

*Brian David-Marshall*  
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**I**n the days before Kuala Lumpur, I sent an email to Jon Finkel about how Olivier Ruel was closing in on his career Pro Point total. Jon's reply?

"I guess I will just have to win this Pro Tour then."

Thank you to everyone who sent me get-well messages over the course of Pro Tour–Kuala Lumpur—and sympathy messages afterward when Jon Finkel lived up to his pre-show prediction and I was not there to take part in the event. In regard to the latter, I was pretty disappointed to miss Jon's triumphant turn but I have to admit it was kind of nice to be able to sit back and watch it all unfold without having to hit my marks. I think it is the only time I have ever watched the live webcast in all the years I have been involved with **Magic**. Rich Hagon and Bill Stark did a terrific job covering a truly historic event, from the pregame show to the moment when Mario Pascoli extended his hand in defeat.

As for my illness; I am finally feeling better and returned to active participation in the real world this week, including one draft at Jon's in which he lost more matches (two) than he did over the course of six drafts in Kuala Lumpur when he went 16-1-1. I returned to Jon's the next evening and we discussed his career, his performance, what it is like to win Pro Tours almost 10 years apart, his draft strategies, and anything else that came to mind as we looked back on his memorable—and still very active—career.



**BDM:** *First things first...when was the last time you held the lead in the Player of the Year race?*

**Jon:** I don't think I have been the leader since I won it in 1998. I won in 1998, I won Worlds in 2000 but Bob [Maher] won [POY] that year. He won Chicago, which was one of the early Pro Tours that season. I don't think I ever came in second and third in the first two Pro Tours of the season. In 2001 I think Kamiel [Cornelissen] beat me in consecutive Top 8s so it definitely wasn't that year. It's probably been nine or ten years since I was in the lead.

**BDM:** *How does it feel to have that lead after all this time? Does it still mean something to you?*

**Jon:** It feels good but I am just not going to win Player of the Year. I know it. I don't even know if I want to go to Philly, which is an hour-and-twenty-minute train ride away, one of my best friends just moved there, and my grandparents live there...I guess I am 50/50. If there happens to be a Limited GP over the summer I might go, but I might not even go to all of the PTs.

**BDM:** *'Might not go to all the Pro Tours' is a far cry from 'going to one Pro Tour and that is it.' If you found yourself in a position to make a run at the title, would you chase it?*

**Jon:** I might, but not particularly hard. In the fall I am usually pretty busy. I am not going to chase it super hard. If they had another draft Pro Tour I would be more inclined.

**BDM:** *How often do you play **Magic** these days?*

**Jon:** I have not played much **Magic Online** over the past couple of months but I probably average two to three drafts each time we draft, so I would guess I draft about three times a week. Since *Morningtide* came out, before the Pro Tour, I played 34 matches, of which I won 17. That is probably about 12 drafts.

**BDM:** *When was the first time you started playing **Magic** competitively and did you immediately find that you were successful in that arena? What drew you to the competition?*

**Jon:** Anytime I ever played in a tournament I always wanted to win—even my fun decks wanted to win. I didn't see those things as being mutually exclusive. It was different back then. You wanted to build the deck you wanted to build but I still wanted to build a deck that was more likely to win than not. That was one of my primary concerns. I remember I went to one or two small tournaments in England. I don't really remember much about how I did. We moved back here and I went to a bunch of Gray Matter events and then the Pro Tours.

**BDM:** *What was the first tournament you remember winning?*

**Jon:** I don't even know. You could probably look through old Gray Matter records and find out what I won. Also random Neutral Ground drafts—I used to play in a lot of tournaments there—but the answer is really that I don't know.

**BDM:** *I always remember you winning the Sealed Deck tournaments we used to run in the morning for a Juzam Djinn—back when we all thought Limited was strictly the luck of the draw. It was quite startling to learn that there was skill involved.*



**Jon:** No one else would get up early enough—I don't even know why I did—and nobody knew how to play Limited at all. The competition in those tournaments was not strong. Finkel's gap over Olivier in the all-time Pro Points race widened to 21 points.

**BDM:** *Your first Pro Tour was the Junior division of PT1. What do you remember the most about that event?*

**Jon:** I was 17 and I made the Top 8. I was playing a blue-white control deck. You had to play with five *Homelands* cards. I had Serra Angels, Orders of Leitbur—or of the White Hand—Mishras, and Blinking Spirits. This was a time when four mana for a 2/2 flier that you could pay 0 and return to your hand was good enough to play in Constructed. Creatures these days are so much better than creatures were back then.

I remember winning my first match and during the first game I had gotten three cards Jester's Capped out of my deck. At the end of the match we signed the slip and walked away from the table. I got called over because there were three cards on the table, which were the three cards that had been removed my deck in Game 2. I remember then getting a retroactive game loss for Game 3 for having played with an illegal deck.

