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First and Foremost

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The Week That Was
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This was a [historic Magic weekend](#) chock-full of firsts, which is only fitting for the first ever Team Constructed Pro Tour. Team formats have been a staple on the Pro Tour since the '99-00 season when Darwin Kastle led Rob Dougherty and Dave Humpherys to the winner's circle in Washington, D.C.. Decks had to be 40 cards high for that event (a glib way of saying the format was Limited) and they remained that high for the next seven team events.



Kajiharu80 -- Tomohiro Kaji, Shota Yasooka, Tomoharu Saito -- took home the trophies from Pro Tour-Charleston.

Anyone who has followed the Pro Tour over the past two seasons should be well aware that nothing should be taken for granted when it comes to professional **Magic**. We have seen a Skins payout, a switch to more exotic locales such as Honolulu, Prague, and Paris, and now a 50 percent spurt in the height of decks for the team format. Not only was the format for [Pro Tour-Charleston](#) Constructed, but it was the only event of the season to utilize the *Ravnica* block exclusively. One could even say this was a first look at the new face of Standard once *Champions of Kamigawa* and company move on to Standard Valhalla.

There were multiple ways that teams could qualify for this event and nobody knew how large the field would be. Teams could be formed with any combination of players with seven levels in the Pro Players Club. This allowed successful players to bring up-and-coming locals to the Pro Tour scene.

Gerard Fabiano teamed with Jose Barbero for this event, and between the two Level 3s they only needed a Level 1 to qualify. Gerard took the opportunity to repay Matt Rubin – the player who first took him to a team Pro Tour at the turn of the millennium – with the precious seat on the Tour.

An even more radical example was Masashi Oiso's team Tottori 1 6 1. The numbers in the team name indicate the player levels of the three team members. Masashi saw this tournament as an opportunity to thank his local **Magic** scene for all the support they have shown him over the years and took two Level 1 mages to be his wingmen...er, wingpeople. One of his teammates was Asami Katoaka, who has been a fixture on the Pro Tour alongside her boyfriend Tsuyoshi Fujita.

Asami's team finished one spot behind her boyfriend's squad. In and of itself, their proximity would not be notable except for the fact that those two spots were 17th and 18th – otherwise known as "in the money." The \$600 that Asami earned as her share of the team's winnings marked the first time that a woman has finished above the traditional money-winning line (she did win \$100 at Pro Tour-Philadelphia due to the experimental Skins payout, finishing in 232nd place).



Asami Katoaka made history in Charleston

The Hall of Fame also contributed some extra chairs to the seating plan. While Hall of Fame members are bequeathed Level 3 status for life, it was unclear how that would interact with team formats. Part of the appeal of a Hall of Fame is to have the game's great players taking an active part in the Pro Tour moving forward. The reach of that universal qualification was extended to allow HOFers to bring any two teammates to the Team Pro Tour, regardless of Player levels or rating.

Only Jon Finkel and Darwin Kastle availed themselves of the opportunity and 83 percent of the semifinal PT Washington match-up between Antarctica and YMG was in attendance in Charleston. Only Dave Humpherys was missing from the original two teams. Darwin kept things in flavor by replacing Dave with Justin Gary to form a YMG squad with the first-, second-, and third-place finishers from Pro Tour-Houston.

The HoF-fueled additions of Justin Gary, Rob Dougherty, Steve O'Mahoney-Schwartz, and Dan O'Mahoney Schwartz were just a blip on the attendance meter. The real swell in the seating chart came from the ratings invites. Teams needed to have an average team rating of 1700 to qualify or an average individual Standard rating of 2000. While the latter was a reasonable barrier, the former worked out to a plus-seven record in team qualifiers. A team that was dedicated to qualifying for this event only needed seven more wins than losses during the PTQ season to get over the 1700 bar. Mike Flores' team – which finished one crushing spot out of the money – is an example of such a team.

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"We are set up for 450 players," was what DCI Program Manager Scott Larabee had told me on Thursday when I asked him how many players they were expecting to make the trip to Charleston. He quickly added, "But we have plenty of room to overflow into side events if we need to."

After record setting numbers in Honolulu (408 players) and Prague (414 players), 450 players did not seem like an outrageous expectation but I don't think anyone was fully prepared for the attendance record to be exceeded by almost 100 players. There were 525 players – 175 teams – when round one began and the side event area conceded without a fight. (Compare that to 119 teams in Atlanta and 107 teams in Seattle to put in a trios context.)

