

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Wait For It

The eleventh season of the Pro Tour is now officially under way with American Mike Hron out to the early lead in the Player of the Year race after his thrilling five-game win over Takuya Osawa at [Pro Tour-Geneva](#). Mike was certainly the underdog coming into the Top 8 with four of the other Sunday players already having squinted in the glare of the final day's spotlight.

It is easy to understand why one might not have picked Shingo Kurihara, Marijn Lybaert, Jim Herold, or Mike Hron when asked for a prediction on Sunday morning.

Fellow American Ervin Tormos was playing in his second Top 8 in only four Pro Tour appearances; Brazil's Wily Edel continued to make Magic look easy with his third Top 8 appearance in the last four major events; Osawa had a Pro Tour trophy from Prague to keep his books from falling over; and Kenji Tsumura continued to mount his Hall of Fame campaign for sometime around 2013 with his fifth Top 8 appearance.

Early in the day on Friday, Brian Kowal told me to watch his good friend Hron -- H-Ron to the regular participants of after-dark drafting on the Pro Tour scene -- as he claimed that Mike had the best chance of returning an individual Limited Pro Tour trophy to the United States in over six years since Mikey P. won it all on the boat in Los Angeles.

Hron had to play against four members of Sunday's draft over the first two days -- and it could have been five had Kenji not defeated Sebastian Thaler in the final round of Swiss. Here is the gauntlet Hron had to run in order to get his shot at that goal:

Round	Opponent	Result
1	Daniel Sanchez	2-0
2	Bram Snepvangers	2-0
3	Jeff Cunningham	2-1
4	Andre Coimbra	2-1
5	Yohan Dudognon	2-0
6	Adam Chambers	2-0
7	Willy Edel	1-1
8	Jon Sonne	2-1
9	Takuya Osawa	1-2
10	Thomas Gundersen	2-0
11	Kenji Tsumura	1-2
12	Quentin Martin	2-0
13	Sebastian Thaler	1-2
14	Johan Sadeghpour	2-0
15	Jim Herold	2-1

I sat down with the Madison, Wisconsin-based player not too long after his victory. While Mike's name might not be familiar to anyone watching coverage in these last couple of seasons, eagle-eyed readers might recognize him as one of the members of fourth-place team Voracious Cobra at [Grand Prix-Chicago 2004](#). As Hron explained to me in the interview, the city of Chicago was where his career as a Pro and late-night draft champion began -- but many years before that GP finish.

Brian David-Marshall
The Week That Was
Friday, February 16, 2007



VIDEO: TOURNAMENT CENTER

Relive Pro Tour-Geneva with the Tournament Center, the newest addition to Pro Tour event coverage. Updates were posted roughly every hour on Friday and Saturday, so you can go step-by-step through the Swiss rounds and then watch the downloads of Sunday's Top 8 action.

- [Geneva Video Archive](#)
- [Wizards of the Coast on YouTube.com](#)
- **TOP 8 DOWNLOADS**
- [Awards Ceremony and Wrap](#) (9 MB zip)
- [Final](#) (113 MB zip)
- [Semifinals](#) (76 MB zip)
- [Quarterfinals](#) (84 MB zip)
- [Top 8 Draft](#) (29 MB zip)
- [Prelude to a Championship](#) (15 MB zip)

AUDIO: GENEVA IN REVIEW

Richard Hagon takes you on a trip through Pro Tour-Geneva with his four-part podcast recap of the first event of the 2007 season. If you're not a regular reader of event coverage, this is a great starting place to learn the top players and storylines we'll be following all season. With exclusive player interviews, analysis of draft strategies, explanations of formats and the PT season, and much more, it's a cornucopia of information.

- Part 1: [Day One in Review](#) (17.7MB mp3)
- Part 2: [Day Two in Review](#) (12.3 MB mp3)
- Part 3: [Top 8 in Review](#) (21.1 MB mp3)
- Part 4: [Pro Tour-Geneva Final](#) (15.9 MB mp3)

Click on the link to listen in your browser, or right-click to save them to your computer.

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"It was Chicago '99 -- [the one Bob Maher won](#)," said Mike who had not been playing the game seriously for very long at the time. "I had just won a PTQ in Madison after I started playing more seriously. At the Pro Tour I didn't even have a sideboard when I came. I didn't think it was important. I just built my own deck and didn't playtest it or anything. I was 19."

Although Mike was familiar with some of the more famous Wisconsinites from the local tournament scene (notably Maher and Adrian Sullivan), he did not really get to know them well until after that first Pro Tour. After a strong finish in Chicago with his last-minute sideboard, he found himself playing alongside those names quite regularly.

