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Racing Around the World

Brian David-Marshall
The Week That Was
Friday, November 10, 2006



The 2006 season is winding down and there are only three events remaining for those jockeying for position in the Player of the Year and Rookie of the Year races (not to mention players trying to claw their way up a level in the Players Club). With only 10 points separating first and fifth in the [Player of the Year standings](#), it is shaping up to be a photo finish in Paris. Everything culminates in the World Championships, but that event will be previewed in a future column that will include some really big news – really big.

The next two weeks are the last two Grand Prix on the 2006 schedule and then it is a couple more weeks before all eyes turn France-ward. Do not underestimate the importance of the next two weeks. It is quite likely that the winner of this year's PoY title will do so on the back of a performance at one of these last two GPs.

By the time you are reading this, players from all over the world will have either already arrived or be waiting nervously for the luggage at the baggage carousel in Newark for Grand Prix–New Jersey. You only need take a quick glance at the top of the Player of the Year standings to understand why a Grand Prix is much more important to the various Japanese, French, Dutch, Canadian, and Brazilian players who have shown up at this year's American Grand Prix than the 'meager' \$25,000 in cash prizes that are given away.

The Top 5 names in the race are all Japanese players who have stalked down Pro Points in whatever corner of the globe they might be found, taking full advantage of their Level 5 and Level 6 status – and, of course, their winnings – to offset the cost of attending these events. Level 5 mages get \$250 per Grand Prix attended while Level Sixers get \$500.

While frontrunner Shota Yasooka, his Charleston teammate Tomoharu Saito, and Takuya Osawa have all won Pro Tours this season, you only need to look at the point tallies for Shuhei Nakamura and Kenji Tsumura to fully appreciate the Grand Prix circuit's value in the Player of the Year race. Both Shuhei and Kenji have only caught the barest sliver of the Sunday spotlight this season when it comes to the Pro Tour stage, with a semifinals and quarterfinals appearance between them.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR RACE

- | | |
|---------------------|----|
| 1. Shota Yasooka | 53 |
| 2. Shuhei Nakamura | 49 |
| 3. Tomoharu Saito | 45 |
| 4. Takuya Osawa | 44 |
| 5. Kenji Tsumura | 43 |
| 6. Mark Herberholz | 40 |
| 7. Olivier Ruel* | 38 |
| 8. Jelger Wiegersma | 37 |
| 9. Willy Edel | 36 |
| 10. David Brucker | 36 |

*Comes off suspension Feb. 2, 2007

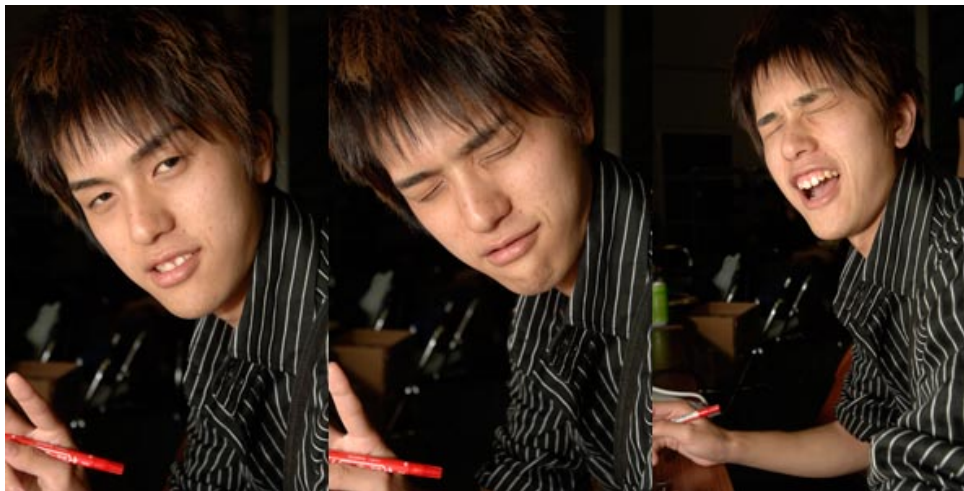
[Complete Player of the Year standings](#)

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Which Kenji will show up down the stretch this season?

Both of the Pro Tour-winless contenders in the race have kept pace with their trophied countrymen by racking up two wins and a third Top 8 at Grand Prix events this season – and not just Japanese Grand Prix either. Kenji won events in France and Malaysia before getting derailed in his attempt at a third straight win in St. Louis by Shuhei – three events on three different continents. Shuhei was similarly diplomatic in his three Top 8s. He had already posted a Top 8 in Toulouse, France before he rattled off back-to-back wins in St. Louis and Hiroshima.

Both players have relied on Grand Prix events for fully one-third of their Pro Points this season. With the recent changes to the Invitation Policy these events have only become more valuable. Just making Day Two is worth one point and you only need to look at last year's race between Kenji, Olivier Ruel, and Masashi Oiso to understand how valuable that point can be. A single point was the difference between Kenji taking the crown and having the first-ever tie in the history of the game – a tie that would have been broken in a one-on-one showdown between Kenji and Olivier at Pro Tour–Honolulu.

You would think that after being involved in **Magic** for a dozen years that I would become at least a little jaded toward the events that I cover, but last year's race – and the prospect of a showdown-inducing tie – literally had me on the edge of my seat all weekend in Yokohama.

