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# Back, Forward, Punch...

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The Week That Was  
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Last week we talked with Pickles pilot Paul Cheon about his victory in Krakow and virtual ascent to Level 6 mage. What fascinated me about Cheon's success story is that as recently as 2005, Paul was still grinding it out on the PTQ level. Shockingly, the same is also true of Resident Genius and recent resident of Level 6 in the Pro Players Club Guillaume Wafo-Tapa.

While Guillaume first played on the Pro Tour in Barcelona during the 2001 season, he never posted the results to stay there until his Top 16 finish in Hawaii to start off the 2006 season. Since then he has posted a Pro Tour victory, three additional Top 16 finishes on the Pro Tour, multiple Grand Prix Top 8s, and the title Resident Genius for his format-defining control decks.

Guillaume thrust himself into the Player of the Year conversation when he made a Top 8 run in Valencia with Heartbeat. He just missed but did manage to post his third Top 16 finish in the last two seasons.

"Heartbeat is a great deck that has always been overlooked I think," said Wafo-Tapa of his deck choice for the last PT. Not that he didn't want to play a control deck... "I'm pretty sure there's a good monoblue control build in Extended right now. I might have ended up playing that if I had more time for testing. Heartbeat was the default choice because I didn't like any control decks."

Despite his strong finish, which found him near the front of the pack in the PoY race, Guillaume opted to not globetrot, instead deciding he would be happy with achieving Level 6 regardless of whether or not he won the race.

He did attend Krakow and with the **Guile**-powered Sonic Boom deck that he designed, which helped him and Amiel Tenenbaum make the Top 8. With Level 6 in hand and no plans to attend Kitakyuushu or Daytona Beach, Guillaume decided to scoop in the quarterfinals to his good friend—and controversy magnet—Olivier Ruel...a decision Guillaume has absolutely no second doubts about.

"As for my concession to Olivier, since he was only at Level 5 at the time, it only felt natural to concede to my friend as the difference between 5 and 6 is a huge amount of money," he said. "I'm just looking to do the best I can at Worlds."

Making the ascent from PTQ player to Level 6 mage in just two years is a remarkable achievement and I asked Guillaume how he was able to suddenly make that leap.

"That's a hard question. Looking back, I don't know exactly why," he said before musing, "Maybe I got experience. I also got better testing partners that year. Or maybe I got more comfortable playing on the PTs. You know the first time you get there, you know no one. And that's kind of awkward being in a foreign country. It's harder to play your best **Magic** when you don't feel at home. I guess a little bit of all that."

While Guillaume has had success playing Limited he is most well known as a deck designer. His **Dralnu du Louvre** from Worlds last year became the default control deck in Standard for the first half of 2007 and his **Teachings** deck that won Yokohama launched a thousand PTQ decks. Now he has added **Sonic Boom** to his resume: a monoblue deck that can tap out for **Guile** secure in the knowledge that it can 'spelljack' the next spell with **Pact of Negation**. **Guile's** trademark move from the Street Fighter video game was the inspiration for the deck name.

"I played the game a lot of years ago and it seemed to be the same with most of the other French pro players, so with three copies of **Guile** in the deck as the kill condition; the deck name couldn't really be anything else," said Guillaume.

Guillaume said he only designs decks for tournaments before adding: "That being said, there's always the next Constructed tournament in



Few players shape the current control metagame as much as Guillaume Wafo-Tapa.

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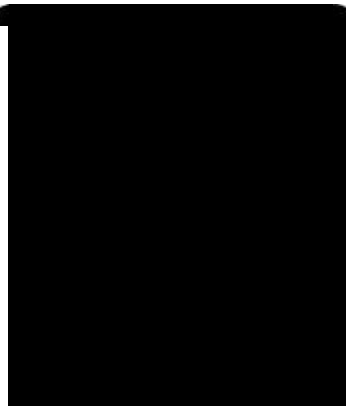
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sight."

I was curious about what makes the Resident Genius tick when it comes to deck design and asked him what inspired him to play a monoblue deck, especially since he has had so much success playing with black removal spells alongside his countermagic.

"Originally I wanted to play blue-black," he admitted. "I had two lists: sort of an updated version of Dralnu and another more inspired from Block Constructed including **Coalition Relic**. I knew I wanted to play four **Cryptic Command** in my deck but both decks had problems playing the Command on turn four and **Mystical Teachings** was not as good as before with the loss of **Rewind**, **Seize the Soul** and the aggro decks being faster than in *Time Spiral* Block Constructed. That's why I decided to try monoblue."

One of the sacrifices that you make in playing monoblue is that you have few answers to a resolved spell beyond bouncing and countering on the return trip. Guillaume was less concerned with the threat of aggro deck than the threat of the new black-blue control deck that had emerged at Champs the week before.

