

Opening Up a New World

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Uri Peleg had been playing **Magic** for a long time when we sat down to talk after winning the 2007 **Magic: The Gathering** World Championships held last weekend in New York City—both over the course of his relationship with the game and throughout the week of the World Championships. He became the first Israeli player not only to reach the Top 8 threshold at a Pro Tour, but the first to hoist a trophy. He was tired by the time we spoke Sunday evening, showing some of the wear and tear of five days of **Magic** and **Magic**-related activities.

While the majority of the players attending the tournament were able to sneak in brief respites on Wednesday evening and all day Saturday, as a member of the Israeli National team Uri had to take part in Wednesday's Flag Ceremony and the Saturday Team competition. He was not even fully sure of how his quarterfinal matchup against former World Champion Katsuhiko Mori was supposed to play out.



"Because of the team day I did not have time to sleep—or test—or anything," said Uri while rubbing his eyes. "We played until 10 p.m. the day before—or something like that. I knew the games against Mori were okay and that I had a shot. It may seem like a blowout but it isn't supposed to be."

A weary Peleg poses with trophy and giant check.

While many people predicted that Uri would advance in that bracket (and although he did win against Mori in three games), Mori explained that the results were misleading.

"The second game was really close but in the first and third I got pretty good draws and he got pretty bad ones," Mori said. "Each individual game does not say a lot about the matchup. In testing whoever won the die roll usually won. I was kind of disappointed that I lost the die roll."

I had picked Uri to win that match when Randy Buehler and I did our predictions for the Top 8 and Uri commented on that to me when he left the feature match after dispatching Mori: "I guess I am supposed to lose the semifinals now?" I had pegged him as a big underdog to Ostuka's Mannequin deck, an assessment that Peleg initially agreed with.

"I talked to Christoph Huber, who played him in the quarterfinals and he actually gave me a sideboarding strategy that I tried and I didn't feel like an underdog at all," Peleg said of his semifinal victory. "He told me to take out Tarmogoyf and Ohran Viper and bring in Cloudthresher, Serrated Arrows, and stuff like that. I was going to bring in stuff like that anyway but I had no idea what to take out. I was never going to take out Tarmogoyf but it makes his Shriekmaw, Inversion, and Damnation much worse than they would be otherwise."

A couple of turn-two Doran, the Siege Towers later and Uri was heading on to face the winner of the Gabriel Nassif/Patrick Chapin match. Prior to the start of the semifinals both Chapin and Nassif

VIDEO: TOURNAMENT CENTER

Randy Buehler and Brian David-

were discussing not wanting to play against Peleg's deck, which was sporting maindeck Thoughtseize and had additional discard and Riftsweepers after sideboard.

"There is a guy in Israel named Niv Shmuuli who designed a green-black deck that we played a lot online," Peleg replied when queried about his deck's origin. "At some point the whole team decided to try out Doran. We weren't sure if it was better than Troll Ascetic for a long time. We were not completely sure because you would take less damage from your lands, you would have Troll instead of Doran, and there were Masked Admirers in the deck. When we played with that version of the deck it seemed fine but at that time everyone was playing the green-black deck so we decided to try the Dorans."

"Doran is much better than Troll in a lot of matchups," he continued. "We just did not know if we could cast him consistently. It turns out you can pretty much. The damage you take from your lands is irrelevant in almost every situation. So Doran is much better. We weren't sure about whether to play Troll or Viper but we were certain we wanted Doran."

Before addressing the finals matchup, I wanted to know how Uri found himself at the World Championships and asked about his first experiences with the game.

"A kid in my school brought home a pack and I read the rule book in bible class," laughed Uri. "I was 13 years old. We started playing but we really didn't know the rules very well. We would return permanents to our hands whenever we wanted. It was fun."

A year later Uri decided to try his hand at tournament **Magic** and found himself looking for a way to reach Tel Aviv from Jerusalem for what would become the highlight of his **Magic** career—even sitting with a \$40,000 novelty check with his name written on it.

"It was the *Mirage* Prerelease and I finished in second place. I was thrilled—I was much happier than I am right now. I was so little and it meant a lot to me," he smiled. "I started to go to tournaments. They are on Saturday in Israel and there is no public transportation on Saturday in Israel. I was a little kid so my dad would drive with me to tournaments and wait for me. He was very supportive."



