# WINNERS, LOSERS AND LEGENDS

*By*
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**More people watched these guys play a video game than watched the highest-rated games of the NBA finals, the NHL finals or *Sunday Night Football*. Welcome to the future of sports**

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*Wooh. WooOHH. Wooooohhh!* This Paris crowd of 5,000 is going wild, wild like they're lit up, wild because they're together and no one understands the inferno like they do, all together as one.

Words appear on a giant screen suspended from the ceiling: DOMINATING. GODLIKE. LEGENDARY. The words, loaded with macho power, have the effect of a puppeteer's strings. At *dominating* the crowd is cheering. By *legendary* they are standing in explosive ovation, stomping from the front row to the back bleachers, the din louder than a rock concert.

Onstage, a tall, skinny 18-year-old with a black nylon jacket, collar turned up, nerdy *Mad Men* glasses

perched on his nose, raises his fist in the air. The crowd chants his name: "Bjergsen, Bjergsen, *Bjergsen!*"

The kid hasn't sung a song, rapped a rhyme, ripped a blazing guitar solo or spun a killer DJ set. He hasn't sunk a game-winning three-pointer or buried a last-second slap shot into the goal.

But Søren "Bjergsen" Bjerg, this adored kid from Denmark who now lives near the beach in Santa Monica, completely rules at a video game called *League of Legends*. His ability is buried within the hyper-turbo *click-click-click-click* of a mouse. Put simply, the game involves two teams of five intense guys as they try to capture the other team's base. In this multiplayer online battle arena, gamers choose avatars from a roster of 120 graphic-novel-like characters, each with unique abilities, such as Yasuo the Unforgiven with his sharp, damaging sword that causes a whirlwind of injury, or Blitzcrank the Great Steam Golem, with his clanky rocket grab, a speedy death grip. To the uninitiated, it all looks like a cartoon without a narrative. To those who know, it's like playing a brilliant mash-up of *Lord of the Rings* meets chess meets soccer meets UFC meets religion.

Created by Santa Monica–based Riot Games, *League of Legends* is played each month by a whopping 67 million people worldwide. It's the new rock-and-roll gospel, a gospel whose word is the fever pitch heard from the Church of Constant Gaming. And the word never lets up. Day into night, sunup to sundown, 27 million people play *League* in any 24-hour period. More than 32 million people watched last year's world finals, held at a sold-out Staples Center in Los Angeles. That's more than the highest-rated games of this year's NBA finals, NHL finals or *Sunday Night Football*.

This has turned e-sports into big business. Amazon recently paid $970 million in cash for Twitch, a massively popular video service on which millions of fans watch live streams of games including *League of Legends*. Coca-Cola and American Express signed on to sponsor this year's *League of Legends* Championship Series.

It's all good for the 20 or so young *League* gods with such names as Doublelift, Hai, Meteos, Faker, Crumbzz and WildTurtle. They make serious money as the all-stars of competitive online gaming, or e-sports, as it's called. Many, including Bjergsen, will likely be millionaires before the age of 25 through winnings of up to $1 million for the world finals, sponsorships and extras including $1,000 daily revenue from streaming their play sessions on Twitch and other sites. (Imagine if LeBron James or Kevin Durant did that with solo practices. They'd be Dr. Dre rich quick.)

*Day into night, sunup to sundown, 27 million people play League of Legends in any 24-hour period.*

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But it's about the fans too. They also play to the death, because whether you're Peter Dinklage short or Blake Griffin tall, *League* is accessible. But fans know how damn tricky it is to win. Their love of the pros is more like adoration. Sure, it's because the pros possess enviable skills, the cougarlike reflexes and the Bobby Fischer strategies. Even more, this fame is about a digital cult of personality stoked by social media that encourages fans to feel extraordinarily close to their idols. All the pros interact with fans on Reddit, Twitch and Twitter (though the constant bashing when players don't do well has driven some to retire early). At its best, it's a AAA-baseball fan-appreciation day where players mingle and sign autographs—except this is online 24/7. And it pays off. Deep down, fans from Texarkana to Seoul yearn to have the rapid-fire synapses of a champion, to win, to win big, to be revered simply for playing games. They want to be heroes. They want to be remembered. And with that online rhapsody comes the money.

