# Michigan VFW Posts Video Game Event Attracts Hundreds

## For the second year in a row, VFW Post 4113, in St. Johns, Mich., hosted Combo Con, an event that brings together gamers and fans of cosplay, movies and comics to raise money for the Post

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Repetitive keyboard clicks and sudden, synchronized shouts of awe echo through a Michigan VFW Post as video gamers wage war against one another while others, some dressed as characters from gamer culture, gather around a large display monitor to watch the action unfold — all in an effort to raise money for veterans.

More than 250 people converged this summer at VFW Post 4113 in St. Johns, Mich., roughly 25 miles north of Lansing, for its second Combo Con — a two-day fundraiser featuring video game competitions, cosplay (dressing up as characters from popular culture) and special guests from the fighter-game community.It raised more than $2,500 for the Post.

Hunter DeSander, the 25-year-old commander of VFW Post 4113, is the brainchild behind Combo Con. A fan of gaming since his youth, DeSander's passion continued during his military
service, and he saw that gaming was "still a predominant thing" that brought people together.

While there are similar, nationally recognized events in the state, DeSander said he wanted to bring that "thrill of competition" to St. Johns. DeSander said he presented the idea for Combo Con to the Post because he likes to "go outside the norms." While he said events like honor guard services and flag-raising ceremonies are "amazing," there is not a big correlation between VFW and video gaming.

"I thought, let's try and branch out, see if we can make something happen, and, in the long run, we did," said DeSander, who served in Afghanistan in 2013 with the 2nd Bn., 506th

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Inf., 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Abn. Div., as an infantryman.

'A CHANCE TO BRIDGE THE GAP'

Most of the volunteers assisting gamers at the event, according to DeSander, were VFW members, and, as Post commander, he said he was able to bring the two communities together.

"As sort of the liaison between the veteran community and the fighter game community, I had a chance to bridge the gap," DeSander said. "We are willing to explore boundaries and defy expectations, and we recognize you guys as a community and in turn when you think of gaming, Combo Con [is] the place that helps veterans."

Post 4113 trustee Gary Price, who served during the Vietnam War from 1967-68 on the USS Colleton ABP-36 with the Mobile Riverine Force, was a volunteer at this year's event. He said he liked the idea of Combo Con and that DeSander "has a way of getting things together for fundraisers."

One draw for attendees was having special guests from the gaming community. This year, DeSander brought in Kenny O'Brien, known as Unrooolie in the fighter-game community, and Woolie Madden. O'Brien, who has been involved with gaming since the mid-1990s, said DeSander reached out to him online about appearing at Combo Con.

That Combo Con raises money to help veterans is one of the "main reasons" O'Brien wanted to be involved. Friends of his — and members of the fighter-game community — have served in the military.

"We get a lot of messages from community members that are like, 'Hey, I'm stationed over here, and we watch your [online video] streams and we watch you play fighting games, and it's helped us get through tough times,'" O'Brien said.

Additionally, Madden said because Combo Con is "half tournament, half convention," the format is unique.

"This is a combination of both of those things, and furthermore, you add a cause on top of it, and it just becomes a good event that's absolutely worth supporting," Madden said.

Having a cause connected to the event also sets Combo Con apart, according to Madden.

"It's a very unique thing in the fighting-game community to see these sort of events having any sort of charity associated [with them]," Madden said. "And in this case, it's all the reason to do the things that you love, the things you have fun with and are passionate about, and you know that it's going toward a worthy cause. That's the best."

Stephen Parker, of Davison, Mich., attended Combo Con for the first time this year. He said he heard about the event through a podcast Madden was on. Parker, whose hometown is St. Johns, drove the roughly 60 miles with his stepbrother for the two-day event.

“It’s a good cause, of course,” said Parker, whose father, stepfather and grandfather all have served in the military. “It’s a great way to both have fun and raise money for charity.”

GAMBLING ON GAMING
Post 4113’s membership is mostly Korean and Vietnam War-era veterans who, according to DeSander, don’t play video games. Video games are “still seen as a very juvenile thing,” DeSander said.

“They had to take the gamble on believing me and trying to get this off the ground,” DeSander said.

Larry Varney, a member of Post 4113 who served in Vietnam from 1966-67 with the Army’s 25th Infantry Division, has volunteered at both Combo Con events. He said the fact that the event brings people into the Post “means an awful lot.”

When doors opened for the first event in 2017, “a swarm of 50 people” walked in, he said. Attendance reached 250 on the first day. The inaugural event took about two-and-a-half months to plan, according to DeSander, including promotion and obtaining sponsors. Three hundred people attended, ranging in age from 8 years old to participants in their mid-30s.

“It was something that crossed state [lines] and even the Canadian border,” DeSander said.

The 2017 Combo Con raised about $3,700 after expenses. Post members used the proceeds for construction and maintenance of their facility.

This year’s event brought in $2,500 after expenses. DeSander said the money raised will go toward veterans in need, the Post itself for “better quality of life and environment” and more community-based events and interactions.

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