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The Legend of Kenji

Brian David-Marshall
The Week That Was
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Heading into the second Pro Tour of the 2007 season, who would you guess sits [atop the standings](#) for the Player of the Year race?

I guess it is not that much of a shocker considering the title of this week's column, but let's face it...you would have probably gotten it right anyway. Pro Tour-Geneva winner Mike Hron did not get very far at the one Grand Prix he attended in the intervening months while Kenji was being Kenji.

Not only did he attend every single Grand Prix in a grueling six-week stretch that traversed the globe from Dallas (third place, 5 points) to Singapore (19th, 2 points) to Amsterdam to Kyoto and then finally to Massachusetts (seventh, 3 points) but he posted solid finishes in three of the five events, racking up 10 precious Pro Tour Points in the process (just enough to nose out into the lead over Hron).

During the 2006 World Championship webcast, Randy Buehler and I discussed the pantheon of all-time great **Magic** players as we watched Gabriel Nassif play under the Sunday spotlight for the sixth time in his illustrious career. No one has ever questioned the players occupying the top two spots in the all-time ranks (although there remains much dissent over how they are ordered). Names like Gabriel Nassif, Bob Maher, and Dirk Baberowski were bandied about but there was no clear third after Jon Finkel and Kai Budde.

The debate has continued, and Kenji Tsumura's name has been thrown into the pot by multiple players. During the panel discussion at Grand Prix-Amsterdam – with Nassif sitting on the panel – Richie Hoehn declared Kenji the third-best player of all time with barely a murmur of dissent from the rest of the panel.

In just one week Kenji will return to the scene of his triumph in the [2005 Player of the Year race](#) which literally came down to the final rounds at the World Championships when he, Olivier, and Masashi Oiso jockeyed for the lead throughout the tail end of that exciting year. Throughout that year Kenji evolved from some spiky-haired kid on the 2004 Japanese National team to the quite possibly the game's biggest star.

How did he earn the throng of fans that close in around him at every Pro Tour, as well as the respect of everybody in the Players Club? Well, let's look back at his impressive career and get some feedback from the coverage professionals, players, and judges who have had the opportunity to observe his ascent first hand.

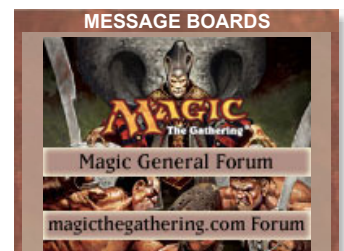
According to the all-knowing DCI database Kenji's first sanctioned matches took place almost seven years ago on May 20, 2000 in an event called "Playspace Hiroshima standard cup #5" Fittingly, he went 4-1 losing only to Manabu Morimoto during the second round.

The first premier-level event sighting of Kenji was in 2002 at [Grand Prix-Utsunomiya 2002](#). The then-amateur finished in 21st place with a 10-4 record (with two byes). Three of those four losses were to Masashi Oiso, Jin Okamoto, and Ichirou Shimura. He won \$250 and earned the first of his lifetime 175 Pro Points (and counting).

The next step in Kenji's career was his fateful appearance at [Pro Tour-Chicago](#). Kenji cited that event as being a tremendous influence on his career in an interview after earning his Player of the Year title. He bombed out on Day One but spent the rest of the weekend watching Kai Budde – then at the very height of his powers – en route to one of his staggering seven Pro Tour victories. For Kenji it enforced the idea that **Magic** was ultimately a game of skill that would pay off if you had the skills and put in the work.

Kenji's skills did not manifest themselves fully until the 2005 season. After ending the 2004 season on a high note – the Japanese National team [finished in third place at Worlds](#) – it was onward and upward for the budding

Update on Rain Delay



superstar. He finally broke through into a [Top 8 at Grand Prix–Osaka](#) and has never looked back. Since crossing the Top 8 threshold Kenji has posted eight Grand Prix Top 8s, including two wins.

