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A Long Time Coming

Brian David-Marshall
The Week That Was
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This past weekend saw Grand Prix events take place in Vienna, Austria and Austin, Texas. They were the first major events to feature *Champions of Kamigawa* in sanctioned play. Day one of each event was Sealed Deck with the Top 64 players advancing to a day Two Rochester Draft -- at least that was the plan, anyway.

Vienna was besieged by Magic players from all over Europe and they had just under 1,000 players show up. While by no means the largest event that Europe has seen over the past two years, it was still an impressive figure -- so high, in fact, that the Top 128 players advanced to the Rochester tables. When the event came down to a final match, it was between Pro Tour stalwart Antoine Ruel and the previously anonymous local Nikolaus Eigner. Eigner's green-black spirit deck managed to pull off the upset over Ruel and his excellent blue-red deck.

Ruel was up one game and looked to be in a great position in the second game when *Devouring Greed* off the top of Eigner's deck let the local player win a game that seemed otherwise hopeless. He managed to win the final game with a *Serpent Skinned Kodama of the South Tree* while Ruel was still scuffling for land.

With a nod to Spirit Week, *Devouring Greed* was just one of many cards that had a chance to perform under the spotlight of a high-profile event this weekend. There had been some talk about it on various websites but it was not until this weekend that people got to see it in action. I know that the day after the Prerelease, Ken Krouner sent me an instant message and claimed it was the second-best common in the set (behind *Glacial Ray*). I sort of rolled my virtual eyes at the time, but as I gain experience with the set I have been playing it more and more often. I have not yet had the opportunity to pick it first but I have taken it as high as second. It has more than lived up to Kartin' Ken's advanced scouting report.



Another card that has been talked about extensively was *Nagao, Bound by Honor*. This was not an overlooked gem and it was generally acknowledged as one the top uncommons in the new set. In Austin, five of the Top 8 sealed decks -- including all four undefeated decks -- featured the legendary samurai in their main deck. This card exceeded all the early hype and the phenomenal success of white samurai decks during the sealed deck portion of the event led to many messy Rochester Draft tables throughout Sunday, as players were hotly contesting white everywhere you looked. Everywhere but the final table, that is.

The *Grand Prix-Austin* field featured just under 400 players and when that event was honed down to a final match, it was again between a relative unknown and a Pro Tour-caliber player. Jon Sonne has a current string of money finishes and was probably the most prominent member of the TOGIT/CMU crowd without an championship trophy on his proverbial mantle. He drafted a powerhouse red-white deck with **four** copies of *Cage of Hands*.

It says something about the depth of white that Jon had four copies of what many pundits consider the best white common and there were still two other decks that were at least half white at the final table. One of those players was finalist Eugene Levin, a Los Angeles-based Pro Tour aspirant who nudged *Blessed Breath* a little bit higher on everyone's pick orders with his Houdini-like use of the card in the Top 8. While three players drafting white might seem like the color was contested, consider this: I witnessed one draft where five out of six players in a row took white cards out of the same pack.

Sonne took out Levin in two games to earn \$2,400 and the Grand Prix trophy. It was a long time coming for the TOGIT star. While Jon has made the Top 8 of a Grand Prix before and has several high Pro Tour finishes to his credit, he had never won a major event. Sonne is known as a deliberate player, and like YMG's Dave Humpherys, would often find himself saddled with unfinished matches going to time. Over the past year or so he seems to have made a conscious effort to hasten the pace of his play and it has shown in his results.

I spoke to Jon about his success, his reputation, and the extraordinary base of players that have emerged from Somerville, N.J., at a little store known as TOGIT.



Jon Sonne took home \$2,400 with his victory.



BDM: How do you feel about your reputation as a "deliberate" player (i.e., sloooooow)? Do you feel it is deserved and have you changed? If so, how did you accomplish that?

Sonne: I definitely used to play more slowly because I felt that I could always beat the other player by making less mistakes. That was at the PTQ level, though. At the pro level playing slowly isn't going to help you that much because your opponent will have that time to think. It's actually often more likely for your opponent to mess up when you play faster at the higher levels. I started trying to play faster when I realized it was hurting my performances with too many draws. For over a year at least I think I've been playing at a good pace and haven't really gotten draws in a while. My overall performance has also been much better in the past year, finishing in the money at almost every event. I don't know how much this is related to playing faster but it has certainly helped some.

BDM: When did you start playing **Magic** and how did that happen?

Sonne: I started playing around when *Fallen Empires* came out. Early '95 people at school were playing and I just got into it.

BDM: When did you first realize you might be good at the game -- not just FNM good but win-a-Grand-Prix good?

