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# Putting on the Moritz

Brian David-Marshall  
The Week That Was  
Friday, October 27, 2006



Not long after getting home from [Pro Tour-Kobe](#) I received an instant message from Greg Weiss (of Elemental Bidding fame):

*Greg: I am really glad I woke up to watch the finals of the Pro Tour. Otherwise I might have been upset about the winner.*

I understood exactly what Greg meant. It would be very easy to dismiss Jan-Moritz Merkel as some lucky kid if you didn't have a chance to see him in action. (And if you did not see him in action, you should [go download those files now](#).) Jan-Moritz ripped through his bracket to defeat a much more experienced gauntlet of players that included Pro Tour-Charleston winner Tomoharu Saito in the quarterfinals; Grand Prix-Paris finalist Bastien Perez in the semis; and Willy Edel playing in his second straight Pro Tour finals.

We overlooked Jan-Moritz all day Friday and Saturday – he didn't even surface in the coverage of the event until his berth in the Top 8 was reserved. Yet, by the time Sunday was over, the 17-year old student from Hamburg, Germany had joined an elite cadre of **Magic** players who have won a Pro Tour their first time out of the gate that includes Olle Rade, Dirk Baberowski, Randy Buehler, and Julien Nuijten.

I was fortunate enough to have a five-camera view of the action from the webcast booth with the aforementioned Randy Buehler. We were both impressed with the way Merkel handled himself on the Sunday stage as he parlayed a PTQ slot and airline ticket to Japan into \$40,000 in winnings and Level 3 status in the Pro Players Club. The decisive game is worth watching as much for the way it starts as for the way it ends. While Willy Edel ultimately made an unfortunate move to attack with everything on his final turn of the game, it was Merkel's tight, aggressive play in the early game that put the spurs to Edel at the end.



Along with the trophy came a \$40,000 check.

Go back and watch it and you will see a clinic in aggressive play. Merkel does not pass up on any opportunities to extract damage from his opponent's life total with **Coral Tricksters** unmorphing to remove key blockers and push Edel against the ropes early before his ridiculous green-red deck could stabilize the ground behind Sporesower and a squad of other Thallids.

Had Merkel played the game any other way Edel would have been able to sit back and draw the **Disintegrate** that he revealed to be on top of his deck even as he extended his hand to congratulate the newest Pro Tour champion.

When I caught up with Merkel after the match to interview him for this week's column, the 17-year old was surrounded by

a group of German players, most notably Pro Tour-Philadelphia quarterfinalist Andre Mueller, exchanging contact information. With Worlds – and a whole year of Pro Tours beyond that – suddenly on Moritz's itinerary, he suddenly found himself plugged into the German Pro Tour scene.

Mueller explained that one of the most impressive aspects of Merkel's weekend was his willingness to listen to more experienced players.

"To be honest, I did not expect it," laughed Mueller when asked what he thought of his countryman's success. "When he first came here, I had never seen the guy before and did not know what to expect. What really impressed me was his ability to learn. I came to him after the second draft and had three horrible cards in his deck. I was like, 'Man, are you a moron or what? Take out these horrible cards.' And he was like, 'Thanks.' "

The cards in question were three copies of **Mystical Teachings**, which Andre felt was too slow to be played in this draft format. While many players in their first Pro Tour would shrug off the advice, Merkel took it to heart and went back to Mueller over the weekend for additional feedback. (For those of you offended by Mueller, please let me assure that his tone is completely lost in print. He is warm, funny, and offbeat – extremely offbeat.)

"Amazing," was the first reaction the beaming Merkel would utter when I turned

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- [Draft Viewer: Draft 5](#)
- [Draft Viewer: Top 8 Draft](#)

the microphone in his direction and asked how he was feeling with \$40,000 in winnings in his virtual pocket. "I am 17 years old. I am going to buy a car when I turn 18 and then... well that is a start."

He explained that he had only been playing the game for a few years: "A friend of mine played during *Onslaught*. I was interested and he introduced me and we played a few games. I became interested even more and started to play in a few tournaments."

At the time, Germany was a pretty big player on the World **Magic** scene. Christian Luhrs had a couple of Top 8s under his belt and some guy named Kai Budde was in the midst of a dominating run and had just defeated one Jon Finkel en route to winning Pro Tour—Chicago. Did this have any effect on his perceptions of the game?



Merkel lost games in only one pod during the Swiss.

(Interestingly, Pro Tour—Chicago was Kenji Tsumura's first Pro Tour and watching Kai convinced him that the game of **Magic** was skill-based – a sentiment that was echoed this weekend by Julien Nuijten after witnessing Kenji's 8-0 run to the Top 8.)