The first Israeli Nationals took place in 1998 and Uri reached the Top 4 and made the National team. He was heading to Seattle to take part in the 1998 World Championships and was still only 14 years old.

"It was very humbling," said Uri of that first foray onto the Pro Tour scene. "We were all sure we would do well because we always did well in tournaments in

Peleg's highest previous Pro Tour finish was 31st at Pro Tour-Philadelphia. Israel. None of us were even close to doing well, which is not surprising to me now but we did not know that was how it was going to be."

"I remember Day One was draft and we didn't have many drafts in Israel," he continued with a faraway look on his face. "I think we each did like two drafts in our life before that. We always played

Marshall recap all the action from 2007 Worlds.

Sunday Video:

- Finals (179 MB zip)
- Semifinals (150 MB zip)
- Team Finals (86.7 MB zip)
- Awards Ceremony (9 MB zip)
- Quarterfinal Recaps

- Worlds 2007 Video Archive
- Magic: The Gathering on YouTube

like 14 lands in our deck. In the first draft I lost to someone with a very fast deck so in the next draft I decided to draft many 1/1 for one mana creatures. We were really bad."

"In Standard we had a monoblue deck—I think it was Cuneo-blue. It was an okay deck. Then there was Rath Cycle Block Constructed and we had a black-white deck which we had tested a lot and we were sure was going to do well. Then right before the round starts out National Champion says, 'I just thought of something...we didn't test against White Weenie it sounds like a bad matchup for us.' And then in the first round we all played against White Weenie, then in the second round we all played White Weenie, and then I think they dropped from the tournament."

Uri finished in 160th place at that event. He would return to Worlds four more times culminating in his personal best experience at the Jacob Javits Center; prior to that his best finish had been at Pro Tour-Philadelphia.

"That was a strange tournament, I finished 31st when I conceded a match that was going to be a draw," Uri recalled. "If it was a regular Pro Tour I would have been doing very well. I had two losses and a draw and normally if you are 6-2-1 that is a decent record."

I asked Peleg to contrast his experiences with the Pro Tour from the late 90s to the current day and he found there to be one significant improvement over the years that he wanted to mention.

"The judges are very good now," he said shaking his head as he listed off horror stories from the early days. "The whole attitude has changed between then and now. I remember my friend got a triple warning for not gaining life from his Soul Warden and if you kept your lands tapped during your upkeep to pay echo on a creature they would stay tapped, you would take mana burn, and the creature would die. It was really horrible back then."

We have seen players blaze a trail for their countrymen to excel on the Pro Tour over the years. Hall of Famer Tsuyoshi Fujita certainly motivated a generation of Japanese and Carlos Romao did the same for a host of Brazilian players. I asked what impact Uri's performance would have on the Israeli **Magic** community.

"First of all I think I am only the second best player in Israel," responded Uri. "There is this guy Aylon Manor who—I used to think I was the best—but it is amazing to watch him play. He finished Top 16 in his first Grand Prix and when he went to the Pro Tour he was playing for the Top 8. He started playing poker but maybe now he will come back."

"Preparing for the Pro Tour in Israel is really, really difficult," he continued explaining why this was the only Pro Tour he attended this season. "We only get one slot every season so only one player is really interested in testing. You need to ask your friends to help or test online but I am guessing it is easier in other countries. When I prepared for Philadelphia I used **Magic Online** a lot and preparing for this event we did some drafts and played in some 8-man queues. For Worlds we can actually prepare because we are four people and for this tournament we can test with each other. That is why I went to Worlds and not any other Pro Tours this year. I don't want to test alone and fly alone."

Uri was
looking

WORLDS: DID YOU MISS IT?

Here are a few notable stories from Worlds that you may have missed:

- Win a Car Tournament Final
- Multiplayer Free-for-all
- 2HG Draft Viewer
- *Lorwyn* Draft Viewer
- Standard Metagame Breakdown
- Legacy Metagame Breakdown

[Click here for complete coverage from the 2007 World Championships.](#)

forward to having some companionship for the 2008 season in his teammate Elisha Amir. "He finished 14th in this tournament—that is the best finish an Israeli has ever had besides me today—and he was playing the same deck. He is going to be qualified because he finished 14th and his DCI rating should be pretty high,



Peleg was joined on the Israel National Team by Elisha Amir, Eviatar Olpiner, and Asaf Shomer. provided he doesn't do anything stupid."

Uri was cautious when it came to making predictions for next season and very respectful of his opponents from this event.

