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# Far East Insights

Brian David-Marshall · *The Week That Was*  
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For the last few years, it has seemed like every week here at **Magicthegathering.com** has been Japan Week as Japanese players continue to dominate the tournament headlines week after week. From Tsuyoshi Fujita's Worlds-bending Goblin Bidding deck to Masahiro Kuroda finally bursting past the silver medal round on Sunday to Shu Komuro joining the ranks of Pro Tour victors, Japanese players are here to stay.

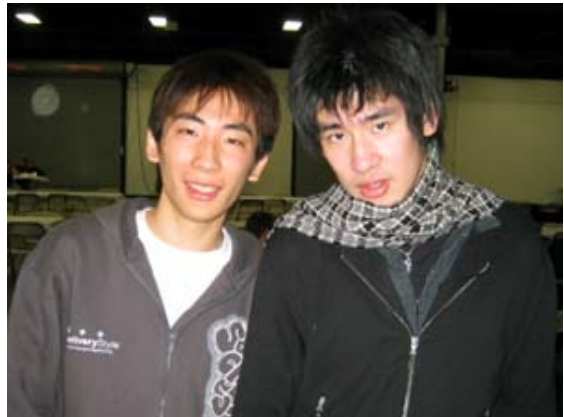
I had the opportunity to talk to four of the hottest names on the Japanese **Magic** scene (with the invaluable translation assistance of Ron Foster) about the history, current state, and future of the game in Japan. Both Pro Tour winners from that country, Kuroda and Komuro, were joined by recent Grand Prix winner Masashi Oiso and Grand Prix superstar Masahiko Morita.

**BDM:** *Over the past couple of years, Japan has become one of the hottest countries on the competitive **Magic** scene. What was the key moment in Japan's rise to this position?*

**Oiso:** Personally, I feel the watershed event in Japanese **Magic** history was when Tsuyoshi Fujita made Top 8 at Pro Tour-Tokyo. He was the first Japanese player to make Day 3 of a Pro Tour -- he broke the barrier for all of us.

**Morita:** I think the biggest reason for this is that we (Japanese players) have been able to interact more with players from overseas. Also, the fact that some Japanese players have made Day 3 of a Pro Tour is also important -- it shows the rest of us it can be done.

**Kuroda:** I think it was when Tsuyoshi Fujita took second place at Pro Tour-Tokyo. For the longest time, making Top 8 at a Pro Tour was a dream for all Japanese players. Fujita made that dream a reality, and in doing so, gave hope to the rest of us. It was a momentous occasion.



Oiso, left, and Morita both made the Top 8 at GP-Boston.

**BDM:** *How much playtesting do you typically put in for any given event?*

**Morita:** I usually start after the previous event is finished, so about a month or so.

**Oiso:** With a Pro Tour, if it's Constructed I usually spend a month or more practicing. I play a lot of Limited anyway, so I only put in a few weeks right before the event. I usually try to juggle my GP practice with my Pro Tour playtesting.

**Kuroda:** Once upon a time, I practiced every day for at least a month. Now that I have a full-time job, I don't have that kind of time anymore, so I cram as much playtesting as I can into the week before the event.

**BDM:** *Do you test live or online?*

**Oiso:** I do all of my Constructed and most of my Limited testing live. I don't have enough cards online to be able to really practice.

**Morita:** Live. I play MTGO just for fun.

**Kuroda:** About once a month on a Saturday or Sunday, I get together with my teammates and we practice together. Since it's difficult for me with my job and duties as a parent, to get out to meet people, I spend a lot of time practicing online--about 2-3 times a week.

**BDM:** How do you feel that a player can best develop technically excellent play?

**Oiso:** The best way for a player to develop is to play a lot! However, I think it's also important to be able to watch other people and pick up on what they know. I think a good way to improve your own play is to watch other people, see what they do that's different from you, and then adopt what they've done into your own style.

If you want to improve your ability to win at premier events, while it's important to practice with people at your own level, I think it's even more important to play with people who are better than you. Best of all would be a pro player who's better than you. That way, you can learn what you're lacking that you need to win.

**Komuro:** While having a stronger player to practice with is important, I think being able to play with people at the same level is also a good way to improve your overall game.

**Kuroda:** I think it's good to have teammates who will point out your mistakes for you. Also, you can learn things from teammates that you might not think of on your own, and that's important to develop as a player as well. You can't do everything on your own. I agree that having a strong player in a community to look up to and learn from is important.