Sonne: I always knew I was good but I felt like the Pro Tour was on this other level that I couldn't possibly compete on. I played in local tournaments for several years and never even attempted a PTQ. Then I saw that people I was beating at the local level were sometimes winning PTQs and I started thinking maybe it wasn't that hard. As soon as I started playing in PTQs around *Masques* block summer I got much better and started winning PTQs with States and Regionals wins following later that year. But there was still another level that I couldn't break, and that was success on the Pro Tour. It was this huge shock coming out of the PTQ, where everyone was terrible, into the Pro Tour. I didn't have a team really so my constructed decks were not good enough for the Pro Tour at first. After the first year I got a good team together with Scott McCord and Eric Ziegler. I really wanted to do well on the PT and the team format seemed like the easiest place to get an advantage by practice. We did so many drafts that summer and eventually it seemed like we couldn't lose. Just before the *Invasion* team Pro Tour we did a draft against team Alpha-Beta-Unlimited, which was considered the best team at the time. We 3-0'd them and then I thought we would win the Pro Tour for sure. We ended up in 6th and that was when I first felt like I could win at the Pro level.

BDM: How did you get hooked up with the TOGIT squad?

Sonne: This was a long process where all the good players in New Jersey eventually ended up playing in the TOGIT group. Over several years everyone in the current group got better and better and moved from the PTQ scene to the train. We all knew each other from local tournaments going back many years but it wasn't until about three years ago that the team was really together.

BDM: When did you realize that that collection of players was really good?

Sonne: I guess when Eugene (Harvey) made the National team and then Osyp (Lebedowicz) made Top 8 of Osaka I realized they were very good. The next year saw Eugene winning Nationals and making his own PT Top 8 and Osyp winning Venice. That kind of solidified their status as top American players.

BDM: What makes TOGIT different from other groups of American players?

Sonne: We practice, I guess. I don't know how much practice other Americans do but many claim to have just shown up at the PT without any practice. Another thing about TOGIT is that we are friends, too. We play basketball and hang out so there is more trust I think than some teams.

BDM: How did you prepare for the GP?

Sonne: I did several drafts and played at the prerelease. There really wasn't much time for anything else.

BDM: What was your strategy coming into the tournament for *Osyp's win in Venice showed TOGIT was a force.* Sealed Deck?

Sonne: I didn't really have a specific strategy but I had some guidelines that I used. I wanted to play two colors if possible because most of the losses I have seen in sealed have been due to mana screw, mana flood, or color screw. For the same reason I wanted to go second hoping to smooth out my draw and mess up my opponent's. I also wanted to play any discard if I could to strip my opponent's bombs out of their hand just before they were cast.

BDM: What about Rochester Draft?

Sonne: I didn't really have a plan for Rochester other than to be in the open colors. I wanted to go white if I could but I wasn't going to force it. Also I had my pick order decided ahead of time so I wouldn't get stuck in the middle of the draft. There are a lot of skills in Rochester but they are generally universal to Rochester Draft so I won't get into that. Experience in Rochester Draft two years ago will help you this year.

BDM: Did you learn anything about *Champions of Kamigawa* Limited over the course of the tournament that you did not know coming in? And if so...what?

Sonne: You don't need bombs to win and you can beat bombs with some of the commons. Don't be afraid of your opponent's bombs. They often die before they can cast them.



BDM: This was the first major tournament you have won. Can you describe how that feels?

Sonne: It didn't really feel great to be honest. I felt like this GP was so easy that once I was in Top 8, I would not have been content without a win. It was almost like I was obligated to win as far as my friends were concerned. If I had not won I know I would never hear the end of it. Also I didn't play a single pro the entire tournament.

BDM: Your first major tournament win comes after the point in life that many players consider the death of the tournament player -- having a full-time job. How do you balance **Magic**, a job, and a social life?

Sonne: Well I don't play as much as I probably should and I don't do that much else because there just isn't time. I actually skipped Nationals this year so I could spend all my time playing basketball. So it's definitely not easy to find time.

BDM: You said you knew you were going to win the tournament the evening before Day Two. Can you describe that sensation, and whether or not you have ever felt like that before?

Sonne: It's kind of hard to describe but I just knew I was going to win. I think it was partly this arrogance where I felt like I couldn't lose to all the local and non-pro players. I was 7-1 after Day One and I was almost sure I would 3-0 my first table because there was nobody I recognized, and I was sure I would get at least one win at the second table. And I thought there would be lots of amateurs in the Top 8 so I would crush them. I basically visualized exactly what ended up happening the night before.

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BDM: What is your role within the TOGIT structure? What are you doing to prepare for Columbus within the group?

Sonne: I trash talk Craig (Krepels) and Pat (Sullivan) until I get them to play basketball. For Columbus I'm working on my reverse dunk.

