

# The Better Part of a Decade

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*I almost never get the opportunity to travel to European Grand Prix on coverage assignments, but wearing my Pro Tour Historian hat I was invited to take a different coverage approach to Grand Prix-Amsterdam. It was the tenth anniversary of the very first GP and there was a desire to have some of that history reflected in the coverage. I was able to get a real sense of how the Dutch **Magic** community evolved over those ten years, from the players to the judges to the tournament organizers. This column followed up on several of the stories that I covered that weekend.*

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**T**his past weekend was a pretty odd one as far as Grand Prix coverage goes. Of course this past weekend was not your run of the mill Grand Prix. Part of the tournament experience in Amsterdam was the celebration of the first Grand Prix in Amsterdam some 508 weeks prior. Despite being at the epicenter of the major-tournament debut of Two-Headed Giant being dropped on the **Magic** community with a 1300-plus explosion of players, I had history on my mind instead of delving into the new intricacies of 2HG.

At some point my weekend plan turned into a piece of investigative journalism as I tried to uncover the format of the original event. Everyone pretty much agreed that the event was Standard and everyone remembered that it was some variant of Standard – then called Type II – from the previous season. Players – some of whom were currently grappling with three different formats over four weeks of events – had a hard time recalling the exact details. I assumed early on that meant it was the Pro Tour-New York 1 format, which called for players to use five cards from each legal Standard expansion.

I was finally pointed in the right direction by Gis Hoogendijk, who explained that the event took place after the Dec 1996 Standard rotation which briefly took *Ice Age* out of rotation for the format – it would later re-enter as Aaron explained in his column not too long ago. For some reason, which was not quite clearly explained to me, Grand Prix Amsterdam was run according to the Nov96 deck construction rules for Type II – at least that's what they called it on the newsgroups. Interestingly the event counted toward players' Vintage – then called Type I – rating.

Something that began to unfold itself as I



Snepvangers has been a huge part of the Netherlands scene since the beginning.

I interviewed players and personnel from that first event was the continuity of the Dutch **Magic** scene. One of the first pieces that I put together on Sunday was about Bram Snepvangers. Bram was one of the first – and for a long time the only – Dutch player on the Pro Tour gravy train (which is how players referred to the being continually qualified based on high finishes at previous events prior to the advent of the Players Club).

What I did not find out until after that piece was that Bram was one of the first high-level judges in Amsterdam and administered the Level 1 judge exam for future Level 5 judges Jaap Brower and Sheldon Menery at that event. Later that year he also ushered another Level 5, Gis Hoogendijk, into the ranks of judge-dom. In talking to Gis about the influence that Bram had on the Netherlands, not only as a player but as a judge and tournament organizer, I was reminded once again of how important community is to the game we all love.

That sense of community was echoed when I spoke with Wessel Oomens and Sven Dijt who made the Top 8 of that first Grand Prix event. Ten years later, **Magic** is very much a part of both their lives. Wessel is a Level 3 mage seeing the world, making new friends, and not looking to change that anytime soon. While many players will talk of the Player of the Year race, achieving Level 6 status,

and being a professional **Magic** player, Wessel is looking to remain semi-professional. He is a student and tries not to let **Magic** interfere with his education but he is striving to remain continuously qualified for the Pro Tour for the foreseeable future. It's hard for him to imagine any other scenario where he could have traveled to as many corners of the world as he had when he was still a teenager without **Magic** as a part of his life – he was only 15 when he first qualified for the Pro Tour.

Of course letting your teenage son go globetrotting 

is not always easy on the parents and Wessel

confessed that his parents had an uneasy

relationship with the game over the years – of course, sneaking out of the house to hit PTQs could not have helped much. He had a special moment this weekend when his parents came to see him at the event and were finally able to understand that their boy had accomplished something special in this game.

Oomens made the Top 8 in the first GP.

Part of the festivities for the GP involved having as many European GP winners as possible attend the event to gunsling, sign cards, and show off the history of the European tournament scene. All the winners were also honored with a star with their name on it lining the floor on the way into the venue. Seeing their son's name as they walked into the convention center, Wessel's parents were filled with pride and understood that their son had done something rare and special with his win at Grand Prix-Malmö – a feat only a rare few of the countless thousands of Magic players can say they have accomplished.

