its structured is, ULOL has also been growing and trying to find an identity, how they want to go about implementing this collegiate system. They want to mimic what's in place with other sports, or do they want to mimic the professional structures? This year changed that completely: previous to this year there were qualifiers for teams, very limited, there was only a few teams who could actually make it to it. And throughout that process, there wasn't really as much focus on the individual teams that were participating. So this year, what they've done is that any school that has a club or an esports program, they're able to actually play, and teams will be broken down into individual groups, by region, and after that there'll be kind of a group stage and beyond that, there'll be playoffs. And I guess the playoff season will begin after that. So this year I think they're kind of, I guess their idea this year is they want to provide an opportunity to any school. Which I think is great – because I do think that rather than mimicking the LCS system which was kind of just a few limited teams and then they would kind of really work with those teams individually – I think the ideal system for collegiate is to look at what's already in place. Not necessarily having like Riot be the figure that NCAA is right now, but what they can do is look at how the NCAA has their structure set up and how they provide opportunities for all these teams to compete and then have a playoff system. So I think for collegiate, the best thing is every school should have an opportunity to be able to have a team to represent them. I think that's the approach they should do, because regardless of what school you go to, if your school takes it seriously or if you take it seriously, you should absolutely have a chance to prove yourself as a school or as a team that you can compete with other programs without necessarily playing these qualifying events, where some luck might be involved. So last year, for example, if a team lost one game in the qualifiers, they were done. Anything can happen in one game, which there was a lot of feedback from teams across the board that – even the teams that made it, like, we didn't really see that as a system that promotes growth for opportunity. So I think what they're doing this year for sure is a good approach, and rather than mimicking the professional system, they should really provide ways for the schools that want to participate to participate, and have ways for students who want to participate to participate.

T: Yeah, that's great. That actually answers the other question I was going to ask, which was what the nature or complexion of those tournaments are. One of the things I started thinking about in this article was finding the advisors of these clubs, thinking of this as a club system instead of, what it really is, the NCAA. And it's fascinating to hear this new plan because it sounds like people could take it much more seriously as you're saying. It's not just people getting together and playing League every so often, it's people committed to this structure. And as much as the administration and students are willing to be committed, sky's the limit.

F: Yeah.

T: So let me ask you – last question because I was so interested at the beginning. This is exactly what I should not ask as a journalist, an open ended question, but: describe to me what it is to be an agent in

the world of esports or competitive gaming. I know sort of what it is to be an agent in the world of pro sports. You hear your star agents like your Drew Rosenhaus in football or Scott Boras in baseball, but it just sounds like...is it, do you feel like the agent experience is similar? Or is it idiosyncratic for someone who's in competitive gaming?

F: I think agency in general in esports now is just at the infancy stage of development. The reason I have started doing this, one is because with my previous experience with players, I've already built relationships with players. And two, I felt that there was really an imbalance when negotiations were happening with players, in my opinion a very visible imbalance where the teams always had the leverage in pretty much every negotiation. Because when you're trying to negotiate your own contract, it's very difficult to leverage it. You don't want to say things out of fear if you say something wrong, they might not want you anymore. So having that middle party who is there trying to create a mutual beneficial relationship with that party they're representing, it puts that player in a better position to get leverage at the negotiation table, and get a deal that's in their favor rather than always just signing something that is in the team's terms, and often times a thing with players is, most players in esports are very young. These are players straight out of high school, or in their early 20s. They really don't have a lot of experience understanding the language and the seriousness of what a contract means. Their parents will look and say "oh this looks good" but there was never a point where people were seeing that there could be issues until things start popping up here and there. And from my perspective I saw that like, players need someone. They need someone to represent them, to get them a deal that's actually good for them, and also to protect them. So, I reached out to one of the people I work with in the collegiate program, a full time lawyer with an interest in esports, so I brought up the idea to him that, this is a thing players need and you can use your law background and your knowledge of contracts and language and we can kind of work and get into the space and really help players. We're in a position to help players find opportunities, and why not take the next step further and make sure that the deals these players are getting are also in their favor. So we took it from there and that's kind of how we got in the space. Right now, the space is still developing – there's not that many people working as agents for these players. But it's very very important for players to get a deal that's beneficial for them that they have that third party there that they trust. And trust in this industry, just like in other sports, trust is very very important. Working with players, I think that's why I started working in that area.

T: Yeah that's fascinating. I'll warn you, I'll probably try to get in touch again because that sounds like something I would love to write and think about. I didn't even think of it from the advocacy perspective, but of course you're talking about a hyper-vulnerable group of people. And teams with all sorts of ability – scarcity, money, yeah. Cool. Well uh, Ferris thanks so much for talking to me. Anything you would want to add or feel we left out?