In March of 2005 he went to [Pro Tour–Atlanta](#) with his Osaka teammates and burst through into the Top 8 of that event. He has gone on to rack up five Pro Tour Top 8s in an extremely short period of time – right around 22 months – and is the most dominant and complete player on the Pro Tour. Take a look at his individual winning percentages since the start of 2005:

Constructed: 61.7%
Limited: 64.0%
Overall: 62.9%

That winning percentage takes into account Limited Pro Tours in Prague, London, and Nagoya – three events that saw him sidelined for Day Two. When I interviewed Kenji after the 2005 season he vowed to improve his lagging Limited game, and with the exception of that event in Prague he was a man of his word. He went on to make the Top 8 of back-to-back draft Pro Tours in [Kobe](#) and [Geneva](#) and had a run of three straight Limited Grand Prix Top 8 finishes, with back-to-back wins.

Those two wins were a pivotal moment in the eyes of the **Magic**-playing world. After all, who wins the Player of the Year title and vows to improve? And then improves? It was a truly impressive run which saw him go undefeated in [Kuala Lumpur](#) with two draws in Rounds 13 and 14 to make Top 8. After three byes in [Toulouse](#) he lost to Geoffrey Siron in Round 4 and then rattled off seven more wins before dropping a match to Shuhei Nakamura in Round 12. Then he went on to win the GP.

All told, he went 23-2-3 (with six byes) over the two Limited tournaments. And it wasn't just red-shirted ensigns he was beating – on the hit list are Shota Yasooka, Quentin Martin, Osamu Fujita, Roel van Heeswijk, Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, Julien Nuijten, Raphael Levy, and Shuhei Nakamura (whom he exacted revenge on in the Top 8 of Toulouse!) At the start of Grand Prix–Yokohama 2004 (Rochester draft, first limited event for Kenji in the 2004-5 season), his Limited rating was 1879. Before losing to Mike Hron in the Geneva semifinals, it was 2249.

So with all that said, on the brink of returning to the site of his tremendous one-point Player of the Year victory over Oliver Ruel, where does Kenji fit in the all-time pantheon of players? I asked a handful of players, judges, and coverage experts to chime in with their takes on where Kenji ranks, along with when they first noticed that there was something special about the young man.

I could find no better place to start than Olivier Ruel, who along with Masashi Oiso was embroiled in that terrific race for the 2005 PoY title.

"I think he is the best player in the game at the moment," declared Ruel who suspects that Kenji might actually be the third-best player in the history of the game. He clearly recalled meeting Kenji at Grand Prix–Sendai – another pivotal moment from Kenji's perspective if you look back at my interview with him – when Oli was team drafting with his brother and Sam Gomersall against Anan Go and two of Anan's friends.

Olivier's team was up 4-2 with all three matches against Kenji still left to be played as the site was shutting down. They headed back to the hotel with Kenji making a detour to pick up some "liquid refreshment." Despite his beverage consumption, Kenji was more than up to the task of sweeping the drafts remaining rounds, making a lasting impression on Oli.

"The second time I saw him was at Worlds in San Francisco," Oli recalled. "He was playing on what might have been the best national team ever along with Tsuyoshi Fujita and Shuhei Nakamura. Shortly after, I was given a questionnaire for my Pro card and I had to answer the question 'do you have a rival on the tour?' I answered 'my brother Antoine, Masashi Oiso and Kenji Tsumura.' We were not even true rivals by then, I just named my bro, the player who was the best in the world (Masashi) and that kid I liked a lot. Eventually, that 'rivalry' came to an amazing point on the following months. I was playing my best **Magic** in 12 years. I was playing more tournaments than Kenji, and still lost the race. I then realized that despite being at that time one of the best players in the game, my best level was not high enough to match with Kenji."

"To me Kenji has always had one of the most important qualities for a **Magic** player – humbleness," he continued. "Now, little by little, he understands how good he is which gives him a new weapon, ambition. Kenji is going to play more and more, travel more and more, and get better and better. What we've seen in the past two years is only a beginning."

It is hard to talk about Kenji without mentioning Richie Hoen. Richie was one of the two players Kenji vowed to model himself after in his



Fujita, Tsumura, and Nakamura at Worlds 2004.

"Kenji is going to play more and more, travel

quest to master Limited formats. The two have become fast friends and have even teamed together for the last two Two-Headed Giant Grand Prix tournaments. Richie cedes all decision-making to the Japanese superstar, which should give you an inkling of just how good Kenji really is.