"There was the Mannequin deck to take into consideration, against which counters are really better than removals," he continued. "So I threw together a monoblue and after a few games I liked the feeling of it—it crushed Mannequin. A lot of French pros were opting to play snow red control and it beat that too, where my blue-black builds were really suffering. After a few games against Elves, I realized aggro was not that bad. Game 1 is more a matter of who wins the coin toss and after sideboarding with **Masticores** and Sowers I was much more confident."

#### Standard on Display

If you're in the eastern United States, there's a chance this Sunday for you to put some of Guillaume's Standard theories to the test at the [Northeast Challenge Qualifiers](#). These Standard tournaments are happening in Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, North Carolina, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Vermont. The top two finishers at each move on to the Northeast Challenge at Worlds—one of the ten entry events for the ["Win a Car"](#) tournament.

- [List of Northeast Challenge Qualifier Locations](#)

If there were one thing Guillaume could go back and change about the deck, it would be the sideboard which he threw together at the last minute. Without much time to test the board he tried to diversify it by including many two-ofs, hoping that in the end some of them would pan out but there was clearly one card glaringly absent once he started playing with the deck.

"I would have had one more copy of Jace and three **Pithing Needle** for the two **Willbender** and two **Take Possession**," he said of the missing *Tenth Edition* artifact. "Amiel and I were whining all day long about how we could have forgotten the Needles. It was really the missing card of the sideboard. It helps against Garruk—or any Planeswalker—but also **Treetop Village** or **Mouth of Ronom**."

"The **Masticores** are for almost any form of aggressive deck," he continued as he ran through his sideboard. "You board in the Sowers against aggro decks that lack removal (like blue-green) or that you think they will be boarding out theirs (like Elves). Sowers are also good against Pickles."

"I don't know why **Willbender** was there, it was supposed to be good against **Detritivore** but **Detritivore** isn't that good against the deck."

One card that surprised him from his board was the six-mana flier that is usually not seen without **Teachings** in the graveyard. "I didn't think the **[Draining]** **Whelks** would be any good but they turned out pretty awesome. I guess mostly because nobody expected them and the metagame included lots of slow decks without much countermagic: **Relic**, **Red Snow**, **Mana Ramp**, and **Mannequin**. **Jace Beleren** was really good too against any kind of control deck."

I wondered if Guillaume ever built any aggro decks and he surprised me by admitting he did, but then he explained that it was not in the way I had intended the question: "Building aggro decks is the first step to establishing a gauntlet. And though I never play any in tournaments, I play aggro decks a lot during playtesting."

But does he enjoy playing control decks all the time?



Will Guillaume's next creation be good enough to earn him another trophy? Tune in to Worlds and find out.

"Yeah. I really don't know why," replied Guillaume. "I guess that's just the way I am. I prefer to have options. I like drawing cards."

Next up for the Resident Genius is post-Krakow Standard and Legacy for Worlds with his playtest partner and French National Champion Guillaume Matignon.

"Last year I played in GP–Lille and I enjoyed it a lot," said Guillaume about designing decks for the Eternal format portion of Worlds. "The format seems great and it reminds me of the past when I first started playing in tournaments and dual lands were Extended legal."

## The Sprint to the Title

If Paul Cheon picks up one point in Daytona there will be ten Level 6 mages heading into Worlds in New York. If he misses that point he will become Level 6 once he registers for the tournament. This includes four players from last year: Shuhei, Tiago, Paulo, and Shouta, who are all longshots to repeat for next season.

The remaining six players have all reached Level 6 (or virtual Level 6, in the case of Cheon) this season and are jockeying for position in the Player of the Year race. Let's take a look at how each of those players have fared event by event since Valencia, with only Daytona and Worlds remaining on the 2007 schedule:

### Tomoharu Saito

#### Valencia – 3 Points

Coming into Valencia, Tomoharu Saito had not only the lead in the Player of the Year race but a one-event advantage over his closest pursuer Kenji Tsumura. While Kenji was going to be attending the following week's Invitational, Saito had announced he was going to forgo that same honor to hunt points in Brisbane. It was a perfect opportunity to cement his lead but he only picked up one point beyond the two participation points with his confusingly named Urzatron deck—Orange Stompy.

#### Brisbane – 1 Point

With such a small field and so few card-carrying Pro Players Club members in attendance, Saito had to have been disappointed with his result although with a race this tight the one point could easily be the difference between first and second place. While other players have commented that there is little difference between achieving Level 6 and winning Player of the Year, the title holds special meaning for Saito, who has had teammates win the title for two years running. Ironically he is looking forward to the perk of an Invitational berth to make up for the one he passed on this year.