It's worldwide, and as Riot Games vice president of e-sports Dustin Beck says, it's the "world's biggest phenomenon that no one truly understands." He means parents, politicians, mainstream journalists, movie producers, anyone who isn't part of the *League* scene. Fans love this punk-ass game featuring monsters and wizards because they can play it for free. And they love it because it's hard. With the deep strategy involved in choosing everything from characters (called champions) to the innumerable spells and abilities, it can take a year to learn properly.

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At the All-Star Paris 2014 event, fans waited for hours in the pouring rain even *(continued on page 130)*

**1.** Members of Team SoloMid celebrate their victory at the North American finals of the *League of Legends* Championship Series.

**2.** Thousands watched the finals live at the Washington State Convention Center while millions viewed an online broadcast.

**3.** Fans at the North American finals.


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though they held assigned seats. The event sold out its four-day stint in 72 hours. Someone sold a one-day pass in the nosebleeds online for nearly $1,000. Fans milling in the lobby are in complete awe. "These guys," says one French teen, "I could never play as good. I love Cloud9 the best."

That ardor is why the Cloud9 team's intrepid leader, Hai Lam, is stoked to play here with the other big boys of e-sports. Cloud9 beat all comers, including the fearsome Team SoloMid (for which Bjergsen plays), to be part of the all-star matchups.

Hai and Cloud9 dutifully practice up to 12 hours a day in a group apartment less than a mile from the Santa Monica surf. But Hai rarely hits the beach, because the work of a Leaguer is never done. That work ethic is one reason Hai's lung collapsed during a dinner with friends and members of rival Team SoloMid a few weeks before the Paris tourney. Hai wasn't crushed only physically. His illness affected his body—and his head. He was emotional, smacked hard by the possibility of missing All-Star Paris. His position, mid-laner, is like that of an NFL quarterback. He calls the shots for the four other team members, each of whom has a task in this monumental beat-down. Hai made a go of it, though. Loaded with tubes and sporting an oxygen mask over his face, he played *League of Legends* in his hospital bed for five-hour stretches, because if you don't practice—even when seriously ill—you'll lose your mojo. It didn't matter. "Cannot go to All Stars anymore, sorry everyone," he tweeted to his 170,000 followers.

"It really sucked to watch my team play without me," Hai says later.

Cloud9 members give it their all in Paris, making it to the semifinals. Without their main man, however, they go down to OMG (Oh My God), a Chinese team known for rocking a cocky gangster pose in photos. The Chinese, who later go on to the finals, are so tough, so in the zone, that team members avoid shaking opponents' hands after they lose a match. They're said to be masters of mind games. Even more than in China, *League* rules in South Korea, where 80 percent of kids between 15 and 25 play at least three hours a day in internet cafés called PC bangs. One guy played so hard and for so long he had a heart attack and died.

It's no surprise players expect to take a beating from the South Korean teams. In fact, SK Telecom T1 K, a formidable South Korean team with players nicknamed Faker, Piglet and PoohManDu, goes 9–0 in Paris. Even more so than Bjergsen, they bring down the house when they win big. Girls hold up signs reading FAKER, WILL U MARRY US? One woman posts on Twitter that she plans to throw her panties on the stage.

Backstage, Faker, a steely-eyed 18-year-old, says his team practices up to 15 hours a day. Polite, serious, rarely cracking a smile, he's asked how he and his teammates avoid burnout. Tired and nearly zombie-like from the frantic competition, he explains, "Even though it's 15 hours, it's still not as big as my passion for *League of Legends*. Even after 15 hours I'm still focused, because I enjoy playing *League of Legends* so much. But after the all-star games, we'll have a very long holiday."

How long?

"A week, maybe two weeks."

Outside the cramped hellhole of an interview room, things heat up. Workers scramble to remove groupies from the backstage area. But as soon as their backs are turned, the ladies return.

