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The Future is Now

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The Week That Was
Friday, November 9, 2007



As the elimination bracket for [Grand Prix–Krakow](#) began to fill in this past weekend, **Magic** fans around the world continually refreshed their browsers waiting to see which player and what deck would emerge victorious from the Top 8. If you had Paul Cheon with Pickles in your office pool, you were the big winner.

Many of the players from my local play group emailed/IM'd me as the event came to a close excited by the news that an American player had nailed down Level 6 status for the first time since the introduction of the Pro Players Club. I was surprised by how much meaning this held for these younger Pro Tour aspirants. I was even more surprised when I realized that they had come to that conclusion on their own; only the bracket had been updated on the Tournament Center at that point and none of the text coverage had gone up yet.

When high-level play began for **Magic**, the game was dominated by Americans but that has changed as the game went global (and digital). As the great American players of the past moved on to the so-called real world and European, Asian, and now South American players stepped up their game, it raised questions about where America stood on the world stage. Some pundits suggested that the game had passed America by (or that Poker ran it off the side of the road), while others have saddled every rising star with the title of the future of American **Magic**.



Cheon broke through in Krakow after two second-place GP finishes this season.

I am pretty sure I am guilty of that last one on a couple of occasions, but with Paul Cheon's win and ascension to the ranks of virtual Level 6, I think I can safely say the future of American **Magic** is now. Of course Paul has accomplished all of this without a Pro Tour Top 8 on his resume. It had seemed like he might get there after the first few rounds of Pro Tour–Valencia before faltering down, but that did not deter the former U.S. National Champion and now four-time Grand Prix Top 8 competitor.

"It still feels a bit unreal to me that all of this is happening," said Paul of the experience of winning the GP and becoming the first American to achieve Level 6 status. "At the beginning of this season I told myself I'd be happy if I hit Level 3. Once I got to the point where I realized I could shoot for Level 6, I decided to make the trip out to Poland and see if I could pick up a couple of points. Words can't describe the sense of accomplishment I felt when I hit Level 6 and knowing that I've got it locked up for next year is a great feeling to have."

I asked Paul if becoming the first American to achieve Level 6 held the same meaning for him that it held for the aspiring Pro players who were cheering him on from the cyber-sidelines on Sunday.

"I think it is meaningful as America has been getting some slack for not being able to be as competitive as the other countries out there," answered Paul, who expects to see more Americans following him into the most private rooms of the Pro Players Club. "I think we're doing a good job of showing that we still have what it takes to do well as we have two Pro Tour victories this season. There's a lot of talent here and I'm sure there will be more Americans that will move up the rankings and show that we're here to play."

Paul's first Pro Tour was the skins payout experiment known as Pro Tour–Philadelphia, where he finished 43rd and got his first taste of winning money on the Pro Tour with an \$1,100 check to show for his efforts. He played a legends deck with **Time of Need** to fetch dragons, warlords, and giant green fatties, but if he could go back he was pretty clear about what deck he should have played instead.

"I would have told myself to go and play Gifts," said Paul. "That was by far the best deck in that format."

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Paul Cheon's Bombz Over Baghdad

Pro Tour–Philadelphia 43rd Place, Kamigawa Block Constructed

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
10 Forest	4 Cranial Extraction
4 Hero's Demise	

1 Island	4 Horobi's Whisper	3 Hideous Laughter
1 Mountain	4 Kodama's Reach	1 Myojin of Night's Reach
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	3 Sensei's Divining Top	2 Night of Souls' Betrayal
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	1 Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang	4 Psychic Spear
7 Swamp	4 Time of Need	1 Wear Away
3 Tendo Ice Bridge	1 Umezawa's Jitte	
	2 Wear Away	15 sideboard cards
24 lands	23 other spells	
1 Godo, Bandit Warlord		
2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni		
2 Kodama of the North Tree		
3 Kokusho, the Evening Star		
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror		
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder		
13 creatures		

While a 43rd-place finish is an impressive Pro Tour debut, it was not until U.S. Nationals last year that Paul had his breakout finish. He seemingly came from nowhere to become the U.S. National champion (the latest in a long line of unknown U.S. Champs that has included the then-anonymous Matt Linde, Eugene Harvey, and Justin Gary). He was armed with what was clearly the best deck for that particular tournament as both he and his teammate Luis Scott-Vargas made the team with it.

Paul Cheon's SolarFlare		
2006 U.S. Nationals, Winner		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
2 Azorius Chancery	4 Azorius Signet	4 Castigate
2 Caves of Koilos	4 Compulsive Research	3 Condemn
1 Eiganjo Castle	2 Dimir Signet	2 Cranial Extraction
3 Godless Shrine	3 Mortify	4 Descendant of Kiyomaro
1 Hallowed Fountain	2 Persecute	2 Persecute
1 Island	4 Remand	
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	4 Wrath of God	15 sideboard cards
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	3 Zombify	
1 Miren, the Moaning Well		
2 Orzhov Basilica	26 other spells	
1 Plains		
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse		
2 Swamp		
2 Tendo Ice Bridge		
1 Underground River		
1 Watery Grave		
23 lands		
3 Angel of Despair		
3 Court Hussar		
1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni		
1 Kokusho, the Evening Star		
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror		
2 Yosei, the Morning Star		
11 creatures		

"I always felt that I had what it takes to be competitive at the higher levels of **Magic** but I just had to get there first," said Paul of the confidence boost he got from his win at Nationals. "Then I finished 12th at Worlds in Paris and since then I knew I could compete with the big boys. At least in my mind it proved that Nationals was not a fluke and that I could continue doing well in bigger events. It gave me the confidence that I needed to take on the 2007 season, but I must admit I still do get nervous every now and then when I play against the big name players that I used to read about before I played on the Tour."