#### Bangkok – 2 Points

It was in Grand Prix–Amsterdam that Shuhei Nakamura explained the importance of getting at least one or two points out of every GP in order to reach Level 6—a formula that Saito has followed to continually stay just beyond the reach of his pursuers. Saito was fighting an uphill battle throughout Day Two after picking up two losses on Day One. Had he won his thirteenth round against Japanese great Itaru Ishida, he still would not have made the Top 8 but could have secured a Top 16 finish. As it was he just missed the cut to three Pro Points by less than a percentage point in the tiebreakers column.

#### Krakow – 2 Points

Will slow and steady win the race? The formula continued to work for Saito, who maintained his lead with another two points to show for his efforts despite three other players in the running all making the Top 8 of this event.

#### Kitakyuushu – 2 Points

That brings Saito's total to 10 points from Valencia to the lead-in to Daytona. He did not miss an event, nor did he miss an opportunity to gain at least one more point than he was guaranteed for showing up. Is this the formula that will win the title? We will know for sure in two more tournaments.



Name	Pro Points
1. Tomoharu Saito	60
2. Kenji Tsumura	55
2. Shingou Kurihara	55
4. Guillaume Wafo-Tapa	52
5. Olivier Ruel	50
6. Paul Cheon	49
7. Raphael Levy	44
8. Mark Herberholz	38
9. Mike Hron	37
9. Shuhei Nakamura	37

• For complete standings, click [here](#).



*Saito has picked up at least one point at each tournament since Valencia.*

## Shingou Kurihara

### Valencia – 2 Points

Shingou Kurihara came to the tournament as a PoY dark horse. When he dropped from the tournament after a handful of rounds without any wins, I know I crossed him off my race sheet for the season. He was playing Saito's Orange Stompy deck, which despite the poor finishes by both him and Saito did manage to put Shuhei Nakamura into the Top 8.

### Brisbane – 3 Points

0.8059 was the tiebreaker difference for Shingou between three points for ninth place and a Top 8 berth with a shot at the PoY lead. The winner of that calculation was Shawn Rayson, who went on to make the finals of this event before falling to Anatoli Lightfoot.

### Bangkok – 6 Points

When Shingou Kurihara's name appeared on the Limited Master ballot, there were many people who did not understand his inclusion but with his second-place finish here he catapulted into second place in the PoY race—almost entirely on the strength of his Limited game. *Colfenor's Plans* was not a card I have ever considered playing in Limited but Kurihara put the card on my watch list with two copies maindecked in his Top 8 draft.



*Nine points at two Grand Prix have vaulted Kurihara up the charts.*

### Krakow – DNP

Saving his energy for Limited, no doubt...

### Kitakyuushu – 3 Points

...and with good reason. Tiebreakers might be the only thing standing between Shingou and the lead position in the PoY race. Once again he finished ninth in a virtual tie for the eighth spot in a Limited Grand Prix. Daytona is up next for Kurihara, and if the decimal points work out in his favor don't be surprised to see him jump to the head of the line when it is all over.

"I would be happy with Level 6," said Kurihara when asked about closing in on Saito's lead. "I can't go to all the Grand Prix so PoY is difficult. But I won't give up. If I win a GP or make the Top 8 at Worlds, I can be PoY."

## Kenji Tsumura

### Valencia – 3 Points

With both Saito and Kurihara mangled in an orange heap early on in Day One, Kenji Tsumura found himself with an opportunity to make up ground if he won his last match on Day One. Kenji had chosen to fight with No Stick. While he seemed to have Game 1 advantage in most matchups, whenever an opponent reached for their sideboard he found himself with his back against the wall. In Round 9 against Tsuyoshi Ikeda, a Game 3/turn one *Pithing Needle* naming *Isochron Scepter* left Kenji keeping pace with Saito but unable to close on the leader.

### Brisbane – DNP

If a butterfly's wings can cause disruptions in weather patterns, then what effect did Kenji's sigh of relief from Germany have on storm fronts over Europe when Saito finished only one point better after this GP?



*Is there enough gas left in Kenji's tank for another PoY run?*

### Bangkok – 0 Points

Going into Valencia he was two points off of the lead. After finishing 85th in Thailand, Kenji was five points back of Saito and now had to contend with Shingou ahead of him as well. Despite the fact that we are talking about a very small sample size of two events, Kenji was starting to make people nervous that he would not be able to follow up on the exciting promise of him and Saito making people forget the end-of-the-year race between him

and Olivier just two years ago. Two events with only one extra point to show for it? Bullets still bounce off of him, right?

#### **Krakow – 0 Points**

Uh-oh...three straight events and only one extra point. Maybe I won't be testing out that bullet theory after all.