"Just go for it," whispers a pretty Asian girl. Doublelift is taken aback.

"This girl is aggressive," he says to no one in particular. They continue to flirt, eventually making their way to a couch upstairs.

Peter "Doublelift" Peng, a *League of Legends* star from Mission Viejo, California who plays for the Counter Logic Gaming team, takes his name from a magician's sleight of hand in card tricks. Outspoken and smart, he tells the woman he was a rebellious kid, his parents "were particularly strong-worded about video games and how much a waste of time they were" and he "was constantly being kicked out of the house" for playing *League*.

It's not bullshit. Peng's background is *Legends* lore. It's not a stretch to say *League of Legends* saved Peng's life—just as it almost destroyed it. In 2011 Peng's parents pressured the then 18-year-old to quit playing. Many *League* pros, including Bjergsen, tell the same story. When Peng's parents had had enough, they kicked him out the door. He claims he was homeless and ended up sleeping on a bench. In a long post on Reddit, he wrote that he seriously needed help. Fans sent Doublelift thousands via PayPal. Travis Gafford, a *League* aficionado who reports on the scene and hosts the *State of the League* podcast, finally took Doublelift in and taught him skills beyond winning at *League*. "No matter how long you stay," Gafford advised, "learn how to get a credit card. Deal with your finances." They're still friends.

Just as there's camaraderie between players, there's envy and trash-talking as well. At the Paris event, Gafford interviews both Bjergsen and Doublelift at the Mercure Hotel near the Parc de la Villette, where the world's teams have gathered to duke it out.

"I can't wait to kick some Doublelift butt," says Bjergsen, smiling.

They even share a hotel room, something that probably wouldn't happen in the NBA or NHL, even for an all-star event.

"When Bjergsen's sleeping I whisper, like, horrible things in his ear, trying to get into his head subconsciously," jokes Doublelift. "Bjergsen is a bad boy. He's a naughty little boy."

Doublelift explains that while the all-star event is competitive, it's not intense enough that "we would try to screw each other over." It would be different if they were at the world finals, he says.

Later, at the hotel restaurant, Bjergsen is mobbed by fans who discovered his location. "I ended up signing autographs for two hours," he says later. "I love *League of Legends*."


*"Harley wasn't her first choice, but he was the only one who didn't leave town when she got pregnant."*

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*League of Legends* was created by Riot Games, a scrappy game developer established in 2006 by two entrepreneurial 20-somethings, Brandon Beck, the then 24-year-old CEO, and Marc Merrill, the 26-year-old president. The pair met while at the University of Southern California and bonded over games, particularly the more elite hardcore games such as *StarCraft*. They realized that few games were being made for players like them, the hardest of the hardcore, who enjoyed indulging in games with others online.

It was as if publishers were leaving games and players in the lurch in order to make the next game. Games didn't update nearly enough, and you could be stuck playing the same maps forever.

In the refashioned entryway to an apartment near USC where the two had their gaming rigs set up, they rhetorically asked why someone didn't make a hardcore game that continually evolved. When they decided to raise money to make such a game themselves, their idea was to outdo the big boys in everything from game design to servicing the community. But with little game-making experience, they "didn't have the cred" of established game makers, admits Beck. They made up for that with detailed proposals that changed with each venture capitalist they encountered. It took them four rounds of financing, 30 employees and three years to make and release *League of Legends*. It also required firing key people within Riot, including the development head who ultimately didn't believe in their vision.

Released in late October 2009, *League of Legends* was far from an overnight success. Riot had horrible defeats after which it had to redo its back-end technology and online store. But Beck and Merrill were quietly confident, so much so they adopted seemingly strange nicknames. Beck's "Ryze" and Merrill's "Tryndamere" are game characters, the latter "a wrathful barbarian king seeking revenge," the former a "rogue mage who's tattooed with spells and seeks the wisdom of hermits, witches and shamans."