For Paul getting his game up to the level of...well, up to Level 6 was a two-pronged attack. The first part of the equation is something that is available to just about every **Magic** player and has been a well-publicized tool for Paul.

"Practice, practice, and more practice," explained the Krakow winner. "The best place to be able to get as many hours into the game as possible is through **Magic Online** and the countless hours that I devoted to the game paid off. Immerse yourself in the game and do whatever you can to improve your game and that includes reading strategy articles, practicing, and surrounding yourself with other players who have the same drive to do well as you do."

The latter half of the equation is more challenging, which Paul acknowledged with a nod to his good fortune: "I think I was pretty lucky to have such a great network of good players around me in my earlier developments as a player and that really helped me improve my game and get me to where I am today. From early team drafts with Sam Stein, Eugene Levin, Zareh Mirbregian at the local store to meeting up with Luis Scott-Vargas and spending countless hours discussing various strategies improved my game drastically. I wouldn't be here without those guys."

After Cheon and Scott-Vargas made the U.S. National Team in 2006, Wizards chronicled their experience of traveling to Pro Tour—Kobe with Sam Stein and becoming regulars on the Tour in this video piece.



I was curious if there was anyone that Paul attempted to emulate when he played the game. He said there wasn't anyone in particular, although he did confess to wondering what went on in the gray matter of an impending Hall of Famer.

"I haven't really thought about being like Kai but I do wonder what his mindset is going into the tournaments," mused Paul. "He expects to win and he knows he's better than just about everybody in the room when he plays. He's got that burning desire to win and that killer instinct which I think you need to become great."

According to Paul that 'killer instinct' can be difficult to keep up full time, what with the non-stop preparation for tournaments having a burnout factor that can devour the required hours of practice he believes will allow him to post a strong finish. He attributes his falter in Valencia with that burnout, but also credits his Spanish swoon with giving him the drive to win in Krakow.

"After that disappointing performance, I had that fire inside of me that really wanted to win and do well so I basically shut off everything I was doing and played as much **Magic** as I could," he explained. "Unfortunately I didn't have the cards until a couple nights before Krakow but as soon as the cards were available I started buying a ton of Standard cards from *Lorwyn* and started testing. I had a pretty good idea that I was going to be playing Pickles even before I left so I spent a couple days practicing in the 8-man Standard queues to get a good feel for the deck. Testing for Krakow involved some 8-mans on **[Magic Online]** and then I met up with LSV [Luis Scott-Vargas] in Krakow. We played with several decks and eventually hashed out a blue-white Pickles list as I wanted to play with *Oblivion Ring* and *Wrath of God* because we expected a bunch of aggro."

GP Krakow 2007, Winner

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Adarkar Wastes	4 Ancestral Vision	2 Aeon Chronicer
4 Calciform Pools	4 Cryptic Command	3 Aven Riftwatcher
3 Nimbus Maze	3 Oblivion Ring	3 Faerie Trickery
10 Snow-Covered Island	4 Rune Snag	2 Jace Beleren
4 Snow-Covered Plains	3 Wrath of God	2 Magus of the Tabernacle
2 Urza's Factory		1 Oblivion Ring
	18 other spells	1 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir
27 lands		1 Wrath of God
		15 sideboard cards
3 Brine Elemental		
4 Phyrexian Ironfoot		
2 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir		
2 Venser, Shaper Savant		
4 Vesuvan Shapeshifter		
15 creatures		

Looking over the Top 8 decklists, it appeared to me that Paul was facing a bad matchup in the finals of Krakow against Amiel Tenenbaum, who was playing the monoblue Wafo-Tapa creation Sonic Boom.

"Yeah, both the Top 8 and finals matchup were not in my favor," agreed Paul who went on to describe how he was able to emerge as the winner. With a handful of dead cards in Game 1, stealing a win before sideboarding was the key with Paul's eight anti-control cards leveling the field for Games Two and Three. "Amiel definitely had the edge in terms of number of counterspells but I believe my edge was also significant in that I was running 27 lands to his 25 and I played with four Storage Lands to his two. You never want to miss land drops in the control mirror and the storage lands are also pretty key."