"If you're simply using results, then Kai and Jon and maybe a couple others are better at the moment," Richie estimated. "But Kenji is well on his way to catching them, with no signs of slowing down. If you're judging him on less concrete things, he's probably in about the same place, although Shota Yasooka could also be better than him, we just haven't seen him play enough yet. Again, he really hasn't been at the top long enough for the comparison to be made fairly yet."

Interestingly it was during Richie's run to his Pro Tour Top 8 in Yokohama when he played Kenji in round one of that event. Despite the fact that Richie won the match, the young player made an immediate impression.

"He was very young back then (although I'm only a year older than him, I suppose his youth was exaggerated by his size, or lack thereof), but he was very calm and collected when we played," said Richie who had seen that confidence in very other few players. "It felt similar to when I played against Jon or Kai, or more recently Shota Yasooka. It felt like he was completely in control of the game. He knew what I was going to do, and was always ready with this best answer for it. Despite that, I won that match, and was very surprised that it took him another couple years to get onto the train, but it didn't surprise me that he was the Player of the Year the year after he first made it onto the train."

At Grand Prix–Yamagata last November Richie went over to observe Kenji play after winning his own match. Kenji had started the game on the draw and was on his heels for most of the game.

"Despite that he was able to maximize his resources, and twice trick his opponent into making the only play that would allow Kenji to survive," Rich continued. "The game still looked bad, but Kenji drew the exact card he'd been playing to draw, then was able to trick his opponent one final time and steal a game that appeared unwinnable throughout. Its games like those that separate the truly great players from the average pros."

Frank Karsten – easily the most cerebral player in the game today – had no reservations about putting Kenji in the top three. In fact he even went one step further.

"He is the best," said Frank without any reservations. "He is extremely skilled at the game now and I think he would surely beat Kai or Jon at their peak. He hasn't posted enough top finishes yet to surpass the other greats on lifetime PT points or money lists, but he will get there soon enough."

Fellow Magicthegathering.com columnist Quentin Martin agreed with Frank: "He's the best. It seems unfair to compare him to Kai and Jon because they both played in different periods of **Magic**. Finkel won off sheer unreal skill in an era where most people hadn't reached that level of the game or tested that much. Kai tested more than anyone at the time and was also amazing. Kenji tests DI and also has the raw skill to back it up. If they were all to be at their heights right now, it might be the case that Finkel would have more raw talent or Kai a different kind of edge, but Kenji would be better because he plays more than them – whenever I log on to **Magic Online** he's there."

Frank had a crystal clear memory of first noticing Kenji in the last round of Pro Tour–Columbus when they faced off, with Frank playing **Aluren** against Kenji's **Desire** deck. The anecdote not only illustrates the qualities that make Kenji a great player but comes complete with a "what-if" ending.

"In the deciding game I assembled the **Aluren** plus **Raven Familiar** plus **Cavern Harpy** combo and put down the **Aluren** quickly, before giving him time to find a counter or to do his combo," explained Frank. "I started going off with the Familiar/Harpy sequence, Kenji allowed me to do it for a short while, and then – Kenji being Kenji – he said 'stop' at the exact perfect moment, with a Familiar on the stack. Then proceeded to play **Cloud of Faeries** of his own through my **Aluren**, then **Snap/Turnabout**/etc., working through his hand that way, eventually adding up to exactly enough **Brain Freeze** storm copies to take out my entire deck (using the couple Harpy cycles I did before to up his storm count). This milled all my win conditions and I lost."

"After the game, he told me that thanks to that win he got exactly to the required 20 points that he needed to get on the train. He was unstoppable after that."

Quentin took a break from the tour for a handful of events during which Kenji stamped his foot down hard on the accelerator. When Quentin returned to the game, Kenji was not the same player he previously remembered – this was right in the midst of Kenji's Limited transformation.

"I've played him in two high-profile Limited games – the semis of a GP and to go 6-0 in Pro Tour–Geneva," said Quentin. "Whereas previously, I had an edge on him in Limited, I felt utterly destroyed. In one game, he played around **Hail Storm** AND **Mystic Snake**, that he hadn't seen, to win! There isn't another player in the world that makes me feel as helpless as when I play Kenji."

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Kenji teaming with Hoaen at GP-Massachusetts.

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Willy Edel – himself a budding superstar of the game – had the opportunity to observe Kenji during one of the Brazilian player's very first Pro Tours – the much bally-hooed World Championships of 2005.