With 40 characters and worldwide online play, *League of Legends* saw an ambitious debut. "We were flying by the seat of our pants. Our work was nowhere near done. We were painfully aware of that," says Beck. The first day didn't exactly set the gaming world on fire. There wasn't even much of a launch party. "We didn't really celebrate with more than some yells and screams," says Beck. "The next day we got back to work, back to firefighting." More gamers came onboard, though not enough. But as the weeks passed, one thing gave Beck and Merrill hope. Players weren't leaving. The retention rate was over the top. Indeed, it was "incredibly higher" than the industry average. In 2009, at the height of the recession, a constantly morphing, ever-challenging, free-to-play game was what players needed and wanted. Elsewhere, big console games such as *Brutal Legend* and *Rogue Warrior* were tanking, and gamers were tiring of the rhythm-based music game *Rock Band*. Even *World of Warcraft,* Blizzard's lauded juggernaut, was peaking. By July 2011, Riot had amassed 15 million players. It snowballed from there—especially the e-sports aspect—so much that 2011 seems like eons ago. The company ballooned to more than 1,600 employees and is readying a bigger space to house its already immense headquarters.

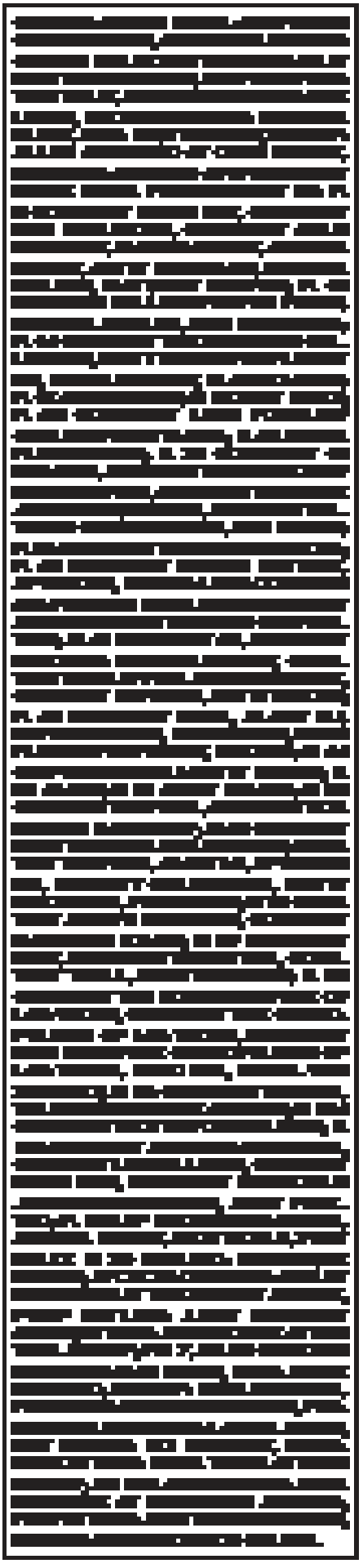
The big bang came when Chinese firm Tencent, the world's fifth-largest internet company, bought a majority stake in Riot for what *Bloomberg Businessweek* reported was between $350 million and $400 million. (Tencent later stated the sum was just over $231 million.) Whatever the price, opening the game to the Chinese is proving to be a cash cow. "That entrée would have been difficult without Tencent," says Riot CFO A.J. Dylan Jadeja. "Look at the problems Twitter and Facebook have faced in China."

While Beck, Merrill and the other Rioters always intended *League* to be an e-sport, the first major competitive season didn't begin in earnest until July 2010. That August *League* became part of the World Cyber Games finals (albeit with an admittedly low $6,000 first prize). The first season concluded with a bang in mid-2011 at Sweden's DreamHack, where a then-dorky Doublelift made himself a legend. Then, with the 2012 launch of Spectator Mode, enabling every fan to watch live games, *League* came into its own.