**BDM:** Who are the current top 5 Magic players in Japan? Why?

**Oiso:** *Tsuyoshi Fujita:* Personally, I think he's the best Constructed player in Japan. *Itaru Ishida:* While his overall resume is obviously impressive, he is probably the best Team Rochester player in the world -- I don't think anyone has been more consistent. *Masahiko Morita:* Since he hasn't played in many overseas events, he hasn't left a big mark on the Pro Tour yet, but I think that's just a matter of time. *Katsuhiro Mori:* He and I are teammates, and I've learned that no matter the format, he's good at it. *Osamu Fujita:* He is one of the pillars of the Kansai community, and has consistently posted high tournament finishes.

**Komuro:** *Tsuyoshi Fujita:* He is a leader of the Magic community, and pushes everyone to get better. *Osamu Fujita:* He has a great passion for the game. *Itaru Ishida:* One of the best Team Rochester players in the world. *Masashi Oiso:* I think he is the best player in Japan. *Masahiko Morita:* His consistency with GPs is phenomenal.

**Morita:** *Tsuyoshi Fujita:* He often puts together decks that no one else has thought of (or didn't think were good) and wins with them. I think that's amazing. *Itaru Ishida:* I can't even begin to try to do what he does with Team Rochester.

He's truly remarkably. *Masashi Oiso:* No one would argue about this one, I think. He's made Day 3 of a PT four times. At the rate he's going this year, I feel he'll end up as Player of the Year. *Akira Asahara:* One of the most successful, out-of-the-box deckbuilders. *Jin Okamoto:* I've watched him play a lot, and he's always very calm and relaxed. I can't remember him ever making a mistake.

**Kuroda:** *Masahiko Morita:* He makes the money at just about every tournament he plays in. He is amazingly consistent. I don't think I've ever seen him not make Day 2 at a GP. Having him on your side at a Team GP is reassuring. He can also play just about any deck you give him -- he's good at both Limited and Constructed. *Masashi Oiso:* A world-class player. What's impressive



*Kuroda has made the Top 8 in the last two Japanese Pro Tour stops.*



*Tsuyoshi Fujita was on each player's list of top 5 players in Japan.*

about him is not just that he plays so fast, but that he's almost always right. I'm surprised he hasn't won a Pro Tour yet. *Akira Asahara*: He is a remarkable person, not just because of his tournament record, but because he has a great personality that allows him to be liked by everyone. I would pay money to use one of his decks. Unfortunately, he has yet to make Top 8 of a Pro Tour, but I have a feeling it won't be long until he does. *Tsuyoshi Fujita*: Probably the most enthusiastic Japanese player. His love of **Magic** is second to none. He is definitely the leader of the Osakan **Magic** community, and keeps it vital. I imagine I will continue to get help from him in the future regarding deck choice and metagame analysis. *Itaru Ishida*: I think he understands **Magic** better than almost anyone. I played against him at GP Osaka, and I saw firsthand how good he is -- when he's at his best, no one can beat him. I'm regarded as an expert at team format, but I just get by with the help of my teammates. Ishida runs the entire draft -- I can't even begin to imagine how he does that.

**BDM**: *Who is the next great Japanese player the rest of the world has not heard of yet?*

**Oiso**: Takeshi Tsumura. He's now on the gravy train, and I'm expecting something big from him.

**Komuro**: Hopefully me.

**Morita**: I'd like to say Go Anan, but he's probably already famous now. Still, I think he's destined for great things.

**BDM**: *What is the story with Go Anan?*

**Morita**: He's a good friend, fun to talk to. Putting his name on all the deck lists actually started out as a joke. We do practice together a lot, though.

**Oiso**: Go Anan is a player from Osaka, although he lives in Boston now. He was friends with almost everyone in Osaka, and so Tsuyoshi Fujita and Osamu Fujita started putting his name on their decklists. That's how he became famous.

**Komuro**: He is a player from Osaka, who is currently studying abroad in Boston. I don't really know much about him, but I think people are trying to make him famous.

**Kuroda**: Anan is a teammate of mine who used to practice with everyone at Adept. I've known him since he first started playing, and he's gotten really good. We started putting his name down on all of our decks, but we had no idea our little joke would get so big.

**BDM**: *Historically, who is most important figures in Japanese Magic?*

**Oiso**: I'm not that familiar with the history of **Magic** in Japan -- I only started playing in the last few years. I do know that Tsuyoshi Fujita and Masashiro Kuroda will definitely be in the annals. They opened the doors for all of us.