"The matches could have gone either way but if at any point he left himself an opening, I would make him pay by playing a hard-to-deal-with threat. He has no good way to deal with a threat once it resolves so in Game 1 I managed to resolve a morphed **Brine Elemental**, and just attacking for two and then unmorphing was enough to put pressure on him and force him to do things he did not want to do. Game 3 I was under the impression that he would board out some copies of **Rune Snag** as I was also playing with them and so I just decided to gun the turn-three Jace plan and once it stuck, the card advantage provided by the planeswalker was just too much for him to handle. Another key part of the match was the fact that after Jace resolved, I would suspend **Ancestral Vision** and every time they were going to resolve, he would counter them when I had seven cards in my hand. I had a grip of counters but the Visions were actually pretty irrelevant as I had an active Jace and that helped me win a key counter war later that won me the match."

Despite making the Top 8 of four Grand Prix, winning U.S. Nationals, posting a Top 16 at Worlds last year, and a Top 32 to start this season in Geneva, Paul has still not played on Sunday at a Pro Tour (not counting the abbreviated Day Two at Valencia, which makes the whole 'playing on Sunday' metaphor for a Top 8 finish at a Pro Tour kind of clumsy). It is hard to imagine that with the skill Paul has put on display for the past two seasons and with the resources at his disposal that status won't change.

"Pro Tours are tough and Top 8ing is difficult but very possible," said a cautiously optimistic Paul. "With the right mindset and preparation, I think it's a very possible goal to achieve. If you play in enough Pro Tours, I think it's just a matter of time before you get your first Top 8 and I'm waiting for my opportunity. Pro Tours are long tournaments so a little luck is required to get to that Sunday stage...I just need to take my luck from Grand Prix and apply it to the Pro Tour somehow!"

Next up on Paul's itinerary is Daytona Beach, where he hopes to secure at least one point. Paul's win in Krakow left him with 49 points. As long as he can register to participate in Worlds he is guaranteed two points—and Level 6 status—there. If he can wrap up Level 6 before then, he will get an appearance fee bonus of \$500 for the extra level.

"I've already done a ton of Sealed with the owner of Enchanted Grounds, Jeff Kokx as he really wants to qualify for Kuala Lumpur," said Paul of his prep for his next GP. "I also expect to play a bunch of *Lorwyn* release events on [Magic Online] so I should have enough hours in to be ready for Daytona."

What of his preparations for Worlds? Will he be working with the same uber-team that included himself, Luis Scott-Vargas, Mark Herberholz, Sam Stein, Gabriel Nassif, Rich Hoaen, and countless other top Pros?

"I'm actually not totally sure yet," he said. "I felt it was a bit large because in the end, everybody ended up playing their own homebrews. The testing group usually starts with me, Luis Scott-Vargas and then whoever else is interested in testing. I plan on doing a lot of testing for this tournament so I really hope to do well. There's a lot less stress as I have Level 6 locked up and [Tomoharu] Saito has like a million points so PoY is a pretty lofty goal but hey anything can happen! Top 8 Worlds one time?"

Well, not quite a million points, but Saito does still hold the overall lead in the Player of the Year race. Like Paul said, "anything can happen". With two

Name	Pro Points
1. Tomoharu Saito	58
2. Shingou Kurihara	52

Grand Prix to go and 25 Pro Points up for grabs at Worlds for the winner, what was once a two-horse race has opened up to include five contenders with less than 10 points between first and fifth.

Saito, Kurihara, and Tsumura can put a little distance between them and the field with a Japanese Grand Prix this weekend that should not feature Guillaume Wafo-Tapa or Cheon. Olivier Ruel, though, is another matter and the French globetrotter could find himself in contention for the PoY title if he can tie Alex Shvartsman's record 21 Grand Prix Top 8s with another strong finish in Kitakyushu.

2. Guillaume Wafo-Tapa	52
4. Kenji Tsumura	51
5. Paul Cheon	49
6. Olivier Ruel	45
7. Raphael Levy	44
8. Mark Herberholz	38
9. Mike Hron	37
9. Shuhei Nakamura	37
• For complete standings, click here .	

World Championships Closing In

Watching the game's best players come thundering down the stretch at Worlds is just one of the reasons to attend the year-end **Magic** tournament in New York this year. A shot at winning a car is another. The list of stores running Northeast Challenge Qualifiers next weekend has been made public and can be found [here](#).

The tournaments will all take place on Sunday, November 18 and will be Standard format (don't forget to [study decklists from States/Champs events](#) all over the world), with two players from each event qualifying for the 100-person tournament that will determine the final eight slots for the actual car tournament. If you miss out at the Challenge Qualifiers, don't fret since you can always come to Worlds and win one of the remaining 24 spots in public side events on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

If you're looking for another reason to venture to the Javits Center the first weekend of December, can we tempt you with a foil [Mirari's Wake](#)?



That's yours for showing up, one of the many cool things going on at Worlds even if you're not qualified. For a complete list of Public Events, click [here](#). Prizes for the Public Events include a 160 GB iPod, 80 GB iPod, 30 GB Zune, original *Lorwyn* art, 8 GB iPhone, Garmin Street Pilot, iPod Shuffle, 80 GB Arcos Media Player, a set of *Lorwyn* premium foil cards, and much more.

Firestarter: The Deck to Beat

Looking through the results from Champs—you can find all the decklists [here](#)—and Krakow what do you think the Standard deck to beat will be for Worlds? Head to the forums and share your thoughts 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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