And this is only half the playing floor on Day One.

In a somewhat surprising first, this marked the first Pro Tour since Washington, D.C. without a European playing on Sunday. The final round of the tournament was crazy with all of the Top 10 teams still in play for the four playoff berths. There was even a scenario where the top-ranked team going into the final round could have missed the cut to Sunday. It looked like Germany's Servus (David Brucker, Helmut Summersberger, and Sebastian Aljiaj) could secure the fourth spot with a win but they ended up sixth behind another German team Schere Stein Papier (Simon Görtzen, Harald Stein, and Simon Hockwin).

Normally, the top 10 teams finishing at a Pro Tour get automatic invitations to the next event (roughly approximating the top 32 invitations given at an individual Pro Tour). Because of the size of the event and the fact that some teams in contention for a Top 4 spot in the final round ended up below 10th, Wizards of the Coast is extending special invitations to all teams with match points equal to the 10th-place team.

"We are currently investigating whether to issue invitations to all players tied with the lowest-ranked, invited player part of the official invitation policy for all Pro Tour events," said DCI program manager Scott Larabee. "If we do, we will make an announcement in the coming weeks."

This means that four additional teams earned automatic invitations to Pro Tour-Kobe: Why Would You Do Zis? (Rich Hoan, Anton Jonsson, Johan Sadeghpour), /wrist (Kyle Mechler, Brandon Scheel, Matt Hansen), Mustbenice...it is (Matt Rubin, Gerard Fabiano, Jose Barbero), and Witness the Thickness (Brett Anderson, Adam Fears, Philip Smith). For Scheel this is a particularly nice reward, as he drove from Omaha, Nebraska, to Charleston just in time to make it to the PT.

It was disappointing to see the European streak come to an end, but Germany continues to post impressive finishes and looks to be reemerging as a **Magic** powerhouse after some quiet post-Budde seasons.

Speaking of **Magic** powerhouses, Japanese judge Shindo Yoshiya was beaming after the finals. "Brazil has soccer. Japan has **Magic**," he declared with a sweeping gesture toward team Kajiharu80, who had just finished ahead of 174 other teams in the final standings for a \$75,000 payday. His quote was illustrated by the team Kajiharu80 defeated in the finals, Brazil's Raaala Pumba. Raaala Pumba "only" took home \$36,000, meaning the finals ended up being a \$39,000 ante match between the two teams.

Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa led the Brazilian squad and fulfilled the promise he has shown over the past five Pro Tours where the 18-year old had moneyed each and every time. The presence of Paulo, Wily Edel, and Celso Zamperu at the Pro Tour was an endorsement of the new system of awarding PTQ winners airfare to the Pro Tour instead of a travel stipend. The team would almost certainly been unable to attend had they had to pay the \$1000-plus airfare per person. Despite being down \$39,000 for the finals match, the Raaala team members should be able to manage the airfare to Kobe now that they are ineligible for the current PTQ season.

It has been quite a while since Tomohiro Kaji, Tomoharu Saito, or Shota Yasooka have been eligible to play on the PTQ level. All three players qualified for the event based on Pro Tour levels – they had eleven combined levels from last season. They also combined something else to create their team name. It's not hard to see where the 'Kaji' and 'Haru' in the name come from. The '80' is contributed by Shota Yasooka whose name means '80 hills' in Japanese.

Last year Kaji and Saito played with Kenji Tsumura as One Spin and reached the semifinals of Pro Tour-Atlanta. Early on Thursday I had teased Kaji about how difficult it would be to replace the reigning Player of the Year. It was no problem, claimed Kaji, as he pointed to Yasooka and claimed, "Player of the Year."

Just three days later Kaji's words turned out to be prophetic as Yasooka surged into the lead of the race with 38 points (he also has a 34th-place finish in Hawaii and a 19th-place finish in Prague this season).

