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Philly Forecasts Fruitful

Brian David-Marshall
The Week That Was
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A number of predictions were made regarding the Top 8 of this past weekend's [Pro Tour-Philadelphia](#). Two in particular necessitate review. Osyp Lebedowicz made the heady claim that there would be four North Americans in the Top 8, while Tim Aten and company announced the formation of a new North American squadron that would be Taking Back Sunday (in name and action).

Both predictions came true. There were actually five North American players in this Top 8, shattering the expectations. The last time there were four American players in a Top 8 was more than two years ago at Pro Tour-Venice, when Osyp was the last American to win an individual Pro Tour. Of the five North Americans, two of them were from the much-ballyhooed TOGIT supersquad list, Mark Herberholz and Steven Wolfman.

Two of the Americans were undrafted rookie free agents. Ryan Cimera and Jeff Novekoff were playing homebrew decks inspired by successful builds from the *Magic Online* tournament scene. The final American was Gadiel Szleifer, who won the event and "took back" Sunday for the United States after letting it belong to the rest of the world for so long.



Gadiel Szleifer captured the first individual title for a U.S. player in two years.

(While it was the first tournament for the Taking Back Sunday squad, it was the second Pro Tour for the t-shirt. Take a peek back at the [Pro Tour-Atlanta](#) coverage and you will find Adam Chambers wearing the same shirt that Gadiel sports in the trophy shot. While the team was not officially formed until the lead-up to Philadelphia, it did exist as a MTGO clan and Chambers was a member.)

It would be hard to script a better ending for the Taking Back Sunday squad. As reported last week, the team was formed partially out of a rift between the TOGIT squad and a handful of members that eventually became TBS (although Gadiel never belonged to the TOGIT mailing list at any time). On his way to becoming the first American since Osyp to win an individual Pro Tour, Gadiel had to get past supersquader Steve Wolfman in the semifinals.



In the finals he squared off with Kenji Tsumura of Japan. Both Taking Back Sunday and the TOGIT group had expressly stated a desire to wrest the spotlight from the Japanese Magic scene and shine it on what both camps felt was a revitalized American vista. Kenji has been called the "best player in the world" by none other than the current Player of the Year leader Olivier Ruel.

With back-to-back Constructed Top 8 finishes (including his victory this weekend), Gadiel is perched to make a claim as one of the top 60-card players in the world. There are actually three members of the class of Columbus who were playing in the final round of the Swiss this weekend. Kenji Tsumura knocked Columbus finalist Shuhei Nakamura in the 12th round into a ninth-place finish.

Tsumura has appeared in back-to-back Top 8s.

Shuhei just missed joining Olivier and Gadiel in back-to-back Top 8s for Constructed Pro Tours. Had he squeaked in – and assuming he didn't knock either of those two out of the Top 8 – we would have had a situation reminiscent of Amsterdam/San Diego from last season. It was at those tournaments that the cream of the 40-card Limited crop rose to the top for two straight tournaments. Nicolai Herzog, Anton Jonsson, and Mike Turian made the Top 8 in both of those Limited events.

While the best Limited and Constructed players have been identified by those two sets of tournaments, they also help us to single out the best player in the game today. Whatever way you slice it – and no matter how many accolades he may throw in Kenji's direction – Olivier Ruel has been in a class by himself since his Top 8 in Amsterdam. He now has three Top 8s over the last two seasons and has pulled ahead in the Player of the Year Race. We are just into the second half of the season so the race is way too close to call, with four players bumping fenders and trading paint near the top of the standings.

1. Olivier Ruel 49
2. Gadiel Szleifer 47
3. Kenji Tsumura 44
4. Shuhei Nakamura 40

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Olivier Ruel and Julien Nuijten also became the first two players to “Level up” to the exclusive Pro Players Club benefits of Level 6 this past weekend. Olivier will become the first player to reap a \$500 Grand Prix appearance fee dividend when he signs up on Saturday morning in Matsuyama. Olivier had already made plans to attend the event and hang out with friends Tsuyoshi Fujita and Masashiro Kuroda before they all head to Los Angeles for the Invitational and E3.

“He could bankrupt us,” was one Wizards employee’s joking reaction after being informed of Olivier’s anticipated presence in Matsuyama. There is no player better suited to take advantage of the Level 6 benefits than Olivier, who is as likely to pop up in the Top 8 of a Grand Prix in Asia or North America as he is on his home continent.