#### **Kitakyuushu – 4 Points**

Now that's more like it! A ridiculous Sealed Deck pool that contained three copies of **Lash Out** and an unconventional second draft featuring six copies of **Battlewand Oak** returned Kenji to the Top 8 and into a tie for second place with Kurihara, ahead of the absent Guillaume Wafo-Tapa. Despite three lackluster finishes in a row Kenji righted his ship and is only five points off the lead with two events yet to play.

## **Guillaume Wafo-Tapa**

#### **Valencia – 8 points**

The Resident Genius could not find a control deck he liked in the format so he deigned to play combo instead. Guillaume piloted the nearly forgotten Heartbeat combo to the third Top 16 of his Pro Tour career. He started things off in impressive fashion with a stunning win over Gabriel Nassif and when the tournament ended, he could suddenly see a pack of Japanese players not too far ahead of him on the PoY track.

#### **Brisbane – DNP**

#### **Bangkok – DNP**

#### **Krakow – 4 Points**

Ever the cautious control player, Guillaume mentioned that he was not going to doggedly pursue the PoY title and was content just locking up Level 6, which he did. Technically he did it twice, as he scooped to Olivier in the quarterfinals to give his friend a shot at maxing out on benefits for all of next season as well.



*Wafo-Tapa has steadily earned points all season, starting with a Top 16 finish in Geneva.*

This was the third time I can recall a similar concession between friends in a high-level event. It happened once on the Pro Tour when Nicolas LeBarre and Yann Hamon, playing identical lists at Pro Tour–New Orleans, wanted to avoid expensive rebooking fees for what they felt was a coin flip and one conceded to the other. The other was at Grand Prix–Kuala Lumpur when Hall of Famer Tsuyoshi Fujita sent his good friend Masahiko Morita ahead in the bracket to eventually earn his first individual GP win.

#### **Kitakyuushu – DNP**

## **Olivier Ruel**

#### **Valencia – 3 Points**

Olivier had a quiet tournament in Spain and a quick scan of the coverage page does not show his name appearing at all. Olivier was looking forward to playing in Brisbane the next week and had also passed up on an Invitational spot go there, although in this case it was a pass-down slot and Olivier had already booked his trip for Australia.

#### **Brisbane – Disqualified**

If Saito was disappointed with his Brisbane finish, I am hard pressed to find a word to describe Olivier's assessment of his own visit to Australia instead of playing in the Invitational. After starting the tournament off with a 7-0 record, the controversial French superstar was disqualified from the tournament for an incident involving an opponent's sunglasses and not being truthful with a judge. I will just leave you with Olivier's words of advice from the coverage in Brisbane...

*"When the two most important judges of a tournament want to talk to you, it doesn't mean they think you did something wrong, it means they know it. Do not lie to a judge, they can usually tell and it makes things even worse."*

#### **Bangkok – 2 Points**

Olivier bounced back from his trip to Australia with a Top 32 finish and two points to continue his quest for Level 6 and a potential shot at PoY. Like Saito, Olivier had a lot of ground to cover on Day Two with two Day One losses, but he picked up two more in the draft portion.

#### Krakow – 5 Points

Lost in all the noise about the Player of the Year race was the fact that Olivier was closing in on Alex Shvartsman's staggering 21 Top 8 Grand Prix appearances. This was his 20th.

#### Kitakyuushu – 5 Points

Olivier's record tying 21st Grand Prix Top 8 also managed to max him out for Level 6 benefits coming into Daytona and Worlds. His four wins on the Grand Prix circuit is second all time behind only Kai Budde, but he did not make any headway on that front as he fell to eventual winner Jun'ya Iyanaga in the semifinals.

### Paul Cheon

#### Valencia – 5 Points

It is hard to view a Top 64 finish at the Pro Tour as a disappointment, but when Paul started out 6-0 he began to set his sights a little higher only to stumble and win only one more match the rest of the way. Coming into the tournament Cheon was not certain which Grand Prix events he would be attending, although Brisbane was definitely not on the table. With another level looming, he was toying with the idea of going to Poland.

#### Brisbane – DNP

#### Bangkok – DNP

#### Krakow – 8 Points

Cheon became the first American player since Bob Maher to win a European Grand Prix and the first Level 6 player from North America. With 13 points in his two events, Paul was getting high value from the few events he was attending and was hoping to stay hot in Daytona and at Worlds for his shot at the PoY title.

#### Kitakyuushu – DNP

So that's where it stands heading in to Grand Prix–Daytona Beach, where all of these front-runners except Wafu-Tapa will be in attendance. Tune in all weekend as I bring you coverage from the GP as a little clarity may come to this increasingly cloudy Player of the Year picture.

### Firestarter

Following up on Guillaume's deck name of Sonic Boom from Street Fighter, what other video game elements could serve as deck design or name inspirations?

*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.*



*Olivier's last five weeks have been quite eventful.*



*Without traveling too much, Cheon is in the thick of the race.*



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