"In the last round Kenji was playing a feature match," said Willy, setting the stage for Kenji's career highlight. "If he won, he would win the POY race. That was a very tough game vs. a dude [Javier Dominguez] with Scepter Chant – Kenji was playing 'Tog – and I saw several pros congratulating Olivier because Kenji would never win Game 3 as he was in a difficult board position and had very little time to do that. Suddenly he started to recover and won it in the extra turns watched by an astonished crowd of players. It was an absolutely amazing game, it was the first time I watched Kenji playing and to me he totally deserved to win the POY after that."



Feature match reporters have a chance to see the game's best players going up against each other and often have a unique insight into those player's game. Ted Knutson has traveled to Japan as often as any other reporter in the game and had the opportunity to follow Kenji's 2005 season from the elimination rounds at Grand Prix–Osaka through the waning rounds of the World Championships. As Ted heads into his final coverage gig before moving on to other endeavors, Kenji – and where he ranked all-time – was very much on his mind.

"Where he ranks in the pantheon of **Magicians**," mused Teddy CardGame. "I think the list probably looks like Kai, Jon, Nassif, Darwin, and then a whole bunch of guys clustered after that who were clearly excellent, but perhaps not legendary. Kenji is poised to eclipse even Nassif soon, and with how much he is loved by pretty much everyone, I think he already is one of the legends of the game. I missed Jon and Kai at their peaks, but I've seen almost everyone else. I can definitely say that Kenji is the player I will miss watching the most when I stop doing coverage."

"I started watching Kenji as early as Worlds 2004," Ted continued. "But the first time I truly sat up and noticed how good he was in [Philadelphia](#). His battles in that event were impressive, and if Gadiel cared about the game at all, it would be easy to regard that final as a battle between two of the most talented young **Magic** players ever at the very start of their careers. As it is, Gadiel's full talent will likely go unrealized, but Kenji's certainly has not."

"Where he truly transitioned to greatness though, was when he busted his ass to turn his Limited game into a force as well. It would have been easy for Kenji to 'just' be a Constructed master, but that wasn't acceptable to him, despite how weak his Limited game actually was. He basically stopped working on Constructed for a six-month period or so – after he was already the Player of the Year, mind you – and transitioned into one of the World's best drafters as well. It was at that point that I knew he had the talent, the desire, and the work ethic to be one of the all-time greats."

Michael Flores who had the opportunity to watch Kenji from the coverage booth on multiple occasions first tipped to Kenji during the Swiss rounds of Pro Tour–Atlanta when Mike was watching his friends Steve Sadin, Paul Jordan, and Mike Clair rattle off an X-1 start to the tournament. On Day Two they ran afoul of One Spin, with Steve Sadin drawing the deadly (although no one knew it at the time) Kenji assignment.



One Spin: Saito, Tsumura, Kaji.

"Kenji took a first-pick **Hankyu**, which was not a high priority draft card at that point," Mike marveled. "Needless to say, Kenji demolished Steve with it. I flitted back and forth among teams in contention and ultimately found myself watching Kenji's final round match, where a win by him would ensure Top 4 for One Spin. It was then that the seeds of a great Kenji Tsumura were formed in my imagination. He did something that very few Japanese players can do, which is to force the opponent to play HIS game. He commanded such a powerful reality and forced his opponent to make exactly the plays that he needed to win combats and in fact win in time – it could easily have ended in a draw."

"If you compare him to another very good player, his former teammate Tomohiro Kaji, you can see a marked difference in play style," Mike continued. "They are both superb, but Kaji is the kind of player who thinks out his plays, plans several turns

in advance, yes, but is reserved and ultimately passive: Kaji makes his plays and trusts in superior execution to win, which is different from Kenji, whose mannerisms, timing, and aura of command enrich his obviously capable technical skills by bending the opponent's plays to fit them like Legos."

As for where Kenji ranks all time, Mike had this to say: "Kenji is in the Jon-Kai class in terms of skill and talent, and almost there on finishes. There are actually several players in this class on skill OR talent, but probably not both – not clearly – and who never backed it up with finishes, though a hand full went on to work in R&D during their primes so it's hard to say. Nassif has something else entirely, but that is neither here nor there. I don't put Kenji at a hard No. 3 because he doesn't have a legitimate title. In order to beat Dirk, Bob, and Nassif, Kenji needs a title...