**Morita**: Tsuyoshi Fujita, because through him the Japanese community has been able to interact with members of the foreign player community.

**Komuro**: The most important person I can think of is Tsuyoshi Fujita. He was the first Japanese player to make Top 8 of a Pro Tour, and has remained one at the forefront of Japanese **Magic** since then.

**Kuroda**: The late Muneo Shibata. Many years ago, there were only three Level 3 judges in Japan, and he was one of them. He opened a card shop called "Adept" in Osaka, and worked hard to train young players so they could compete on an international level. Among Adept "graduates" are Tsuyoshi Fujita, Masahiko Morita, Osamu Fujita, Shuhei Nakamura, and myself. If it hadn't been for him, we wouldn't be here. My lasting regret is that none of us were able to get a title while he was still alive.



*Oiso was one of three Japanese to make Top 8 at PT-Columbus.*



*Kuroda's victory in Kobe was the first PT win for a Japanese player.*

**BDM:** *In the past, Japanese players have been notorious as "hate drafters." I noticed that at the last couple of high-level draft events players have emphasized that they will not hate draft. Was the perception in the past fair?*

**Oiso:** I only recently started playing on the Pro Tour, but I've never been told by someone that I or other Japanese players hate drafted.

**Komuro:** I think maybe some Japanese players hate drafted, but only a few. The majority try to cooperate with their opponents and play nice, I think.

**Morita:** I don't know, because I only started going to the Pro Tour recently. I've heard stories about how Japanese players hate drafted, though.

**Kuroda:** I think maybe so. However, most of my close friends don't habitually hate draft. It maybe something that was limited to people who won qualifiers and went to the Pro Tour.

**BDM:** *If so, what made hate drafting such a popular strategy?*

**Komuro:** Probably because no one wants their opponent to get a bomb and beat them with it.

**Kuroda:** In Japan, there's a perception that if you can cut off other people, you're a good **Magic** player. So, a lot of people believe that if they hate draft, they'll be perceived as high-level players, so then everyone started doing it.

**BDM:** *What led to the current change in philosophy?*

**Kuroda:** I don't think there's been a change in philosophy. It's just that people like Oiso, who don't hate draft, have started winning. There are still a lot of people who hate draft.

**BDM:** *Sticking with the topic of worldwide perception for the moment, how do you feel about the widely held belief that Japanese players don't bluff or play headgames with their opponents?*

**Oiso:** I think it's true that there are not a lot of players that will readily bluff, but I don't believe that Japanese are particularly bad at it or don't do it at all.

**Komuro:** I don't think that's true. I believe Japanese players bluff when they need to.

**Morita:** I guess that's true. I'm sure there are some people who try, but it's probably pretty obvious to non-Japanese people when they do.

**Kuroda:** I think it's because most Japanese players can't speak English very well. Even if they tried, it wouldn't work very well.

**BDM:** *Do you bluff?*

**Oiso:** Yes, if I need to in order to win, but I always keep it within the rules -- I don't lie or cheat.

**Komuro:** Sometimes.

**Morita:** Never.

**Kuroda:** Not really. It's not my nature, and usually I'm too busy thinking about other things when I'm playing.

**BDM:** *Which players outside of Japan have had the biggest influence on your **Magic** career?*

spanning questions we posed the players, we wanted their quick thoughts about the basic elements of the game. Here's what they had to say:

**Favorite deck?**

**Oiso:** I generally like Combo decks. Right now, my favorite deck is Desire -- especially because I win with it.

**Morita:** Any deck with **Survival of the Fittest**. I love using Survival a lot, then playing **Living Death**.

**Komuro:** Accelerated Blue. It's a lot of fun to ramp up mana so you can play one powerful card after another. It's a really strong deck.

**Kuroda:** NWO (Living Death deck with **Survival of the Fittest**), because I got my first premier event finish (at the 1999 Nationals) with it. That event is what really launched my career.

**Favorite card?**

**Morita:** **Living Death**. I love to reset the game or throw it out of whack.

**Oiso:** **Vampiric Tutor**. I like tutor cards in general, and the more flexible the better. It's a combo player's best friend.

**Komuro:** **Decree of Justice**. It's the card I used to win my first title (at a Grand Prix). Also, I like using tokens.