Riot saw the future of e-sports. So much so that the company gives each of the pro teams $175,000 in yearly sponsorship money so players have a base salary. It also provides money for housing and travel. And it teaches these usually shy guys how to open up in front of the cameras at twice-yearly player summits. The owner-managers of some teams employ part-time sports psychologists and life coaches. You need them, they say, when you spend most of your time indoors, playing just one game professionally. To some it can seem overbearingly cultish. To Riot Games employees, who go through training called "denewbification" while wearing green hats with ears based on the game's Teemo character, the way it works is the way it works. If they don't like it, Riot offers employees 10 percent of their yearly salary if they leave the company within 60 days. Most are happy to stay.

Although the game remains free to play, Riot makes money by selling optional virtual goods such as skins to customize the appearance of a player's character, which are purchased with $10 to $50 gift cards. Rare packages are known to sell for as much as a grand in online marketplaces.

But the primary reason the game remains popular isn't because players are addicted to dressing up their characters. It's because the game continually changes. With a console game such as, say, *Call of Duty,* downloadable updates become available every few months. *League of Legends* changes every two weeks. Those tweaks are



both wonderful and maddening to fans, especially to the stars. Cloud9's William "Meteos" Hartman says, "They'll take the really good champions, nerf them, make them really not good. That's one of the most annoying things that can happen. You have to keep practicing a ton."

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It's a postcard-perfect summer morning in Santa Monica. Joggers and cyclists hit the boardwalk. Kendrick Lamar blares from a passing convertible. The beach teems with hot bodies.

A mile away, inside the modest two-bedroom apartment where Hai and the rest of Cloud9 live in a spartan, college-dorm-like setting, the first-floor practice room is darkened by shuttered blinds. Team members sit at computers, preparing for the day's scrims (practice against other teams). Piled on a chair are wristbands, T-shirts and other team paraphernalia, the products of marketing guru and team owner Jack Etienne, 41, a lifelong game aficionado who recently quit his sales job to work full-time with Cloud9. Etienne continually checks his phone for messages in a place that looks lived-in yet temporary, with laundry hampers here and mattresses on the floor there. Some teammates share a room, and none of them have many possessions. But it's better than their last headquarters, where one team member slept in a bathroom closet just to gain some privacy.

Yet this is gaming nirvana circa 2014. Each Cloud9 member is generally thrilled about playing *League of Legends*. Optimism is at the team's core, says Hai, who began playing *League* in earnest in college when a floor mate "started shit-talking" him. The team took time to develop. Hai washed his hands of a player who was physically confrontational and one who disappeared for an entire week before a tournament. After adding Meteos, an affably sarcastic Virginian "who basically made this giant play with a damage-over-time spell that kept us from losing" during a crucial game, Cloud9 was ready. They began to win every match they competed in.

Hai named the team Cloud9 because, he says, when you're on cloud nine you're feeling happy and euphoric. Other teams don "dark colors and they wanted to be badass, right? I'm a gamer, dude. I'm not 200 pounds. I don't look like a badass football player. But I am a very happy person, and I feel people can relate to that." An example of the team ethos? They wear hoodies and T-shirts colored sky blue and cloud-like white. "Bright, because that's how the game is. It's bright and makes everyone else feel happy," says Hai.

Now, post–lung collapse, Hai relaxes on his balcony near a hot tub that has been used just once or twice for parties. He talks about his sudden interest in working out at a local gym with Cloud9 member An "Balls" Le, a small, reserved guy who keeps extraordinarily fit. Hai began working out after his injury. "When guys grow up skinny and tall," he says, "they get these little air bubbles on their lungs. They could pop at any time. By working out, I'm trying to avoid being sick from now on. I'm still recovering." He'll never be able to do anything that involves dramatic pressure changes, such as deep-sea diving or high-altitude mountain hiking. He shrugs. "I probably wouldn't do that anyway."

Three months after the incident, Hai, though a speedy talker, still appears fragile. The team hasn't performed to expectations since the all-star event, and to make matters worse, a new team called LMQ is kicking serious ass and currently tops the standings.

Later, Meteos, who is celebrating his 21st birthday with a visit from his family, who made a feast for the team, sits on the balcony, praising Hai. Playing with him, Meteos says, is "super intense, because he's super decisive with his shot calling. He has a good idea of how to win games. He knows what we should be doing at almost any time." But, Meteos says, if things aren't going well during practice, Cloud9 can be involved in "lots of arguments about what we should be doing." That doesn't last long. "It can be a little stressful, but no one ever storms off and says 'Fuck this' or anything."