"From '99 I played in almost every single Pro Tour for a year and got on the train for a while," Hron recalled. "I got 40th at that same Chicago playing SqueeBind. If I had a sideboard I think I would have made Top 8 at that event. I built a sideboard but I was playing the wrong cards -- I think I had [Harmonic Convergence](#) over [Tranquility](#)."

Later that year -- in yet another tournament won by his now-friend Maher -- Mike Hron tuned that deck to a seventh-place finish at Grand Prix-Seattle.



Mike Hron pocketed \$40,000 for his efforts in Geneva.

Mike Hron, SqueeBind - 7th Place		
Grand Prix-Seattle 2000, Extended		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 Forest 3 Gaea's Cradle 4 Mountain 4 Taiga 3 Treetop Village 1 Wasteland <hr/> 25 lands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Hail Storm 4 Stormbind 4 Survival of the Fittest <hr/> 9 other spells	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Boil 4 Emerald Charm 3 Hail Storm 2 Null Rod 1 Spike Feeder 1 Spike Weaver 1 Tranquil Domain 1 Uktabi Orangutan 1 Whirling Dervish <hr/> 15 sideboard cards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Avalanche Riders 1 Deranged Hermit 4 Elvish Lyrist 3 Masticore 1 Mindless Automaton 1 River Boa 3 Spike Feeder 1 Spike Weaver 4 Squee, Goblin Nabob 2 Uktabi Orangutan 4 Wall of Roots 1 Yavimaya Elder <hr/> 26 creatures		

He would have his best finish, until this season, a year later at [Pro Tour-New York 2000](#) -- once again with a Constructed deck.

"I got ninth at New York a year later," Hron explained. That year the format was *Masques* Block constructed -- a format that was dominated by Lin-Sivvi and her band of fighting Rebels. Mike's deck choice for that event contained elements of both irony and foreshadowing. The foreshadowing was reflected in the way he went against the conventional wisdom for that tournament and the irony was that years later he would join the rebellion but not for *Masques* Block. "For that event I did a lot of testing. I played an anti-rebels deck that was black-green with [Thrashing Wumpus](#), [Death Pit Offering](#) and [Saproling Burst](#)."

Mike Hron, Roshambo - 9th Place		
Pro Tour-New York 2000, Masques Block Constructed		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7 Forest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Death Pit Offering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15 Unknown Sideboard

4 Rishadan Port	3 Forced March	15 sideboard cards
16 Swamp	2 Horn of Ramos	
27 lands	4 Massacre	
2 Ascendant Evincar	4 Natural Affinity	
4 Divining Witch	4 Saproling Burst	
4 Thrashing Wumpus	2 Skull of Ramos	
10 creatures	23 other spells	

The deck caused a stir in the wake of the event but never posted another strong finish, not unlike the pilot who never got that close to Sunday again until this past weekend. Hron would periodically pop up on the Pro Tour for the odd event or play teams with old friends like in 2005, but when he showed up in Geneva it was not the same Pro Tour he remembered.

"I used to team draft quite a bit back in the old days with Dustin Stern as my partner and got to know a lot of people that way," Hron reminisced. "I recognized maybe five people this time coming back."

Part of the reason Mike returned to the Pro Tour was a recent resurgence of the Madison scene.

"A new store opened up downtown and there is a group of people that are able to get together more often. People come and go -- people are graduating each year. Lately we had everyone living in my apartment qualify -- me, Brian Kowal, and Matt Severa. There were qualifiers in Madison, Minneapolis, and Chicago and we won all three of them. Then Sam Black, who owns the store, also qualified at Gen Con SoCal."

Not only was Mike going to be traveling with friends, he would be able to prepare with them. Much like his strong finish in New York years ago, Hron was extremely well prepared for this event: "We had four playtesters and as soon as *Planar Chaos* was available we practiced every day. I would say we averaged two drafts a day -- 40 drafts overall I would say."

Also like in New York, Hron had a game plan based on what he expected the field to be planning: "I could tell after the first draft that a lot of people did not have as solid a grasp on the format as we did. I was fairly confident that a lot of people wanted to draft green and that is the last thing I wanted to do."



One land short, Osawa extended the hand to Hron.

I pointed out to him that the actual last draft he did on the weekend had him playing green: "I said at that beginning I was only drafting green if I opened **Spectral Force** or **Stormbind**. Green did get better in *Planar Chaos* but really it just made other people want to draft it. I was black if possible every single time."

One of the strong incentives for Mike to be in black was the good price he could get on his cards. It was not like he thought that black was deep in the third pack -- his opinion of the color was the same as most everyone else's.