It is almost a dead certainty that all five of the frontrunners will show up in New Jersey. In addition to sprinting toward the finish line in the Player of the Year race, only Shota and Shuhei have either locked up or virtually locked up Level 6 status for next season. Worlds is a pretty wide-open tournament that has been known to take some unexpected twists and turns. Counting on more than two points could be foolish when the difference between Level 5 and 6 is so valuable. Players get all their Pro Tour airfare and accommodations paid for at the highest club level, receive \$2,000 per Pro Tour attended, and \$500 for every Grand Prix. The difference in status has to worth well in excess of \$10,000 when you factor in the accommodations.

What is less certain than the Japanese appearances will be who will show up from the rest of the world.

The recently resurgent Brazilian **Magic** scene could certainly use an additional boost from having either Willy Edel or Paulo Vitor da Rosa hit Level 5 or 6. Carlos Romão has made a North American Grand Prix appearance this season and maybe he can convince his countrymen of the value of a trip north. Brazilian National Champion Paulo has a little extra edge in the Player of the Year race this season with the extra points available in the Worlds Team Competition, and he should certainly chase down any points that are available to him.



Willy Edel is part of a surging Brazilian Magic scene.

Despite not having a single memorable finish this season, the stealthy Jelger Wiegiersma continually finishes well into the money and is the top Dutchie in the standings. A Top 8 finish this weekend or even in Japan next weekend could be enough to propel Jelger into dark horse status at Worlds when it comes to the end-of-the-year sprint. Expect a number of Dutch players to show up on both of the Grand Prix coverage pages.

Pro Tour–Honolulu winner Mark Herberholz is among the big-name North American players who will be attending New Jersey. Mark is the highest-placing North American in this year's race and is only 13 points off the lead.

In the [Rookie of the Year race](#), Germany's Sebastian Thaler (née Aljaj) had a strong lead until countryman Jan-Moritz Merkel took home the Kobe trophy in his first PT appearance. Two Japanese players – Takahiro Suzuki and Kazuya Mitamura – and Thomas Didierjean of France round out the top five in the standings.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR RACE

1. Sebastian Thaler	27
2. Jan-Moritz Merkel	25
3. Takahiro Suzuki	24
4. Kazuya Mitamura	22
5. Thomas Didierjean	19
6. Wesimo Al-Bacha	18
7. Ben Lundquist	18
8. Masaya Kitayama	16
9. John Sittner	16
10. Jonathan Rispal	15

[Complete Rookie of the Year standings](#)

With a Grand Prix in my backyard, you would expect that I would be a lock to do the coverage but I am bowing out in lieu of Limited Informant Noah Weil. I will likely be playing but more importantly, I will be heading up the audio coverage of the event. Much like the MoxRadio coverage of the European Grand Prix events, I will be there with my Top8Magic.com team that includes Michael J. Flores, Billy Moreno, Matt Wang, and a growing legion of supporters.

[Audio coverage begins Friday](#) on the train ride to the event. We will follow the event all the way through to the finals and the coverage can be found here. If you are going to the event make sure you say "Hi".

(Level) Five Questions with Rich Hoan

One of the players who will undoubtedly get extra attention from the Top8Magic team as well as from Noah will be Rich Hoan. Rich is easily one of the top Limited players of all time and after his trip to lovely Toms River, N.J., he will be heading off to Japan with Quentin Martin and a handful of Dutch players for the last GP of the season.

1. *What is your Players Club status for this year and what do you hope to finish with?*

Rich: I'm currently Level 4, and guaranteed Level 4 again for next year, but I am going to Japan for a Grand Prix in attempt to get to Level 5.

2. *Heading to New Jersey seems like an obvious choice, but what made you decide to take such a long trip for a Grand Prix in Japan? You have not really traveled that far for a GP in the past.*

Rich: With the new Grand Prix point payout, getting 11 points between two Grand Prix and Worlds seems doable, and the difference between Levels 4 and 5 is enormous.

3. *What monetary value do you put on a Level 5 finish?*

Rich: Well, there's an automatic \$2500 because of the extra \$500 at five Pro Tours, as well as approximately another \$3000 for the five flights. But to me making Level 5 would also likely mean a change in lifestyle. I think I would travel to nearly all Grand Prix next year in attempt to see how well I could do if I really focus on the game.

4. *In order to get at least one point at each of the Grand Prix means you need to get to Day Two – and navigate the rocky waters of Day One Sealed Deck. What are the key differences in playing Sealed and Drafting this format?*

Rich: Well there are the obvious differences between Draft and Sealed that never change between formats. You have to work with what you're given. Colour preferences which can drastically alter how you draft aren't very relevant when opening a sealed deck.

5. *What has your best Constructed finish been and who will you work with for the Constructed portion of Worlds?*

Rich: My best Constructed finish that comes to the top of my head is 33rd and Pro Tour–New Orleans - Tinker. I played Goblins and was 10-2 before losing the last four rounds. For the Constructed portions of Worlds I am working with the Hat himself, Gabriel Nassif, as well as some of our associates such as Mark Herberholz, Jeff Cunningham, Ben Rubin, and Jelger Wiegersma.



Hoehn has moneyed in the last eight individual Limited Pro Tours, with an average finish of 20th.

Firestarter: You drive the coverage!

What do you want to know from the Pros this weekend? Ask and ye shall receive. I will do my best to follow up on any serious questions posted in the forums in the audio coverage from Grand Prix–New Jersey.

*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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