Just outside the apartment, owner-manager Etienne mentions he flew in from San Francisco to serve as a kind of father figure until Hai gets back up to speed. To boost morale, he does everything from grilling chicken and steaks for the team to taking them to see *22 Jump Street*. He even manages to organize a rare trip to the beach. "If they lose a match, there's less bickering when I'm here," Etienne says. "Hai's still getting stronger, but he's not there yet. He will be." There's hope in Etienne's eyes—along with the merest hint of desperation.

Beyond the apartment, beyond the beach, in this world of *League of Legends* everyone is counting on Hai. Even teams he battles weekly pull for him to recover—just not enough that Cloud9 will beat them.

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Although there were earlier experiments, competitive online gaming rose in popularity two decades ago. It took the popularity of 56K modems, which provided enough rudimentary bandwidth, to drag players en masse down the rabbit hole to play *Ultima Online, Doom, Quake* and, soon after, *Counter-Strike*.

Dennis "Thresh" Fong, the wiliest of professional gamers, began his dominance in 1993. He remembers the thrill of winning a Ferrari at E3 in Atlanta after a *Quake* tournament. It wasn't just any Ferrari. It was a hot red Ferrari 328 with Pirelli P7 tires and a removable roof panel. Not only that, it was owned by one of the geniuses behind *Doom* and *Quake,* John Carmack. "Carmack was pretty amazed," says Fong. "*Thresh* means to strike repeatedly. People coined this term *Thresh ESP* because it seemed like I was two or three steps ahead of my opponent—all the time. I was viewed as the Michael Jordan of video gaming." It's no brag. Thresh never lost a tournament, not once.

Today Fong, who still owns the Ferrari, has bought and sold various companies—enough to make him a multimillionaire—and

is now CEO of Raptr, a social community for online gamers. In a dark hotel lobby in downtown Los Angeles, Fong, whose company is about to release a survey stating that nearly 17 percent of all PC gamers are *League* players, says, "The success that pro gaming is seeing came a lot faster than I thought it would. The reason *League* appeals is because people on a mass level appreciate what goes into playing and winning." Now 70 percent of players watch *League* online.

Fong and others like him inspired Michael O'Dell, a former pro who owns Team Dignitas, one of the oldest competitive-gaming teams. O'Dell remembers his first sponsor offered his team $10,000 back in 2003. "It wasn't enough to support one player for a year, let alone a full team," he says. Once, he didn't have $3,000 to pay for the team's hotel rooms.

In 2007, DirecTV, British Sky Broadcasting and Asia's STAR TV put e-sports on cable with the Championship Gaming Series. They hired O'Dell, who eagerly hopped on the gravy train. His team won $500,000 in the world championships. "But they didn't do it right and spent $50 million on God knows what," says O'Dell. It wasn't just the lavish spending that led to the series' demise. It tanked because it focused more on the broadcast aspect than on player and fan needs.

With *League of Legends* e-sports, Etienne, O'Dell and other owner-managers feel their ship is about to come in. Etienne points to what he sees as a more dignified sponsor, the Air Force Reserve, which recently signed up with Cloud9. "It can only grow from here," says Etienne. A few years from now, O'Dell believes, e-sports will be massive. Megacorporations will buy the teams "for hundreds of millions of dollars." That's the hope, anyway. At that point, cautions O'Dell, the pros won't be as accessible. "They'll have security," he says. "Fans won't be able to get close to them like they do now."

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Mid-June 2014. Game day is a Saturday afternoon at a Manhattan Beach, California soundstage, and if you dare park in filmmaker Joss Whedon's spot, you will be towed immediately. Autograph-hungry teens await their *League* heroes outside stage 22. Inside the dressing rooms there's smack talk among the North American teams competing. This weekend the most compelling attraction is Team SoloMid, featuring Bjergsen, versus Cloud9, led by Hai. Despite their eminent stars, neither team has lived up to its potential. But it's Hai and Cloud9 upon whose shoulders lie the heaviest weights.