I remember thinking it was quite bull\*\*\*\* at the time. I wonder how that would be handled today.

I remember our tiebreaker was individual game wins. I played my last round opponent and I said, "Let's say whoever wins this wins 2-1 because game wins are going to be a tiebreaker." And clearly that would today be very much illegal. Actually it was then too because he called the judge on me and I was told that you can't do that. This was kind of a different era where there were no floor rules—the guys next to us did it.

**BDM:** *What was the ramification of that?*

**Jon:** I got a warning. That is the only warning I have ever gotten for a collusion-type effect. I have gotten a few game losses in my time. I got one for being pre-sideboarded in a match at Worlds 2000.

I remember getting a game loss at a GP in Texas for failing to draw a card. I had my opponent Oath of Druids locked, I had a Scroll Rack in play, and like four upkeep effects and literally had the game completely locked. I did seven things during my upkeep and then attacked—I actually didn't need to get a game loss for that.

I suspect that over me lifetime I have had very few unintentional draws and very few game losses for procedural-type things, which is probably useful.

**BDM:** *I did notice that you seemed very crisp operationally in this last tournament. How do you maintain that level of awareness?*

**Jon:** I was thinking "let me not do something stupid."

It was funny...I was reading the coverage and the guy was talking about me playing mind games with my opponent because I made him burn for one and asked him not to look at my deck while shuffling. This guy has ascribed this whole internal world to my mind that has no basis in reality. I had him burn for one because he had a mana in his pool and he said, "go." He was at two, but if he was at 20 I would still have him burn for one. The way he was shuffling there was a chance that he could see the bottom card of my library...probably not, but don't look down while you are shuffling.

I am not saying that in my lifetime I haven't played mind games with people. I think I probably play less than many people. I certainly wasn't there. What should I do? Go back and say, "Would you like to go back and untap one of your lands in the Top 8 of the Pro Tour? You don't need to burn this time."

**BDM:** *You don't think you have some impact on your opponents simply by your reputation? Your opponent in the finals certainly seemed a little daunted to me.*

**Jon:** Clearly Mario was somewhat affected by the pressure of being in the finals. People are all the time. I have been in these places before and I could definitely feel it. I do very well under those circumstances; I am good at focusing and



seeming poised Finkel dropped Game 1 but then won three in a row over Mario Pascoli in the finals. under pressure. I had some rare out that happened to have first strike [Preeminent Captain]...it has some ability that is pretty good and then, hey, it has first strike too. He didn't realize it and it was clear that he slumped in his chair.

There was one time where I Coordinated Barraged his Seething Pathblazer. I feel like there was a way he could have used his Sunflare Shaman to kill one of my guys and in response sac'd it instead of his other creatures and therefore two-for-one me. He definitely made a mistake there...whether that was because he was playing in the Top 8 of a Pro Tour or not...who knows?

Sorry Mario, by the way...I am not trying to bash you or anything.

**BDM:** *Getting back to the early part of your career... Your breakout season came ten years ago when you made the Top 8 three times, including your first Pro Tour win. I remember reading your*

*tournament report for that event and it felt like winning that tournament was a huge event in your life, for more than just the money and the trophy. Was it?*

**Jon:** It does make some sense, but whenever I am asked this question I still think it is true that the biggest deal for me was making the Top 8 in Chicago 1997. It was my first Top 8. It gave some validation to all the time I spent on **Magic**. I had I think four Top 16s. My deck was excellent and I lost many coin flips in that Top 8—not to bitch or anything. That was certainly the biggest yes-moment in my **Magic** career.

**BDM:** *You don't think that there was a big change in your life after New York?*

**Jon:** It is definitely true. That might have less to do with the winning and more to do with a conscious decision to change the people I was hanging out with—I think for the better. I think that had a bigger impact. Personally the money is always relevant. A lot of this thing is being very good at something you care about and competing at the highest level. The value of that victory was significantly greater than what the \$25,000-\$30,000 was for the first prize. Now that I think about it I definitely did make a conscious decision to change the people I hang out with. It is people I am still friends with today.

**BDM:** *Even when you stopped playing you were still on top of your game with multiple Top 8s in the 2003 season. What happened that you stopped playing?*

**Jon:** I was really limping through 2003 but on some level I was really limping after 1998. I played some more around 2000 and then I was limping for awhile. I had a lot of other things going on. One day you wake up and ask, "Do I want to play **Magic**?" and at that point the answer was very rarely "yes." So therefore do I want to go to this tournament? I didn't want to so I didn't go. I think that this happens when things people enjoy become too much of a job—especially when you access to better jobs. It can definitely lose a lot of its pure fun factor.