"I have played a few draft games against Kai," Merkel smiled. He also includes Luhrs as one of his local players. "I think I was a little bit influenced by them. I saw that you could make so much money and have much fun while playing. I looked up to them and wanted to make that true for me as well."

Although he started in *Onslaught*, it was *Ravnica* that propelled him around the globe to win the Pro Tour – a trip he might not have made if not for the free airfare. "I won a PTQ in Hamburg. I definitely came here because the flight cost me nothing. I think that is just amazing – flying to Japan and not having to pay for it."

At the time we spoke, Merkel had not had much of a chance to sightsee although he did get a chance to belt out 'These Boots Are made For Walking' during karaoke at the player registration party. "That was fun but my voice really sucks."

Merkel downplayed the idea that he employed any psychological tactics during the finals. Randy commented on how Merkel completely dominated the table with the position of his cards. Even if you look at his body language during the match, you can see him almost looming over the board while Edel seemed pushed against the back of his chair. "There are not many mind games you can play with 22 creatures," Merkel laughed.

"In *Time Spiral Limited* during our test drafts I learned that aggressive decks are the best ones. I decided to draft aggressive decks all the time with many two-drops. My first draft was blue-green splashing black with very many creatures, *Call of the Herd*, *Ixidron*, and *Tromp the Domains*. The deck had a very good curve and was an amazing deck – I 3-0'd that draft."

And what about the second draft that Mueller alluded to earlier? "The second draft went very, very badly. In the third round of that draft I was paired with Aaron Lewis. I almost lost that round but I got him by a few points. Those were my only two losses. I do not even make Day Two if I lose that Game 3."

I asked Merkel to share some advice about playing **Magic** in a tournament setting with so much on the line.

"The most important thing you have to learn is to keep yourself concentrating all the time," he explained. "After you make a mistake, don't give up. There have been times where I made a mistake and was so upset that I lost my concentration – you can still win a game where you make a mistake."

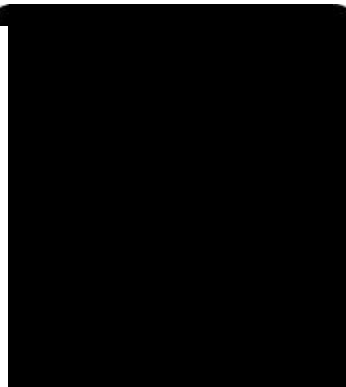
Merkel was grateful that he was able to lean on the German players for support during the weekend. The advice proved especially critical in that Round 6 matchup with Aaron Lewis.

"Andre Mueller taught me that I should board out the *Mystical Teachings*. I showed him all my draft decks. You can't just figure everything out for yourself; you need to talk to people. I talked much to him between the rounds and did a practice draft with him before the tournament. He is a pretty good player and he said much to me. Even more so was Jan Ruess from Hamburg who is also here. We talked all the time."

Such advice does not come without a price though. "I will pay for a meal for the German players. It is a tradition they told me but maybe they are lying," he laughed. Although he was going to go for the meal it was most assuredly not going to be Kobe beef. "Maybe McDonald's."

Merkel had some advice of his own to offer for anyone playing in *Time Spiral* drafts over the [rest of the PTQ season](#). "You should value two-drops very highly. Suspend is very, very good. Try to keep it two-color –

***"I have played a few draft games against Kai...I saw that you could make so much money and have much fun while playing. I looked up to them and wanted to make that true for me as well." – Jan-Moritz Merkel***



maybe a little splash. Adjust to your first few picks and try not to have a clear plan in mind."

And what about green? All weekend long the pros were calling green unplayable, saying green doesn't win. Yet if you look at the two decks in the finals they were predominantly green decks.

"Green doesn't usually win if many players draft it although in this draft, many players drafted green," chuckled Merkel. "Green is fine if you pair it with blue. Blue has fliers and evasion while green has two-drops and fat on the ground.

"My main deck had **Thornscape Battlemage**, which was an awful card for me with only a **Chromatic Sphere** to activate it," Merkel looked back on his Top 8 deck, still learning. "Edel was playing a mana-heavy deck with splashes in two colors. I sided in the Acid Moss on the play and the **Drifter il-Dal** when I was drawing for extra evasion. I was one playable short so I was switching between these cards."

I look forward to seeing what else this young player has learned when he plays at Worlds in just a few more weeks.



## Firestarter: Champing at the Champs

Good luck to everyone playing in Champs this weekend! Simple questions: What is going to be the best deck? The most-played deck? The most influential card in *Time Spiral* in regard to the new Standard? Share your opinions, thoughts, and theories 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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