**Kuroda:** **Arc-Slogger**, because it won me a Pro Tour. Probably Nassif's least favorite card, though. =)

**Favorite (magic) color?**

**Oiso:** Black -- because that's the color of **Vampiric Tutor**!

**Komuro:** Blue. I like being in control.

**Morita:** Green. I actually don't care about the colors or which one I use, but when I asked friends, they all said "Oh, green, definitely", so . . .

**Kuroda:** A lot of Japanese players think I like green, but I actually like red the best. I'm not just saying that because I won a PT with a red deck -- I've liked it since I started playing.

**Favorite format?**

**Morita:** Team Rochester, because of the communication involved.

**Oiso:** Right now, I like Extended best. There are so many options available, and it's always exciting because people keep coming up with new decks.

**Komuro:** Team. Playing **Magic**

**Morita:** Olivier Ruel. I don't exactly respect him per se as a great player, but he is the first non-Japanese person I could call a friend. Because of him, I'm planning on learning English so I can communicate with other people better.

is a lot of fun, but it's even better with friends.

**Kuroda:** Team Rochester. It's the most interesting format, and I'm good at it. =) My record for Team Rochester is 19-1.

**Oiso:** Craig Krempels. I think one of the reasons I am where I am today is because I pushed myself when we were competing in the Rookie of the Year race, and also because of that I got to know a lot of American players. Also, I respect Kai Budde because I think he is simply the greatest **Magic** player in history.

**Komuro:** Kai Budde.

**Kuroda:** Gary Wise. I believe I owe him my Top 8 finish at PT Kobe. I had been on a losing streak and was thinking about quitting, but he encouraged me to keep playing. I'm really sad that he retired. I also really respect the Ruel brothers. I think a lot of people could learn from their attitude toward **Magic** and life in general.

**BDM:** *What are the popular strategy websites and magazines for Japanese players?*

**Oiso:** In Japanese, Magic Daily News (<http://magicdailynews.com/>) and Lancer's Room (<http://lancer.9232.net/>). Of course, I look at magicthegathering.com, even though it's in English. The best **Magic** magazine right now is Mana Burn.

**Morita:** I often look at Cheap Magic (Kouichirou Maki's page) and read the magazine Mana Burn.

**Komuro:** Magic Daily News (<http://magicdailynews.com/>). There are two magazines with **Magic** content, Game Gyaza and Mana Burn.

**Kuroda:** Maki's web site "Cheap Magic" is used as a portal site by a lot of people. I also see a lot of people reading Mana Burn.

**BDM:** *How do you guys feel about traveling outside of Japan for events? I have noticed that a couple of you rarely travel outside of the APAC region. What are the factors that dictate whether or not you travel?*

**Oiso:** The biggest factor that influences whether one of us plays in an overseas event, hands down, is travel cost. Depending on the time of year, tickets to Europe and even North America can be prohibitively expensive.

**Komuro:** The cost. It's expensive to travel, so it's not easy to just go to an event outside Japan.

**Morita:** It's a long way to travel, and also the fact that it costs so much to go anywhere from Japan is a limiting factor.

**Kuroda:** I think what most people think about is if they can cover their travel expenses or not. If the prize money doesn't make up for it, it's not worth it. Of course, people who are thinking about Pro Points have other factors to consider.

**BDM:** *What does your **Magic** schedule look like in the next few months?*

**Oiso:** I'll be going to Pro Tour–Atlanta and Grand Prix–Singapore. After that, it depends on my school schedule.

**Morita:** I plan on going to Atlanta and Philadelphia. I may also go to Seattle.

**Komuro:** I plan on attending every premier event. I will be at Pro Tour–Atlanta and Grand Prix–Singapore.

**Kuroda:** I should be able to go to Philadelphia, because it coincides with Golden Week. [Editor's note: Golden Week is a series of holidays at the end of April/beginning of May. April 29 and May 3-5 are all national holidays.] I also plan on going to Grand Prix–Matsuyama.

## Head to head

In addition to the group questions, I posed specific questions to each of these **Magic** masters. First up, Masashi Oiso.

**BDM:** I understand that Gabe Walls has been teaching you English. Is this true? How is that going?

**Oiso:** I don't know where that came from. I'm friends with Gabe, but he's not teaching me English or anything like that. My English has been getting better, but that's simply because I've been going abroad regularly for two years.

**BDM:** Tell me about Grand Prix–Boston.

**Oiso:** I originally wasn't planning on going to Boston, but I'm glad I did. There were no rules problems, and I didn't have any difficulty communicating with anyone. However, I did have some trouble with my pronunciation when announcing targets for **Cabal Therapy** -- people had trouble understanding what I was trying to say, so I ended up writing the card name on a piece of paper.