BDM: So many of the TOGIT players are associated with having outrageous personalities. You are much more reserved than say...Gerard Fabiano, Osyp, or Craig. How do you fit in with that group? Are you the official TOGIT straight man?

Sonne: I guess I don't enjoy being ridiculous like Craig or Osyp.

BDM: How do you plan to prepare for Nagoya?

Sonne: Probably just do a lot of drafts.

BDM: Why did it take so long for you to have a "breakout" tournament?

Sonne: It took a while to be able to have the focus necessary. There have been so many GPs before where I needed one win for Top 8 and I would make one mistake and there would go my chance. For a long time when you play on the PT level, you can play well for the first four or five or maybe eight rounds but then fatigue sets in and you start making mistakes. This year I have been focusing a lot more so fatigue doesn't start causing mistakes.

BDM: Were you actually slow-rolling Levin or did you just not notice that he only had one card in hand?

Sonne: He had a bunch of cards in hand for a while. On the last turn I drew a burn spell and he was at 2 and I knew he had **Blessed Breath** in hand and only one white open. I cast **Cage of Hands** on his Dragon to tap him out. I didn't even check how many cards he had in hand.

BDM: Can you describe how the draft played out? When did you realize white was clear for you? How did you know to take red?

Sonne: I knew from pack one when I got **Kabuto Moth** third. Neil (Reeves) made me nervous for a little while by not committing to a second color besides green. The guy in seat 1 was red-black and Neil was green and I was white in seat 3 with black on my other side. Red or blue were really my only options for a second color. I jumped on red because it's better, less color-intensive than blue, and Neil couldn't cut me when the guy in seat 1 was also red. So Neil ended up green-blue and I got white-red in excellent position. If you were one of three white drafters at a table and you got to pick where the other two white players were...that's where they were in the Top 8 for me.

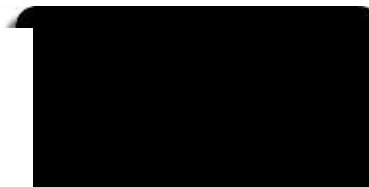
BDM: Most overrated card in the set for Limited?

Sonne: I don't really know what cards people think are good. But for the most part the cards people think are good are good.

BDM: Most underrated?

Sonne: **Waking Nightmare**.

BDM: Who will be the next TOGIT player to win a major event for the first time?



Sonne: I think Adam Horvath will win an event next. He has had an excellent season last year and I think he might be breaking out with a win soon.


Good Play of the Week

In the semifinal round of Grand Prix–Austin, Eugene Levin was facing off against Gerry Thompson in game 1 of their match. Gerry had enough mana on the board to activate his **Matsu-Tribe Decoy** four times and compel Levin's entire team to block it -- letting the rest of Thompson's creatures get in for lethal damage. Levin thought about his play for a while and finally cast **Blessed Breath** and used the activated ability of his **Kami of the Waning Moon** to give the Decoy fear so he did not have to block it. He then gave a key blocker protection from green and was able to safely block and keep that creature alive. He cracked back for the win on his turn with all of Thompson's mana and creatures tapped.



Bad Beat of the Week

Most players wish they could sit down at a Rochester Draft table with friendly players on either side of them. Osyp Lebedowicz got his wish this past weekend when he sat down between Kate Stavola and Neil Reeves. Both are friends of his and familiar with the complex unspoken politics of Rochester Draft.

As the early packs played out it became obvious that he was going to be green-white with some mix of the other three colors on either side of him. Things were looking up for Osyp as he snagged a **Nagao, Bound by Honor** and **Myojin of Cleansing Fire** early in the first round of packs -- a good thing, since Osyp was locked into green-white at this point by the picks on either side of him. 

Osyp looked on in horror -- and eventually had to burst out laughing -- as his Myojin pick was followed by four of the next five players taking white cards from that pack and then having three of those players take green on the way back. Osyp was committed to green-white and had no easy way out of the color. Three of the other four players remained equally committed to white and Osyp found himself short of high-quality cards.

He ended up going 2-1 in his pod but lost to Jacob Sklar, who had what seemed like half-a-dozen **Kitsune Blademasters** -- any one of which would have improved Osyp's deck immeasurably. Osyp finished in 13th place and was one win short of the Top 8 with his subpar deck from the last draft.

A Look Back at the Weeks That Were

One of the things we endeavor to do in this column is bring you who made the Top 8 in the past weekend's PTQs. Behind the scenes, Greg Collins and I spend a lot of time talking about how to bring you more statistics about **Magic** players and provide as much information as we can to the readers.

One of the things that occurred to us was that while players who make the Top 8 of multiple PTQs are at the top of their level of play, there was almost no recognition paid to that achievement. I remember when Jordan Berkowitz had his breakout tournament in Venice, it seemed to many players that he came out of nowhere. I was hardly surprised because I had watched Jordan dominate the PTQ circuit on the East Coast for the previous year, almost qualifying at will.