F: Uhm, no not really. So like I guess one question I have is what like what is this story you're writing. Are you trying to focus specifically on League or on the collegiate system in general? Because there's a ton going on outside of League, developing this year and recently.

T: Yeah so you're sort of recognizing my own training wheels with esports [laughs]. I'm focusing on League a lot because Riot is a little easier to research because there is a more centralized system, but I am interested in it all, actually. I know, so, I'm familiar with Riot's entry into the university system through ULOL and the ways in which they're trying to empower groups by kind of making them legitimate, but can you give me a taste – not everything, I know there are a million sports and I'm just

seeing here that Robert Morris does more than just League as well. You do DOTA and other stuff as well. But can you give me a taste of how that's all developing?

F: Yeah, sure. So, recently, past two years really, Blizzard has been doing Heroes of the Storm, and through that doing something called Heroes of the Dorm, which airs on ESPN. They also have something called Tespa, which is a part of Blizzard, they own Tespa now. Tespa is basically their initiative for collegiate. So what they've done this year, they've taken all the Blizzard games and Tespa is working with those games and they're starting to have their own system. Almost similar to ULOL is trying to do with all the Riot games. So Hearthstone, Heroes of the Storm, Overwatch these are all the games, yeah. Tespa is trying to create a system similar to ULOL with all games across the board. Heroes of the Dorm is still something that's pretty big overall, they're still working on ESPN. Definitely, Blizzard, it's clear that they're starting to take that next step. I think this will be like their first official year doing something other than Heroes of the Storm. And then with, at RMU we have all these games: Heroes of the Storm, Hearthstone, DOTA, CS:Go – so we have numerous titles and numerous coaches and players. And I think right now, besides Riot with League, it's Tespa and Blizzard, that's their initiative. The only one that is still waiting to come in is Valve with CS: Go and DOTA. So far those guys have done nothing – the guys handling that is the CSL which is the Collegiate Star League which also handles – the CSL this year is working with directly Riot again to create ULOL again. So it's going to be, much more involvement across the board with all these clubs and schools. Riot has partnered again up with CSL to handle the number of teams and students who are going to be involved, compared to last year. I think what will happen, CS: Go and DOTA are fairly significant games, and it's just a question of whether – when not whether – they'll start to get involved. Compared to Riot, they're pretty hands off. Their tournaments, they have these majors that they get third parties to host. They're a bit of a different company than Blizzard and Riot that are more hands on and want to have the control of how they run things.

T: That's kind of Valve's personality anyway, yeah. But it seems like in the professional world, regulation seems like the final frontier for this stuff. Riot's obviously ahead of the curve with it, but all these – as you're saying, in the university system it's the same thing – all the ways of finding rules, systems, competitive consistency. Everywhere I saw, people were describing DOTA as the Wild West as far as that goes. I guess that adds up in terms of university as well.

F: Yeah, I think if Valve does come in and lets third parties handle things. I mean, even from my perspective looking from the outside in: you have two completely different models and approaches to how systems can work. Valve is promoting third parties, and if a third party can't handle it they'll say "sorry, we'll find another third party capable of running things smoothly." Whereas with Riot, it's more like they themselves are the ones who hire people and have individuals work for them and they control everything and the flow of things. The question is going to ultimately be for Riot is, do they need a third party to handle the decision making rules? With their current system, with all these teams involved, right? You look at the NCAA who have regulations and they have rules and they have to enforce things – it'll be interested to see what Riot does with so many teams participating. What's already happened previously, minor little incidents have happened, there will for sure be rules that need to be enforced as they expand to more teams. It'll be interesting to see how the different models of operating and controlling things will work out.

T: Yeah especially because they're both the professional and the amateur at this point, running both sides which is kind of strange. Well that's great, actually – I mean thank you, that's super helpful for me

as someone looking from the outside in. It's such a huge, feels like esports and competitive gaming in general is so massive that it's hard to find an entry point. But what you're saying about university stuff sounds so familiar to a lot of the problems in a lot of college sports, and it really does kind of hit home that this is becoming another sport, not even an exceptional sport but like part of the group.

F: Right yeah.

T: Thanks so much man, I really appreciate it.

F: Thanks also, appreciate you talking to me.

T: Absolutely. Good luck moving forward – based on your pedigree I have no concern that the Eagles aren't going to do well. You feeling good about your chances?

F: Yeah, we feel confident as always. We've done a lot of things to get to where we are now. There's a lot more growth for us to do, and more we want to do, definitely looking forward to the upcoming season.

T: I'll be definitely keeping an eye on what you're doing. I'm a fan – looking forward to seeing you succeed.