The theme of continuity was reinforced in my conversation with Wessel, who finished third at that first Grand Prix playing a deck designed by Noah Boeken. (More investigative journalism at work as we tried to recreate the decklist, which had been previously described as a sligh deck but turned out to be an early Ponzia build featuring the unexpected Balduvian Hordes.) He spoke of a regular Monday night draft that still takes place to this day, which at one point led him and Rogier Maaten to ask a promising young Dutchie named Julien Nuijten if he wanted to playtest with them. There was a clear line of players helping each other, osmosing newer players up into the more experienced play sessions, and generally building up the game in their community.

In the coverage game we love to talk about how a **Magic** community has suddenly burst upon the scene. We have done it with Japan, France, the Netherlands, and recently with Brazil and Portugal. If you scratch beneath the surface of any of those communities you will find a Bram Snepvangers making sure there are enough judges to support the community, a player base making sure that the green PTQ winner has a decent deck for the big show, and a whole slew of people who love the game.

Most of us will never win a Pro Tour or even a Grand Prix but that doesn't mean you can't accomplish great things in this game. As I talked to each of the different members of the Dutch community – Bram, Gis, Wessel, and others – there was a collective pride in the accomplishments of their community because they all knew that a victory by Von Dutch or Julien Nuijten or the Dutch National team was something they helped to make happen; something that began more than 10 years ago before *suddenly* bursting on the front page of the tournament center.

## Two Out of Three Ain't Bad!

I was pretty sure Raphael



Levy was not going to manage the three-peat

Levy started the 2007 season with a bang, winning in Dallas and Singapore.


when he shambled into the tournament site on Friday evening for the **Magic** panel I was hosting. He was in his third time zone in three weeks, and while all of his luggage may have arrived from Singapore I was not sure that there still wasn't a piece of Raph himself that had been shipped somewhere else by mistake.

There probably needs to be some holistic thinking applied to the Grand Prix schedule next year. In the past it was extremely rare for a European player to hit either an American or Asian Grand Prix – much less one of each on either side of a European event. There have even been weekends with two or three Grand Prix taking place at the same time.

With the new Players Club-driven emphasis on doing well on the Grand Prix scene and hitting as many events as possible, even having five events as clustered together as Dallas, Singapore, Amsterdam, Kyoto, and Massachusetts are this season seems untenable. Thankfully Raph did not even make Day Two of this weekend's event; otherwise he might have considered going to Kyoto as well.

"The deal was that if I made at least Top 4, I would seriously consider going to Kyoto," explained Levy, who understands the value of every event. "When I arrived in Amsterdam, I felt exhausted. I hadn't had a good night sleep in more than two weeks and really wanted to stay at one place for more than two days, and lay in bed for just as long. I would love to have the best season, reach Level 6. I can't really say I'm aiming at Player of the Year as I know it will mostly depend on if I can EVENTUALLY pull out a Pro Tour Top 8 again. That said, I could also get all my points from GPs."

Of course you could hardly blame Levy for wanting to play the hot hand. It has been close to 10 years since his first Grand Prix experience in Barcelona, and before his win in Dallas back in February it had been nine years since his last trophy shot. When he started to attend these events all those years ago they must have seemed like a piece of cake as he was winning money right from the start – with the win not far behind – but when he started playing he was not driven by money.

"GP-Barcelona was the first event I collected money  in. \$250 for a 15-year old meant something, especially as the dollar was really strong back then. Poujade and Levy formed an early rivalry. But that wasn't the most important thing," he recalled. "I had a rival back then, Matthieu Poujade. I had played on the PT once before, while he hadn't. My only goal was probably to outclass him again. He ended up Top 8ing the GP and qualifying for the next PT when I only finished in the top 16. The best scenario would have been of course that we both Top 8ed, qualified, and lived happily ever after. But this rivalry made me work harder on my game in the beginning."