**BDM:** *So you went on to other things and had a book written about you—what is that like?*

**Jon:** It is pretty weird at first. Again, your life it told through someone else's voice. David Kushner was much better about it than it could have been. It is a large portion of your life, but it is the portion that fits within the correct box...which is not your entire life. It is odd...it was obviously a well-written book and it was flattering and for the most part true.

After you get over the initial weirdness of it, it is pretty cool. Who can say that when they were 26 years old they had a book written about them? Once again it reminds me that for my entire life I will never be known more for anything than this game I was the best at when I was like 20 years old. No matter what else I do in my life I will never be known by as many people as know about me through **Magic**.

**BDM:** *Is that good or bad?*

**Jon:** Neither. It just is. I love **Magic**. I think it has been one of the greatest things in my life. I never really felt like I had peaked in my life because this thing made me famous. It just is.

**BDM:** *You began playing **Magic** again Finkel defeated powerhouse Guillaume Wafo-Tapa three times over the weekend when you were about to be inducted into the Hall of Fame. What was that like to find that **Magic** was*



*still something you could have fun playing?*

**Jon:** When I was elected to the Hall of Fame, they sent us a box of all the sets that were in rotation and I called some old friends and we got together and we drafted. It was like, "Oh yeah, this is really a lot of fun." I still think *Ravnica* block was one of the best blocks they have ever made.

Going to Worlds that year, I couldn't be there that whole weekend. Going for just the Hall of Fame ceremony was really tough. I am glad I ended up going but if it wasn't for Worth Wollpert I probably would not have. I literally flew on a long trip to Japan, stayed there for 36 hours, and then flew back for scheduling reasons. It was a long trip for just the ceremony. Worth convinced me to go and he was completely right.

Then I came back and I liked playing **Magic** so I played **Magic**. It was much more enjoyable then when I stopped playing. It is a great game. It was a fun thing to play as a game. It was a much better game than a job.

**BDM:** *There was a mention that you were more prepared for this past weekend's event than you were for Prague—the first tournament you played in after your HoF induction. Is that true?*

**Jon:** I had been playing for a while by Prague. I played a ton with the format. I think it was one of the best formats ever. I had done better in those drafts than I had done in the *Lorwyn* block. At this point I am 18-19 in LLM drafts here. I think that I am probably better than that in the format but I was doing much better than that in the *Ravnica* block drafts. There is a lot of randomness in this game. I think that I am in pretty good **Magic** playing shape—especially for draft. I think I was one of the half-dozen players most likely to win this tournament and I think that was also true for Prague. I happened to have one complete and utter train wreck of a draft and I didn't make Day Two.

Take Zvi in this Pro Tour...I think there is zero percent chance that in any match I have a five percent greater chance of winning it than Zvi does. It is possible that he was supposed to win more matches than I did. He had one train wreck of a draft and he didn't make Day Two and no one heard about him.

The idea that I showed up for Prague not caring and that I had some renewed sense of urgency for this tournament is...it is a fun narrative maybe for people to tell. Although it is kind of annoying when people tell a narrative about your life and you are just like, "Man, could you have at least asked me?"

**BDM:** *Why did you decide to fly all the way around the world for this event?*

**Jon:** I went to Kuala Lumpur because I thought it would be fun. I wish I had gone to the *Time Spiral* block one. I actually did best in the *Time Spiral* block format of all the drafts I have done. I showed up because it was fun and I had been playing and that was exactly how it was when I showed up in Prague. I would say that my chances of winning this tournament were not significantly different than my chances of winning Prague.

**BDM:** *I know that you drafted Kithkin in the final draft, but what were your other decks like?*

**Jon:** I had one deck that was green-white Kithkin because I opened Cloudgoat Ranger and got passed all sorts of green cards and I was forced to play it. It was less of the ridiculous 20-creature Kithkin deck and more like 15 creatures and like seven really good tricks. I had two Hunting Triad, Briarhorn, Fistful of Force, Earthbrawn and maybe something else. I had ridiculous creatures too—Chameleon Colossus. I 3-0'd with that deck.

I don't think I have ever opened Mirror Entity in all my drafts here [in New York]. That is kind of surprising because we have done a lot of drafts here—especially all-*Lorwyn* drafts. I opened really well in this Pro Tour. You need to get lucky to win. I opened a Mistbind Clique. Cloudgoat Ranger was my first overall pick in two drafts. One draft I first-picked Mirror Entity and Profane Command.

**BDM:** *What is your general approach to drafting this format?*

**Jon:** I decided awhile ago that I do prefer playing blue. I basically try to play blue whenever I can unless I absolutely cannot. It is more fun so \*\*\*\* it. I definitely have a tendency to take a blue card where somebody might take a non-blue card. It has worked very well for me here against a very good group of people.

