



## Electronic gamers ready to battle at Daytona Ocean Center

By Jim Abbott

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DAYTONA BEACH — After eight years of summer gatherings in Orlando, electronic game competitors in the CEO Fighting Game Championships are relocating this week to the World's Most Famous Beach.

Roughly 6,000 gaming enthusiasts representing more than 45 states and 30 countries are expected to descend on the county-run Ocean Center on Friday for the opening session of a three-day marathon e-sports tournament involving such popular electronic games as Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat, Tekken, Tomb Raider and Halo 3. Competitors will vie for \$100,000 in prize money, awarded in amounts ranging from \$1,000 to \$25,000 throughout the weekend.

The championship has unfolded since 2010 in Orlando, a city that also figures into the host organization's CEO acronym. It stands for Community Effort Orlando Gaming, Inc., an events company specializing in competitive fighting game tournaments, enthusiast outreach and promotional entertainment tied to video game products.

Despite such close ties, the Orlando organization has decided that its hometown is no place for a street fighting man, to paraphrase Mick Jagger, moving its signature annual event to a new destination for the first time in 2018, said Alex Jebailey, the group's founder and director.

"Daytona feels like it's going to be my city, and my community's city, for the weekend," Jebailey said by phone from Orlando, recalling the warm reception he received from Ocean Center staffers and area tourism officials when he visited the convention center. "It feels like they will be there to support us every step of the way."

The event is a “perfect fit” for the destination, said Lori Campbell Baker, executive director of the Daytona Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau.

“CEO Gaming is a perfect example of the type of ‘e-sports’ that we’re focusing on,” Baker said.

The core demographic for electronic gaming ranges from ages 16-36 and interest extends globally, Jebailey said. Dedicated gamers tend to start as teens, such as Luke Okada, 25, who began playing at an arcade near his family’s apartment complex in Dallas. His passion inspired him to leave a career as a financial adviser to work at CEO Gaming, where he coordinates staffing at the championships, a task that involves 14 production teams of 54 paid staffers as well as 115 volunteers, who this year will travel from as far as France to be part of the event.

“They really care about their games and the opportunity to cherish their hobby and promote it as a lifestyle that they are proud of,” Okada said. “It’s really awesome to see how easily people are willing to come forward and help to make these things possible.”

After presenting the inaugural 2010 championship at Orlando’s Central Florida Fairgrounds, a hastily organized event that involved only three weeks of preparation, the Fighting Game Championships moved to the Wyndham Orlando Resort on the city’s congested International Drive, for the next seven years, until costs grew too expensive, Jebailey said.

His friends urged him to consider Tampa or Daytona Beach and a tour of the Ocean Center was impressive enough to inspire Jebailey to sign a two-year deal for 2018 and 2019, he said.

“The building comes with so many benefits,” he said. “They offered so much that would save me on costs, a giant exhibit hall with an arena, and having it all in one location right next the Oceanwalk (retail shops) and the beach. Plus, everybody over there was personally welcoming. They wanted to help me as much as possible. It was very easy to connect with them.”

The presence of the arena influenced the addition of a first-ever wrestling component to the weekend’s activities, Jebailey said. On Friday, New Japan Pro-Wrestling will present five matches in the Ocean Center’s arena, including a tag-

team bout between Tetsuya Naito & Hiromu Takahashi and Kenny Omega & Kota Ibushi.

The wrestling idea emerged when Jebailey met Omega, a fight-game fan, at the 2016 championship.

“When I brought up the idea of incorporating a wrestling event, he said, ‘If you get a bigger place, let’s do it.’” Jebailey said. “So after we settled on Daytona, I went back to him: ‘Hey, I have this arena now.’”

Jebailey, 35, said it costs between \$300,000 and \$400,000 to produce the annual championship, a total that includes Jebailey’s own contributions, along with money from corporate sponsors and attendees. The Ocean Center move will save roughly \$200,000 in production expenses, he said.

Tim Riddle, the Ocean Center’s deputy director, said that the county-run center is charging the gaming company its full rate for renting the building. That includes exhibit hall rental of \$3,250 for move in/move out days; and \$6,500 for show days; an arena rental of \$1,500 for move in/move out days; and \$3,000 for show days; and ballroom rental of \$750 for move in/move out; and \$1,500 for show days.

“In all, we’re charging between \$39,000 and \$40,000,” said Riddle, adding that those fees include many of the Ocean Center’s in-house production resources that hotel meeting rooms might not supply. “When you go to large hotels, they don’t use large staging every week like we do, so he probably paid double for production equipment. We’re a one-stop shop for all of that.”

In anticipation of the event, the Ocean Center recently finished an upgrade of its WiFi capabilities and now offers gigabyte service, Riddle said. It’s among numerous details focused on by the center to ensure that the event unfolds without a hitch in its Daytona Beach debut, he said.

“We have five times the bandwidth we had two weeks ago,” Riddle said. “Not only for the competitors, but there will be lots of spectators sitting in the stands who will want to post to Instagram, Snapchat or Facebook Live. I don’t want them leaving here saying it was a great event but the internet was slow.”

“We’re in a 2-year event that we want to turn into a 5- to 7-year event,” Riddle said. “This is an upward trend in terms of this industry, which is exploding. It’s a huge new event for us. We’re very excited about the current and future prospects.”