Olivier Ruel, your leader in the Player of the Year race.

Leveling up was clearly on the minds of many players in Philadelphia. Here is a list of players who are Level 4 or higher after Philadelphia as the Pro Players Club is officially seeded. The players whose names are in bold “leveled up” based on their performance this weekend.

<u>Level</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Points</u>
6	Julien Nuijten	61
6	Olivier Ruel	68
5	Kamiel Cornelissen	54
5	Shu Komuro	45
5	Shuhei Nakamura	50
5	Gabriel Nassif	51
5	Jeroen Remie	57
5	Gadiel Szleifer	55
5	Kenji Tsumura	51
5	Jelger Wiegersma	49
4	Ryuichi Arita	33
4	Pierre Canali	36
4	Antonino De Rosa	30
4	Murray Evans	35
4	Gerard Fabiano	32
4	Tsuyoshi Fujita	41
4	Masami Ibamoto	30
4	Tsuyoshi Ikeda	40
4	Itaru Ishida	42
4	Anton Jonsson	35
4	Tomohiro Kaji	37
4	Frank Karsten	33
4	Craig Krempels	32
4	Osyp Lebedowicz	42
4	Katsuhiko Mori	31
4	Masahiko Morita	38
4	Masashi Oiso	36
4	Jin Okamoto	37
4	David Rood	36
4	Antoine Ruel	33
4	Tomoharu Saito	33
4	Ichirou Shimura	40
4	Geoffrey Siron	34
4	Terry Soh	35
4	Jonathan Sonne	32

By the end of this season, there could easily be 10 players with Level 6 benefits -- the equivalent of 10 players winning Player of the Year. And lest you forget, there is still a Player of the Year race to contend with on top of that. The amount of money that players will be winning over the course of the second half of this season should be unprecedented, once you factor in appearance fees and travel costs.

Philly Payout

The skins style payout for Pro Tour-Philadelphia was a big topic of conversation all week. It was interesting to talk to Chris Galvin, who is Vice President of Organized Play, about the new payout system. He was intrigued that players

seemed to think that the payout was implemented to attract newer players to attend the Pro Tour. That was an attractive side effect, according to Galvin. But his real goal was simply to, "Shake things up. We have been using the same method for paying people out on the Pro Tour since 1999. Every now and then, you need to shake things up."

That said, it was clearly the best tournament for first-timers to be playing in since the start of the Pro Tour, as only 40 of the 311 participants failed to leave Philadelphia with some [prize money in their pocket](#). Two of those first-timers made it all the way through to Sunday, and there were 15 who finished in the top 64. The top first-timers were Cimera, Novekoff, Mario Girolami, Wilson Freeman, Harold Stein, and Daniel Neiman.



Here are a few first-timer statistics, based on the new payout: *Jeff Novekoff pocketed \$4,750 in his first Pro Tour.*

Number of players at Pro Tour-Philadelphia: 311
First-time Pro Tour players in attendance: 116
First-timers who won money: 96 (83%)

First-timers who didn't win money: 20
Pro Tour veterans who didn't win money: 20

Total money won by first-timers: \$46,161
Average first-timer prize money: \$397.93

The Greatest Final Ever

If you were following the weekend coverage at all, you know the greatest final in Pro Tour history was a topic of discussion. The consensus among the coverage staff and tour veterans points directly at [Pro Tour-Chicago](#) from the 1999-2000 season, where Bob Maher took on Brian Davis in an epic five-game finals match. Wizards recently began digitizing many of the old Pro Tour videos, and history now comes to life as we present the [complete final via a BitTorrent download](#). Enjoy!

This weekend's storyline and Firestarter

For me, the big storyline is going to be drafting old blocks of cards with friends. My good friend and neighbor Pat Donovan is going to be moving back to Cincinnati in the near future. Before he takes off, he's having a good-bye barbeque with old friends and old draft sets Sunday. From *Mirage/Visions/Weatherlight* through the current block, we will be drafting from early Sunday morning until *Kamigawa* is betrayed. I am looking forward to looking back on good times with good friends. I am even preparing my Asian-style chicken wings, which brings me to my firestarter for the week.



Card sleeves required.

When you are hanging out and drafting/playtesting with your friends, what is your gaming snack food of choice? I also have to make a lot of wings for Sunday, so any recipe suggestions to add some variety are welcome as well. I will be at E3 next week to cover the Invitational, but I will sneak off and let you know how the drafts went and how the wings were received by all.

*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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