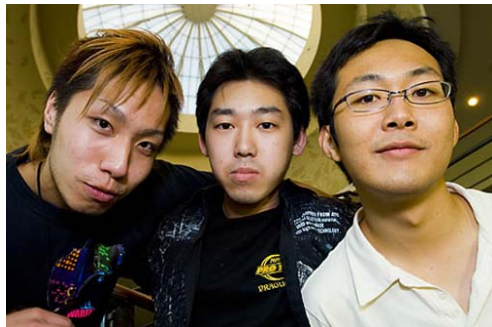
"At first Kenji wanted to team up with Katsuhiko Mori and we had a hole for one player. Accidentally we found a very good player to team up with. He was going to team up with Akira Asahara but we stole him," laughed Saito in the Players Lounge while maintaining a firm grip on his long-awaited trophy. "Some time around *Exodus*," is when Saito remembers starting to play the game.



Saito and Kaji with Tsumura, from Pro Tour-Atlanta.

Saito normally relies on Kaji to practice with and bounce deck ideas around. Kaji had to focus on school in the month between Prague and Charleston, which led Saito to a different methodology than he is used to.

"At first Kaji was a little bit busy and could not practice so much. So Shota and I built decks for about a month. About two weeks before Charleston we began practicing together and found a good deck for each of us – for the style of each player. We felt good with our decks but not with the third deck. We had to spend a lot of our time on the third deck."



Who needs Kenji when you have Shota?

Saito felt completely in-tune with his deck which was an efficient Rakdos damage machine which lightly dipped into Boros for *Skyknight Legionnaire*. "All 75 cards were suited to me. The deck played so well and I was rarely mana-screwed."

"Basically, I am such a maniac about control decks," said Yasooka in regard to his counter-heavy anti-control control deck. "This format is all about two control decks and one beatdown deck. When I matched up against another control deck I would have almost perfect wins."

Kaji was not so happy with the deck he ended up piloting and only won six matches overall in the tournament. "The deck mulliganed too many times over the weekend. I must have mulliganed 40 or 50 times over the course of the weekend. I would have initial hands with *Farseek*, *Farseek*, *signet*, and one land and I would be forced to mulliganed. There is no way I would play that deck if I had to do it all over again."

He may have only won six matches, but he made those wins count. Before the finals, three of his five wins came when his team absolutely needed him to win – the other two came in 3-0 sweeps – and in the finals he had to pull out the biggest match win of his career with his sixth and final win of the tournament.

"We have two more big events this year so it is too soon to say," was how Yasooka deflected any questions about his newfound lead in the Player of the Year race despite his teammate's pre-tournament prediction.

"Yasooka is the man," gushed Saito. "When I cannot decide which card to play or which play to make I would ask him and he would have the answer."

This surprised me because Saito is not only such an individual player but has been around the Pro Tour for so long.

"Basically I would ask Yasooka but I wanted him to agree with my decision," he confessed. "For example I would ask questions like, 'This hand is one I should keep...okay?'"

It was pointed out that while the world at large may not be familiar with Yasooka, this was in no way a breakthrough for Yasooka.

"He is very famous in Japan," explained Japanese coverage reporter Keita Mori. "His name has become synonymous with control. He rules over the local Japanese tournaments like a tyrant. Everyone looks forward to the latest Yaso Control deck."

"His Honolulu deck was pretty special," laughed Kaji when asked if Yasooka had ever attacked for two. "The average power of his attacking creatures was 1.3. The deck was blue-black Jushi Control and it could attack with only Jushi or Bob – that was how it won. He didn't even have Meloku – he had Azami instead."

Despite all the talk about decks, play styles, and practice time Saito knows the real reason his team won the tournament.

"With my old hairstyle I was not winning so much so I changed it for this event."

You can look for Yasooka this weekend as he defends his lead in the Player of the Year race in Toulouse, France at the Grand Prix. Yasooka just made the Top 8 in Malaysia and will be hoping to repeat that feat against the 1000-plus person Euro field. Joining him on the continent will be fellow PoY hopefuls Shuhei Nakamura, Takuya Osawa, and Kenji Tsumura in what is promising to be an exciting race.



A little off the sides, please.

Firestarter: Market fluctuations

After looking at the coverage from Charleston and checking out the [decks of the 25 money winning teams](#), are there any cards from *Ravnica* Block Constructed that have not received a fair shake in other Constructed formats yet? Will we see *Skeletal Vampire* darkening the skies of the remaining Regionals and upcoming Nationals? Which cards proved their mettle to you this weekend and deserve a closer look in more diverse formats? Share your opinions in the forums.

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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