It's not a good day for Cloud9, not even close. During a 36-minute game, they fall behind, and once they do, they keep getting clobbered. You can see it on their hangdog faces as they battle. As Bjergsen and SoloMid shine, Cloud9 becomes sadder and sadder. Clearly Hai still isn't up to par. At one point he appears out of breath. They lose 21–8 and trudge the long walk to greet their fans as every team must do after a match. As the dark of the studio turns into the blinding sunlight of L.A., Hai tells teammate LemonNation, "I'm really sorry. I apologize."

Fans, though, seem to prop up Hai and the gang with cheery buoyancy about their chance to top the North American standings. "You'll win next time," says one girl to Hai. She pauses for a moment, then asks, "Can I take a selfie with you?" Hai obliges and manages a small smile. "You'll win next time," she tells him again.

Later, in the maze of spaces above the broadcast studio, Doublelift sits alone in the middle of the room. Even though CLG won, it was against a minor team, and Doublelift seems annoyed when he's offered congratulations. He's ready to blow off steam as well. "I do feel a lot of players don't deserve to be professional players, because they don't put in the practice time. But I'll tell you one thing—Cloud9 is the team to beat. They have a brotherhood that other teams don't have. When you play against them, you feel like you're playing against one person, not five. We fear no team but Cloud9 right now."

The weeks pass as quickly as a mouse click. Even though Cloud9 is improving, it is one of five teams, including Team SoloMid and Counter Logic Gaming, that are virtually tied in the standings. Beyond them all is LMQ, a Chinese team, named for its founder's wife, that moved to North America last year to vanquish the U.S. teams. The team had financial problems and sketchy ownership issues throughout the year, but those outward pressures never reveal themselves during competition. In July LMQ seems utterly unstoppable. On message boards, some fans expressed surprise that LMQ, a foreign team, was allowed to play in the U.S. at all. But Riot allows any amateurs a chance to make the pros through a series of playoffs. Brandon Beck puts LMQ's dominance in perspective: "Last year Cloud9 completely blew out everyone else when they were new. With LMQ it's like a new pitcher in baseball. You have to figure out how to hit their pitches."

As the season ends in August, Cloud9 has indeed figured out the new pitcher to mount an amazing comeback. Hai is completely well, and everyone is performing together like a well-oiled machine, annihilating foes with an accuracy and speed they haven't seen since February. When the regular season is done, Cloud9 has tied LMQ. They're headed to the nerdy Pax Prime game conference in Seattle to be one of six teams that will compete in the North American regional finals for one of three spots at the world finals in South Korea and a whopping $1 million team prize.

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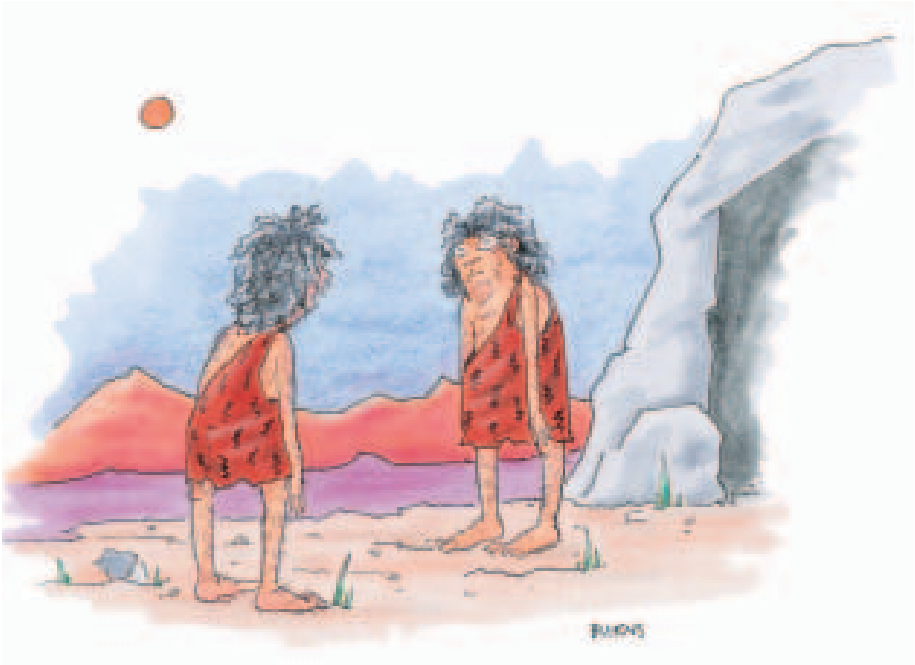
Late August. Thousands of fans file into the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle for the North American finals. Outside, a man wearing a floppy-eared Teemo hat buys loose joints from a grungy couple. The overflowing audience spills into the streets, giving the atmosphere a festival vibe, and viewing parties spontaneously spring up at local bars such as the Pine Box, a former funeral home.