"But that's the only thing keeping him out of that No. 3 spot. He is an absurdly tight player. I don't want to blaspheme or anything right now, but even when Jon was on his 'I'm Jon again' run, he was making sloppy plays when it didn't matter, and Kai had to get lucky under the lights to win sometimes and was even lampooned for making mistakes in Grand Prix Top 8 positions (but still winning obviously). The **Magic** media is at its absolute height today and we don't really talk about Kenji that way. That said, it is hard to gauge granularly because Jon, Kai, and now Kenji were active at their primes at different times, though I think Jon is still the overall multi-dimensional best whereas Kai has the best naked resume."

Rich Hagon of MoxRadio fame was on hand when Kenji began venturing to the European Grand Prix circuit. The Grand Prix in Toulouse was particularly memorable.

"When Mox turned up to cover Toulouse, the first person we saw waiting outside the building was Kenji. That in itself was a statement of intent, because Toulouse isn't exactly en route to, er, many places," recalled Rich. "Only three weeks after winning Grand Prix–Kuala Lumpur, here he was again, going up against a truly enormous field. Here's the key bit. After his three byes, he gets paired against Pro Tour–London winner Geoffrey Siron, and loses. From there, he was unstoppable. As we counted down the rounds, we kept saying 'surely he can't do it.' Of course he could, and did, and as a side note, his final win against Marijn Lybaert (Marijn who?) went up in value once the world realized that the hitherto unknown Lybaert was no fluke, courtesy of a Top 8 in Geneva."

"Implacable, relentless, apparently effortless, it's hard to imagine a player you'd less like to face when you absolutely, positively have to win." – Rich Hagon, Mox Radio

"Implacable, relentless, apparently effortless, it's hard to imagine a player you'd less like to face when you absolutely, positively have to win," said Richard, echoing the opinions of the countless European players who slump in their chairs whenever Kenji darkens the threshold of any of their events. "Final thought, consider this: Why would you ever bet against him making a Top 8 in any given tournament? That's how good he is."

Yes, despite all the accolades there was an undertow that pulled most people I talked to away from flatly giving Kenji the No. 3 spot – or even putting him in the same class as other No. 3 contenders like Nassif, Dirk, and Bob.

"I think Kenji is a great player, but I'm not sure he's as good as Kai, Jon or even Dirk were at their prime," explained Osyp Lebedowicz of his reluctance to even crown Kenji the best active player today. "Of the current class, I still think Nassif is more of a master, but not as determined as Kenji. All in all I think Kenji needs to finally win a Pro Tour to secure a place among the likes of Kai and Jon."

Jeroen Remie was also aware of what he felt was a glaring omission on an otherwise sparkling resume: "I never really noticed this kid was that special until he made like his third Top 8, simply because I started recognizing him. Richie Hoen talking about Kenji all the time also helped. Basically he was just there all of a sudden, and he never loses....until the Top 8."

Sheldon Menery was the Head Judge for Kenji's first Sunday appearance and the young player made an immediate impression: "His team seemed all business, but he carries an impish quality which spiced things up. But despite that quality (he has this devilish grin that makes you think he's always up to something), unlike many players of his generation, he's polite and respectful."

"There are no questions as to his skill and talent," said Sheldon, who feels there is a broad gulf to cross for anyone to be mentioned in the same breath as Kai and Jon. "But I'm not ready to yet put Kenji in the Kai and Finkel company – it's really the two of them and then everyone else. Kenji will have to sustain his current performance for another couple of years for me to elevate him to Finkel/Kai levels."

There is no traditional firestarter this week – the whole column more or less serves as a topic of discussion. All eyes will be on Kenji this season as he continues his assault on the record books. Can he return to form in Constructed after devoting so much time to mastering the art of the 40-card deck? Can he get the elite-class sixth Top 8 finish? Will he finally get the Top 8 monkey off his back? And where will he end up when the final chapters of his career are written? Share your thoughts on Kenji in the forums and don't forget to follow his ongoing adventures from the Tournament Center in just one week.



Kenji's battle against Olivier for the 2005 Player of the Year was the stuff of legend.



Kenji Tsumura, a master at work.

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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