I thought it would be interesting to take a look back and see how many players made the Top 8 of multiple events. With the tireless help of Wizards of the Coast Events Logistics Coordinator Tom Ko, we culled all the North American PTQ Top 8s from June 28, 2003 to October 2, 2004, which represented qualifying tournaments from all the individual PTs from San Diego right up until Nagoya. The list of everyone who reached the Top 8 of a PTQ at least three times can be found [here](#).

There are a number of familiar names, including Josh Ravitz, Bill Macey, Mitch Tamblyn, Nate Heiss, Eric Taylor, Patrick Sullivan, Billy Postlethwait, and Gadiel Szleifer. GP-Austin Top 8ers Gerry Thompson, Michael Jacob, Mike Thompson and Eugene Levin are also on the list, along with some other names that you will undoubtedly be hearing more about in the coming months.

There were three players who actually reached the Top 8 of a PTQ nine separate times during that period of time. Ervin Tormos, Robert Swarowski, and Brent Kaskel accomplished that feat each, with only one PTQ victory to show for it. I do not know Tormos, but Kaskel was featured a couple of times during the Grand Prix–Austin coverage and is considered to be one of the better young players from Texas.

One of the game's elder statesman, Eric "EDT" Taylor, has been in the Top 8 eight times over that span of time also with one win. Adam Prosak is a name that keeps popping up when we post PTQ Top 8s in this column, and he too had eight such appearances but with a pair of victories.

As for the this past weekend . . . congratulations to Zev Gurwitz (his deck had four **Kabuto Moth** and three **Cage of Hands** in the Top 8) and everyone else who won a PTQ. If your event is missing from this list, you need to bug your local organizer to get the results in quicker.

Event City	Event Date	Event TO	Attendance
Chicago (PT Qualifier)	10/9/2004	Barratt Moy	92
Finish: 1. Lucas Duchow; 2. Cyrus Rashtchian; 3. Andy Crivello; 4. Adam Kugler; 5. Jake Anderson; 6. Steve Downing; 7. Eddie Anderson; 8. Andrew Beland			

Salt Lake City (PT Qualifier)	10/9/2004	Chris Scanlon	50
Finish: 1. John Dearing; 2. Nathan Jerman; 3. Sammy Batarseh; 4. Ben Hakanson; 5. Eric Twarog; 6. Alex Sittner; 7. Kyle Felter; 8. Aaron Muranaka			
New York City (PT Qualifier)	10/9/2004	Glen Friedman	89
Finish: 1. Zev Gurwitz; 2. Steven Cohen; 3. Christian Calcano; 4. Peter York; 5. Timothy McKenna; 6. David Wallin; 7. Anthony Impellizzieri; 8. Michael Flores			
Charlotte, N.C. (PT Qualifier)	10/9/2004	Jim Bailey	71
Finish: 1. James McCoy; 2. Michael Krzywicki; 3. Clint Hays; 4. Daniel Jenkins; 5. Adam Racht; 6. Ken Kamihara; 7. Scott Cely; 8. Joseph Greer			
Waterloo, Ontario (PT Qualifier)	10/9/2004	Marvin Paguirigan	74
Finish: 1. Jingpeng Zhang; 2. Kyle Smith; 3. Steve Tomik; 4. Matthew Vienneau; 5. Darryl Gardner; 6. Ryan Leslie; 7. Steven Wolfman; 8. Jon Boutin			
Kansas City (PT Qualifier)	10/9/2004	Steve Ferrell	40
Finish: 1. Nate Spilker; 2. Sean Mangner; 3. Kelly Wichert; 4. Oren Gamble; 5. Kevin Hollon; 6. Kevin Vanhoy; 7. Gabriel Sanderson; 8. Bodie Manly			
Austin, Texas (PT Qualifier)	10/10/2004	Tim Weissman	104
Finish: 1. Adam Gendelman; 2. Tony Menzer; 3. Kyle Dunne; 4. Eric Johnson; 5. Mikhail Karasoulis; 6. Phil Jones; 7. Tracey Steele; 8. James Fulgium			

Firestarters

Welcome to a new feature in The Week That Was, where we'll take a topic discussed in the column and pose it to you, the readers, for your unfettered opinions. This week's Firestarter:

Ken Krouner called *Glacial Ray* and *Devouring Greed* the two best commons in *Champions of Kamigawa*. What do you think the top commons are in the new set?

Click on the "Discuss a Long Time Coming" link below to start a fire on our message boards!

*Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is *Top8Magic.com*, the publishing house that is releasing *Michael J. Flores: Deckade*.*



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