Inside, the thousands in attendance stand in stunned silence, thundersticks by their sides. Counter Logic Gaming has fallen to Team Dignitas. Onstage, CLG leader Doublelift appears older, haggard, tired. With the defeat, he and his team now have to beat powerful amateurs or face relegation, banishment from the *League* forever. Meanwhile, across the world in South Korea, Faker and his SKT team, both slumping, go down to a *(concluded on page 137)*



*"We're screwed—the women just invented something called a 'headache.'"*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savvy Samsung White team, meaning SKT won't be attending the world finals either.

*League of Legends* and e-sports seem to be stumbling too as a year of growing pains pile up all at once. Bjergsen was fined $2,000 by a highly concerned Riot Games for trying to persuade a player to change teams, and some pros privately feel the penalty is too low. Behind the scenes, some are calling for player unionization, a scenario to which Riot Games CEO Beck doesn't know how to respond. Riot is also contending with the meteoric rise of a challenger, *Defense of the Ancients 2*. The first version of *Defense of the Ancients* was among Riot's inspirations for *League of Legends*, and Valve Corporation, *DOTA 2*'s seasoned publisher, is vying to topple *League* from its throne. And everyone is still reeling from a South Korean pro's attempted suicide by leaping from a 12-story building after his manager pressured him to throw games. "It's still a bit like the Wild West out there," admits Team Dignitas's O'Dell.

None of this matters to the thousands inside the convention center who are now screaming louder than ever. Cloud9 handily wins its first game against Bjergsen and Team SoloMid, and pundits are predicting a 3–0 shutout. But TSM parries, led by Bjergsen. By game five, Hai and Balls appear twitchy, a slight panic in their eyes. Jason "WildTurtle" Tran takes advantage of Cloud9's missteps with four successive kills (a "quadrakill"), and TSM prevails. Hai and Cloud9 are beaten after a close, five-hour, five-game match against Bjergsen and TSM, who are now the North American champions.

As TSM celebrates onstage under swirling lights and artificial fog, Hai sits alone backstage, angry, reddening, dejected. "It's about pride," he spews. Nonetheless, as one of the top three teams, Cloud9, along with TSM and LMQ, is heading to South Korea for the world finals and a chance to win the $1 million team prize. Hai knows Cloud9 has to stay focused. The teams will vie in a sold-out 60,000-seat stadium that was home to the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Seoul will be louder than Paris, the groupies more numerous and the hometown fans less hospitable to any North American team.

Cloud9 leaves the next day for Korea, where the team plans to practice and scrim 12 hours a day. "It's like boot camp," says Hai. Bjergsen and TSM are at it too. Bjergsen, now meditating for focus, has removed his beloved dog from the team house so it won't be a distraction. Becoming supremely triumphant by bringing home the $1 million team prize weighs on their minds, anvil heavy. Winning the big one would mean financial stability for the team, the possibility of being remembered, even the hope of being respected by their parents for a life spent playing video games. All it takes is 50 fingers of brilliance, locked on mice and keyboards, *click-click-click*ing.