"It's hard to tell because I know I was very lucky this tournament. I think I am better than an average player but I am not like players like Gabriel Nassif or players like that. I don't think I am in their league. I played against him and every turn he was thinking and looking through my graveyard and I am just so tired. It was also amazing to play against Antoine Ruel. Those players are just much smarter than me. It is also experience but I just can't think as fast."

When asked for a play that he felt was pivotal to winning the match, Uri—who seems truly humble about the whole experience—instead wanted to point out his own misstep that could have very well cost him the title.

"I actually thought there was a play that lost me the World Championships in the last game when I attacked with two birds, Doran, and Riftsweeper," he explained, referring to a play where Doran meant he could try to sneak in a couple of extra points in the air with his Birds of Paradise but what he thought was a tell from Patrick Chapin was actually a lethal trap. While Uri contemplated his options, Patrick reached over to pick up his pen as if he was resigned to taking combat damage.

"I was thinking he could have Hellkite and thinking about to attack or not to attack because I had Cloudthresher. I was going to attack without the Birds and I saw him moving to adjust his life total. I wasn't even looking at him so I thought there was no way it was a trick."

Sure enough, Patrick was holding the Hellkite and ambushed most of Uri's team, including the two Birds which could have been used to pay for his own flash creature.

"It could have been the match," sighed Uri.

Will Peleg's success serve as a trailblazing moment for Israeli players? Time will tell.

"Luckily he did not have much more than that. I did not know he has such bad spells under his lands.



I think he drew land, land and he could have drawn any spell to beat me. He had no shot that game if I don't attack. When he plays the Hellkite I flash out Cloudthresher. Then his turn he can't attack for five and activate both lands like he did and I have plenty of stuff still in hand."

With that I let the freshly crowned champion be swallowed up by the throng of well-wishers and teammates so he could celebrate, get something to eat, and finally get a good night's sleep.

2008 Invitation Policy: Five Questions with Scott Larabee

DCI Program Manager Scott Larabee informed me that there was going to be a significant change to the 2008 Pro Tour Invitation Policy regarding the benefits associated with the Pro Players Club. He agreed to a quick interview to outline the changes and explain some of the reasoning behind them.

1. What, if any, changes are being made to the Players Club this year?

Scott: We are making two changes: 1) The Level 3 benefit of a \$500 appearance fee for attending a Pro Tour or Worlds is being eliminated, and 2) The rule that allows a player to gain Level 3 status for the remainder of the year by having 30 Pro Points over the current year and the previous year is being changed. For 2008, it will be 25 points, but a player must achieve the 25 points by the end of the second Pro Tour (Pro Tour–Hollywood).

2. Why are these changes being made to the Level 3 players in regard to the appearance fee?

Scott: We had to bring the cost of the Pro Club down a bit. Wizards of the Coast is a business and like all businesses, we have to operate within a budget. When deciding how we were going to lower the cost, we took a look at all the benefits that the program offers. We decided that the single best reward offered by the Pro Club was the airline tickets to Levels 4, 5, and 6. At the same time, the cost of airline tickets has risen dramatically since we started the program. In order to keep the airline tickets, we had to reallocate money from one part of the program to another. As such we have chosen the Level 3 appearance fee.

3. And what about the refiguring of the point totals needed to make Level 3 over two seasons?

Scott: The change that allows a player to have 25 points over the current and previous season to achieve Level 3 is being changed to better achieve what this rule was meant to accomplish—allow players that are on the cusp of making Level 3 at the end of the year to not have to completely start over in the current year.

4. What will you provide the Level 3s to offset the appearance fee?

Scott: Level 3 Pro Club members will not receive their invitation to the Pro Tour until the day of the Pro Tour. This means that Level 3 players will now be able to play in Pro Tour Qualifiers, provided that their ONLY invitation comes from their Level 3 status. If, for example, a Level 3 Pro Club member finished Top 16 of a Grand Prix that feeds a particular Pro Tour, that player is no longer eligible to play in PTQs that feed that particular Pro Tour.

5. Will there be any adjustments to the amount of points needed for each level?

Scott: No changes will be made to the initial seeding of players in their 2008 levels.

Firestarter: Champions among Champions

From Mike Hron in Geneva to Uri Peleg in New York City and every Pro Tour and Grand Prix in between, 2007 has been an exciting, action-packed season of **Magic**. Who is your favorite champion this year? Head to the forums and share your thoughts!