"If you look at the black commons from *Planar Chaos* there are really only two good ones -- **Rathi Trapper** and **Blightspeaker**. My goal was to draft black-white rebels in theory -- if it was coming. I figured most people wouldn't be drafting black. **Brain Gorgers** is a card most people don't even feel is playable and **Trespasser il-Vec** is another card that people rarely take. It is available much later than it should be."

Mike was so confident in his black plan that he stunned me with his first-pack, first-pick **Tendrils of Corruption** over **Teferi** in the third draft of the weekend.

"Teferi is not as good as it used to be," Mike shrugged. "It's a huge commitment at triple blue so you need to have at least nine **Islands** in your deck to even play it. You can play seven swamps and still play **Tendrils**. And if you pass **Teferi** it is a stronger signal that passing **Tendrils**."

He went on to explain that five months ago when drafting triple **Time Spiral**, you could open a pack with **Strangling Soot** and **Fathom Seer**, take the Soot, and expect the Seer to come back. Now if you wanted the Seer you had to pay first-pick prices. That's a high price to pay knowing that most people in a draft want to be blue -- you might not see any more blue cards and have wasted that first pick.

If you look at the draft viewer for the Top 8 you can see that Hron was faced with that very same pick. What he did not know at the time was that the presence of five **Phthisis** in

the draft as driving the price of black up as well.

"Fathom Seer and Soot were the only options in my opinion. I went with the Soot because that is what I had been doing. I thought the person to my right would be red-green and I did not want to do that -- I was happy not to do that. I took Soot and then I took Shadow Guildmage -- two black-red cards -- but after that the black dried up real quick."

What made him realize green was going to be open for him? "I think it was a seventh-pick Wurmcalling, which I think is a very good green card and apparently no one else does. I think a lot of people try to draft aggressive beatdown decks with green and Wurmcalling is more of a control card. I figured green was there and then I opened Spectral Force."



Before taking on Osawa, Hron had to dispatch 2005 Player of the Year Kenji Tsumura.

Talking to Mike's friends about his play style, one thing that came up again and again in those conversations was Mike's refusal to walk into tricks -- be they Exclude, Giant Growth, or even Drudge Reavers (a card Mike played around in the finals against Osawa).

Mike downplayed the read, however. "I looked at his decklist and knew he had Drudge Reavers and Crookclaw Transmuter. Either way I didn't want to attack into it. If it is Transmuter they just bounce but if it was Drudge Reavers I just throw a guy away. He had said 'go' with a ton of cards in his hand so he either had one of those cards or a terrible hand."

One of the more talked about plays of the tournament came in the final game when Mike had three different turns where he could have played Spectral Force. On the first he chose to play Gauntlet of Power and Mire Boa -- only to have the Boa killed with Cradle to Grave -- and on the next he passed with no play at all!

"He didn't have any black permanents out at that point," he explained. "So the Spectral Force was not going to kill him fast enough. He had five or six lands and lots of cards in hand. He most likely had Phthisis and maybe enough lands to cast it. If I played it I was almost certainly dead. I was waiting for him to play a black permanent or for me to draw something. I was looking for anything I could play that would affect the board and let me attack. If he had played a seventh land I would probably not have cast it at all."

Osawa ended up stuck on six lands and never drew the seventh to cast one of his three Phthisis he had in his hand. Hron took Osawa's play of Corpulent Corpse as a signal to deploy his giant monster. Interestingly enough Osawa had a mental lapse and did not realize that his Corpse would allow the Force to untap. In fact, Osawa simply assumed the Force always untapped every other turn and attacked with his Corpse rather than leaving six points of toughness back -- with help from a topdecked Deepwalker -- and going down to one last point of life and one crucial draw step.

Instead Osawa laid his hand on the table and congratulated Hron on his victory. Hron expected to see Phthisis but not a set of them. "I knew he had at least one but I didn't expect that he had all three."

Hron was looking forward to a couple of Magic-free days before deciding if he would be taking full advantage of his qualification for the next nine Pro Tour events. "I am kind of burned out right now after averaging three drafts a day for the last three weeks or so. I will probably go to Yokohama. I just hope that some other Madison guys qualify for it. Hopefully I can go to most of them."



Firestarter: Draft Viewing Pleasure

The coverage from Pro Tour-Geneva includes a [draft viewer for the Top 8 draft](#). Looking at the eight players in the Top 8 draft, do you think you would have done anything differently? Would you have taken Soot over Fathom Seer if you were Hron? Who had the toughest first pick/first pack of the draft? Go to the forums and share your opinions there.

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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