I prefer Fairies to Merfolk but I will go either way, and if forced to, will draft something else. I kind of wanted to draft an aggressive Elemental deck but I never opened or saw any Elemental cards. I never played red in any of the drafts but I was kind of looking to a little bit—after blue, of course.

**BDM:** *Why Mulldrifter over what many people consider a bomb like Brion Stoutarm in the Top 8 draft?*

**Jon:** I didn't think that was close. Mulldrifter is going into any deck I play. The Mulldrifter is more of a consistency card. I didn't want to put myself into white-red right at the beginning. I don't even know if it is a better card. I am planning on playing blue; how can I take Brion Stoutarm and then have all three of my colors picked? How am I going to splash my Nameless Inversion then?

**BDM:** *Did you feel like something had gone awry when you finished Morningtide and found a dearth of Bombardiers, Crickets, and Zephyrnauts? Did you still feel good about your deck?*

**Jon:** The white deck's strength is supposed to be in the third pack. It has so many good commons. Not only are these cards really good but they are really good in only your deck. If there is a Zephyrnaut opened to my left I am almost certainly getting it. While it is a bomb in my deck, it is unplayable in everyone else at the table's deck. I knew this because I got a million Kinsbaile Skirmishers at the end of the first pack.

My expectancy after the second pack was way better than my deck was. But after I registered my deck and did some test draws it seemed super consistent and super good. I really had no idea how good it really was. I had no frame of reference. It almost played more like a bad Constructed deck than a good draft deck. I was a little bit worried going into each round but looking back I was probably a two-to-one favorite in each round but I had no idea at the time.

**BDM:** *I had a "Broadcast News"-type moment after talking to you between the semis and finals and you related your decision to take Ponder over Shields of Velis Vel. It ultimately ended up as part of the webcast via my chats with Greg [Collins] and him talking with Rich and Bill. Can you explain that pick and what the decision was there—especially with Shields being so good with your two Kithkin Greathearts?*

**Jon:** I was obviously base white but I had some blue cards and I didn't know what the future was going to hold. I really like Ponder in the 16-land deck that I thought I was going to be playing. Shields of Velis Vel was a card that was going to be in my sidebar at best. I was hoping that I would not have to play the Kithkin Greathearts at that point if I was getting more white cards.

I had passed the Thundercloud Shaman and knew it was going to stay to my right. He was one in four to make the finals, I was one in four to make the finals, maybe our chances are a little different, but that is one in sixteen. I am not going to take this card for the one-in-sixteen chance I play him AND I am going to side it in and have it for at exactly the same time he has Thundercloud Shaman. I definitely changed my pick because, although I had seen the Shaman, I was pretty unlikely to play against it.



**BDM:** What did you think of your quarterfinal opponent Guillaume Wafo-Tapa?

**Jon:** I played him three times and I beat him all three times and I am pretty sure he is the best player I played against in the entire tournament. You can just tell. Results don't tell you everything, and I could just tell by playing him that he was an excellent player.

**BDM:** Will you be playing in Hollywood and who will you work with for Standard?

**Jon:** Probably. I am 80 percent. I know I can get a good deck. A lot will depend on how I feel in mid-May. I will work with Zvi and [Steve] Sadin and hopefully [Pat] Chapin.

**BDM:** What are you looking for in a deck?

**Jon:** Just some fun deck to play that won't make me feel like I am in Constructed hell.



## Pro Tour Tidbits

- Jon wasn't the only Hall of Famer making bold predictions about his performance prior to the start of this Pro Tour. Just look at what Nicolai Herzog said in his Hall of Fame profile last fall when asked about his chances of making another Top 8:

"Oh and Sundays?" he added, "Absolutely. Next Limited PT. Wait and see! To everyone that voted for me! Thanks mates!"

- Congratulations to Steve Sadin on making his first Pro Tour Top 16 finish. It is especially exciting when you consider that he did not win an actual game of **Magic** until 4 p.m. on Friday of Day One. He had a bye for the first round and then got blown out 0-2 in his next two matches. He was down a game in Round 4 and on the brink of elimination before he turned his tournament around and finished in 12th place.
- People should not have been surprised by Guillaume Wafo-Tapa's "breakout" Limited performance this past weekend. Since firmly entrenching himself on the Pro Tour just a couple of years ago, Guillaume has finished in the Top 16 of one Limited Pro Tour and in the Top 24 of another, along with two Top 8 finishes at Limited Grand Prix in Europe. Perhaps it is time to drop the Constructed prefix from the title "Master" when discussing this guy—he seems to be the complete package!

## Firestarter: The Jon Finkel over/under

Jon has 25 Pro Points for this season after his win in Kuala Lumpur and sits atop the Player of the Year standings. If you had to set the over/under line on how many points Jon will amass this season—currently he seems likely to attend both Pro Tour–Hollywood and Worlds—where would you set it?