Levy had experienced some modest success – including a Pro Tour Top 16 finish – by the time he won his first major in Lyon. He came within one intentional draw a couple of weeks previous of having a shot at accomplishing what he would have to wait nine more years to finally accomplish.

"Before GP Lyon I had attended two Pro Tours: Paris where I scrubbed out, and Mainz where I finished 12th," he said. "I had also made the French team the year before and therefore played Worlds in Seattle. I had ID'ed myself out of the Top 8 in GP-Madrid two weeks before. The deck I played, Legion Land Loss, was originally posted on the Legion's mailing list. The Legion was the first international team that shared strategies via emails and chats on IRC. Manuel Bevand had posted a mono-green land destruction deck with Tornados and Desert Twisters. I took the deck and worked on it some, playing against my friends here in Toulouse. I played my own version in Madrid (where I finished ninth), and gave it another try in Lyon. I had been tuning it for weeks and at that time, I felt unbeatable. I trusted my deck. I just didn't think I wouldn't win!"

On the surface you would be hard pressed to find similarities between the mono-green LLL deck and the five-color insanity of Domain Zoo that took him to his back-to-back GP titles, but Raph thinks the decks are more alike than mana bases would have you believe.

"The first thing they have in common is that they are both Extended decks. I made 13 GP Top 8s – 10 in Limited and three in Constructed. I don't consider myself a Constructed specialist, but I won the three Constructed GP Top 8s I played in," he pointed out. "The other thing they have in common is that they were both really stable decks. By that, I mean that they could never really 'fizzle.' You could play 20 games, and most of them would look exactly the same. Both would beat a slow or a bad draw from your opponent without giving him a chance to come back."

It certainly says volumes about the buffet of mana fixing available in the current Extended that a five-color deck is considered as stable as a mono-colored deck from nearly 10 years ago. I asked Levy how much has the game changed in

***"Magic was a different game back then. The Internet was starting***

between his first and second victories, besides the availability of excellent color fixing.

"**Magic** was a different game back then," he answered. "The Internet was starting to bloom but not everyone had access to 'the knowledge.' The metagame wasn't something defined – I don't even think there was such a word at that point. I believe it appeared a couple of months later. So basically, you had a deck you thought was good, you played it against your friends who had their own decks. The ideas we had about the decks that would be played represented pretty much what 'the metagame' was in reality. Preparing for a Constructed tournament nowadays requires a good analysis of the worldwide metagame, good adaptations skills, and if you're a real master, deckbuilding skills."

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During the panel discussion on Friday I asked Levy if his induction into the Hall of Fame eased or heightened his burden in regard to doing well. He claimed it was the latter as the absence of that second trophy outside of Lyon loomed over him as something he had to prove somehow.

"Some people called it 'variance' – that I just had to aim at the long run. I missed quite a few opportunities to win a second title, but never managed to," said Levy of the long span between wins. "In Dallas, it was quite a surprise; I hadn't realized how good the deck I had in my hands was. In Singapore, it was another story. I was fresh off a good result and I knew I could win again. And that's maybe the common point between my wins: the absolute conviction that you're playing the best deck and that you trust your chances to win."

Had Levy decided to attend Kyoto he would have been jumping from Extended to 2HG Limited to Standard in the span of a couple weeks. Most players have trouble keeping track of one format, much less three. I wondered if there was any blurring of the card valuations as he transversed the competitive landscape.

"I don't think there's a real confusion when you know what you're doing," Levy assured me. "The players traveling to all the GPs are real professionals. The only thing is that now in a regular booster draft, my heart jumps in my chest when I'm passed a Volcanic Awakening or an Empty the Warrens... but I usually calm down quite fast."

## **Firestarter: Kyoto Protocols**

I am truly envious of blisterguy's assignment this weekend as he gets to see some of the game's best deckbuilders as they try to instill some order upon the Chaos. This weekend will be the first major Standard event in the post-*Planar Chaos* environment at Grand Prix-Kyoto. I actually don't even know what to expect. What do you think the decks in the Top 8 will look like? Give us your predictions in the forums and follow the GP from the Tournament Center all weekend long to see how they pan out.

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