

Tiger. Jordan. Hawk. Wendel?

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ENLARGE PHOTO

Professional video gamer Johnathan Wendel in his house in Kansas City, KS.
PHOTOGRAPH FOR TIME BY MATTHEW GILSON

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Professional video gamer Jonathan (FatalIty) Wendel likes comparing himself to Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan and Tony Hawk. Wendel doesn't have a 350-yd. drive or a turnaround jumper, but he has dominated the PC-gaming field, winning 12 championships and collecting more than \$500,000 in prize money and well over \$1 million beyond that in sponsor deals. To prepare for big matches, Wendel says, he imports sparring partners from as far away as Finland, avoids alcohol and caffeine and runs a couple of miles a day. "Fitness is crucial," he says. "It's all about who has the most stamina and can think faster."

In likening himself to His Airness, Wendel is thinking past the rec room and into the boardroom. What Jordan did for sneakers, argues Wendel, FatalIty (pronounced fatality) can do for the sound card. To that end, Wendel has partnered with manufacturers like Creative, XFX, Abit and Zalman to put his stamp on a hardware line he claims will give aspiring gamers an edge. He and his associates will claim about \$5 million in royalties for 2006. "I want to create a FatalIty brand that will last," says Wendel. He's talking not just mouse pads and motherboards but even apparel. His website touts hoodies embroidered with the FatalIty label as the "ultimate gaming accessory for the ultimate pro gamer."

Twitch athletes like FatalIty are trying to make a claim on sports programming and its rich merchandising spin-offs. There's already a built-in audience, and it's global. In 2006, combined sales of video and PC games hit \$13.5 billion, a record for the industry and more than \$4.5 billion above Hollywood's total box-office receipts. Competitive gaming is currently insignificant in that universe, with sales between \$15 million and \$20 million, according to industry consulting firm Parks Associates. But big players are entering the market. In January, DirecTV announced the formation of its own Championship Gaming Series. The matches will be viewable in 100 million homes worldwide, and the prize money will exceed \$1 million.

The pro circuit has also birthed other official rankings and ventures, like Major League Gaming (MLG), which last year raised \$35 million in venture capital. "Two years ago, selling pro gaming to cell-phone providers and soft-drink companies was difficult," says Mike Sepso, CEO of MLG. "But 2006 proved it was real. Tens of thousands came to our live events, and hundreds of thousands watched them." While MLG's revenue is growing, profitability is, at least for now, elusive.

Skepticism about whether pro gaming is a sport--as compared with, say, pro fishing--isn't as important as the question of whether gaming can appeal to viewers. There's a difference between watching Peyton Manning threading a touchdown pass and watching a gamer control a character doing something onscreen.

Leagues like MLG have their roots in pre-broadband underground circuits, in which players traveled the country to compete against one another. Sepso and his business partner were both sports and gaming fans, and in the nascent underground scene they saw the makings of something more.

"It looked to us like an early NASCAR or an early X-Games," says Sepso, who at the time was running a broadband company. "It was compelling, so we bought in, and we got to know a lot of these young guys."

MLG specialized first in platform gaming exclusively, holding contests and establishing official rankings. In addition to being shown on USA, MLG matches are televised on Comcast's on-demand service as well as on the MLG website. But more important, MLG landed some big corporate fish as sponsors, including Boost Mobile, Toyota and Gamestop. That made the prize pool big enough to allow many gamers to quit their day job.

Dave (Walshy) Walsh was working 65 hours a week at the post office when he began gaming. For his first tournament, in the summer of 2003, he drove to Nashville, Tenn., and crammed into a hotel room with six others. He took fifth place and won 50 bucks playing the original Halo. But by 2004 he was pulling down \$1,100 per competition. In 2005 he won a new car worth \$43,000, which he sold to make a down payment on a house and launch a fledgling clothing line aimed at gamers called Kiaeneto.

Walsh began selling Kiaeneto T shirts over the Internet and at gaming centers where devotees gather to play. He says in the first month he sold more than \$15,000 in shirts and hopes over the next few years to build a line exclusively for gamers. "I would go to a lot of these competitions, and I'd see people wearing Hurley or Volcom," says Walsh. "But those labels are for skaters and snowboarders. There are a lot of people out there who want to represent video gaming."

In a world full of geeky male teens, a promoter's dream might be a team of Swedish women. And there is. Les Seules, a Swedish squad founded in 2004 for a French competition, is one of dozens of female teams formed over the past three years. Captain Louise (Aurora) Thomsen says that when she started playing Counter Strike in 2003, there were about 10 teams; now there are more than 100. She says advances in design have broadened gaming's appeal, particularly in Scandinavia, where gamers abound. (And with up to 20 hours of darkness each day in winter, there's a certain logic to that.)

Les Seules anticipates a new slate of sponsors on the heels of a world tour filmed for an upcoming reality-TV series that has been sold to numerous networks around the world. The team is already sponsored by headphone manufacturer Sennheiser, which pays the women to wear the headphones in competition, to listen in on the sounds of digital slaughter.

Last year MLG focused on four-vs.-four team matches for the game Halo 2. Rob Dustin, an executive producer at MLG, says the main challenge was whittling down the onslaught of information for the lay viewer. Next season Dustin hopes to find a Cinderella team and build its programming around it. He needs more stars. "The uniqueness of the MLG is that you can start as just four guys from Poughkeepsie and end as a top-five team," says Dustin. "You can't do that in other sports."

It's a lesson that Wendel has fully absorbed. At the recent Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, he strutted onto a stage and faced all comers in the first-person shooter Quake 4. The first challenger lost, 23 to 0. Another scored -3. None of the 20-odd opponents scored a point. Afterward, Wendel talked up a new deal he had signed for the Championship Gaming Series. Instead of playing, Wendel will be announcing for DirecTV's new series. "I'm going to be the John Madden of gaming," says Wendel/Fatality. That's when he's not being the Michael Jordan of gaming.