**BDM:** What happened in your final match with Lucas Glavin? Did you somehow trick him into making a mistake like many people have suggested?

**Oiso:** The reason I didn't concede and played **Aluren** was because I assumed that he would use **Krosan Reclamation** to get **Exhume** and a creature, then attack after confirming I didn't have **Gilded Drake**. I certainly didn't predict what would happen, and I was as surprised as Lucas was. Anyone can make a mistake, especially when the pressure is on in the final match.

**BDM:** What led to you playing **Aluren** and why that build specifically?

**Oiso:** Given the results of Columbus, I anticipated there wouldn't be any decks using **Cranial Extraction**, so I went with **Aluren**. My idea was that as long as there were no decks running **Cranial Extraction**, I wouldn't have any bad matchups. I went with the build I used because I expected a metagame of beatdown (Goblins or RDW) and combo decks like Life and Scepter Chant, so I put **Wall of Blossoms** in main and **Pernicious Deed** and **Naturalize** in the sideboard. My metagame analysis was mostly on target, but there were a lot more **Desire** decks than I expected.

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Next on the docket was Shu Komuro, Japan's newest Pro Tour champion.

**BDM:** When did you realize you were going to win the Pro Tour?

**Komuro:** I felt I had pretty good chances when the draft was finished. As soon as I drew the **Teller of Tales**, I knew I had won.

**BDM:** How did winning feel and how has it changed your life? Are you a huge **Magic** celebrity now?

**Komuro:** I'm just really happy that I won, especially because I beat Anton [Jonsson]. My life has certainly changed, if for no other reason that I now have an invite to every Pro Tour for a year. I'm really looking forward to traveling around the world and playing **Magic**.



*Komuro holds up his PT–Nagoya prizes.*

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Masahiko Morita, holder of 13 Grand Prix Top 8s, was next.

**BDM:** You are one of the most highly respected **Magic** players in your country and one of the most successful Grand Prix players of all time. What needs to happen for you to carry that success to the next level -- playing on Sunday at the Pro Tour?

**Morita:** Well, first I need to actually start playing at every PT I qualify for. Also, since I can't speak English, I feel I am at a disadvantage when playing with non-Japanese, so I think I will need to learn English before I can play on Sunday. And, of course, practice.

**BDM:** Has travel outside of Japan been an issue for you? Did going to Boston give you incentive to travel for more events?

**Morita:** Yes, the money is an issue. I have had to pass on many PTs because I couldn't afford to go. I also hate flying long distances. I think I would maybe like to play in an American GP again - probably Seattle.

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Finally, the ever-selective Masashiro Kuroda answered the question that is on everyone's mind.

**BDM:** Most players in the world would kill to be in the position that you are in. Can you talk about why you rarely, if ever, attend events outside of Japan? Based on your last two Pro Tour events with a Grand Prix victory to top it off in the past year, it seems like you could make your family a lot of money playing at every Pro Tour stop on the schedule.

**Kuroda:** I would love to be able to play in every Pro Tour and make a run for Player of the Year, but the reality is that most Japanese companies don't let you take that much time off. The best I can do is 2-3 days at a time, tops. That's why it's so hard for me to play on the Tour.

When I was still a university student and had more time, we Japanese players weren't doing so well on the Tour. It was a serious financial risk to go abroad for an event with no guarantee of how much we might win. So, I limited myself to domestic events.

I'd love to play in overseas events if the opportunity presents itself, but in order to do that, I first need to find a job that will let me take lots of time off. There are a lot of people who have to put their **Magic** career on the back burner once they get married, but I'm lucky to have a partner who understands **Magic**, and lets me continue to play and practice. She's the reason I've been able to keep winning even after getting married, and I thank her for that.

## Magic Invitational: The North American Ballot

The votes from the Latin American ballot have been tabulated and former World Champion Carlos Romao is your choice to go to the **Magic** Invitational. This week's vote heads North and focuses on the Canadian and American **Magic** scene. Go [here](#) and vote for your favorite player.

## Firestarter: What have you done for me lately?

Carlos Romao and Kai Budde have topped the first two Invitational ballots despite having a weaker 12-month performance than some of their contemporaries. Should the Invitational be about historical achievements or a reward for a window of excellent play? To voice your opinion just click on the button marked "discuss" and let your fingers do the talking!



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