

Brian David-Marshall
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The Grand Prix train pulled into Shizuoka last weekend and to the surprise of exactly no one, Olivier Ruel had hitched a ride to Japan aiming to add to his historic Grand Prix Top 8 total. Heading into Shizuoka, Olivier was tied for the all-time lead in Top 8 appearances with Grand Prix trailblazer Alex Shvartsman at a staggering tally of 21. Once the event was over, Olivier owned the top spot with no signs of slowing down.

"About two years ago, I reached the point where I was number three in nearly all lifetime categories," said Olivier Ruel when I interviewed him about his historic finish. "I'm very far from Kai [Budde] and Jon [Finkel] in most of the categories. I'll never catch them in Pro Tour Top 8s but I want to try and chase them in every category I can. For the first time, I'm number one at something, and that's really encouraging. I guess I'm also number one at 'number of Grand Prix played,' which relativizes my achievement, but I don't claim to be the best player in the history of GP or anything. I just am the most regular and that's enough to make me happy and proud. I checked and I've actually played in 86 Grand Prix. Number 100 will be in 2009."

Grand Prix competition has been the wind at Olivier's back in the Player of the Year race recently, with a bulk of his points coming in a flurry of Top 8 appearances over the past few years. The importance of that was not lost on the French player as he explained the significance of his record in terms of his career: "(The Grand Prix record is) extremely important, for two reasons: 1. I had the opportunity to travel a lot which is what I like the most in the game; and 2. Despite not being one of the very best players in the game I can compete with them in a year's time because I play more tournaments than they do. Grand Prix are my passport to Level 8."

Olivier, who will be eligible for the Hall of Fame this year, began his Grand Prix career a decade ago at Grand Prix-Lyon, which was won by his countryman (and future Hall of Famer) Raphael Levy. Olivier did not achieve his first of 22 Top 8s until the following year in Madrid.

"I was playing Survival in a Necro/Donate metagame," recalled Ruel. "Not necessarily a clever choice but I loved the deck so much. I think I never played any deck as well as I played that one. I lost in the quarters to Xavi Gonzalez running Merfolk."

One of the stories coming into Pro Tour-Kuala Lumpur was that Olivier was poised to pass Jon Finkel for second place on the all-time Pro Points list. Only three points behind Jon coming in, Olivier was much further back by the time Jon was done reminding everyone how easy he could make **Magic** look.

"I didn't even know I was that close until I read your column the week before the PT," laughed Olivier. "I was planning to (pass Jon), as I never got prepared better for a PT before, but I guess I will have to wait for another few months."

I wondered how it felt for Olivier, on the brink of passing a legend, to watch Jon devour the Pro Tour from the sidelines after a disappointing Day One in KL.



Olivier Ruel took over first place in lifetime Grand Prix Top 8s last weekend.

"It made me really glad—except when he was winning versus [Guillaume] Wafo [Tapa] (three times that weekend). The PT is going through a very hard time and nothing better could happen to it than Jon winning the PT," said Olivier, before adding that Jon is not his prey. "And anyway, I'd be really glad to catch Jon, but this is not my goal. My goal is to get to Kai."

"Luckily, this lifetime standing is not based on **Magic** skills, in which case I'd be a thousand miles behind Jon and Kai. It is about combined skills and self investment. If on a scale of skills or gift, Kai and Jon would be 10, and Kenji 9, I'd probably be around 6. But on a scale of dedication to the game and efforts, if they were 10, I'd be about 15. I am not them, I am not and will never be as good as them, but I'll get to them my own way."

Olivier Ruel

Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Faerie Conclave	4 Bitterblossom	2 Deathmark
1 Island	3 Cryptic Command	4 Flashfreeze
2 Mutavault	2 Notorious Throng	2 Peppersmoke
2 Pendelhaven	4 Rune Snag	3 Sower of Temptation
4 River of Tears	2 Unsummon	4 Thoughtseize
4 Secluded Glen		<hr/>
4 Snow-Covered Island	15 other spells	15 sideboard cards
4 Underground River		
<hr/>		
25 lands		
4 Mistbind Clique		
4 Oona's Blackguard		
4 Pestermite		
4 Scion of Oona		
4 Spellstutter Sprite		
<hr/>		
20 creatures		

As he pursued Jon and Kai, I wondered who Olivier thought might be stalking him. While 22 Grand Prix seems like an impossible number to match, Alex Shvartsman's 21 Top 8s were also declared unsurpassable in the past. After all, the last of those 21 came back in Washington, D.C. in April of 2004.

"There will be someone, someday, but I'll try to add another 15 to make things more difficult for him," said Olivier. "At the moment, I guess Kenji and Antoine are the closest ones to catching me."

If there were any concerns about Olivier Ruel moving away from the game of **Magic**, you only need to hear him talk about goals for the 2008 season to know that Olivier will be in the mix as the PoY race comes down the stretch in Memphis.

"I'd love one PT Top 8 and two more GPs. Three would be good. My goal is to be a Level 8," he explained, currently sitting 42 points below that threshold. "Jon is something like 15 points ahead at the moment, so if I reach my goal I'll pass Jon even if he wins Worlds. But my dream would be to pass Jon and Kai on the same weekend, if possible beating one in a Pro Tour Top 8. Probably never happening, but who knows? I've seen so many 'never happening' facts coming true in 15 years of **Magic**."

While Olivier had been playing in Grand Prix since 1998, it was not until 2001 that he really caught the bug and started traveling abroad for events. He was not even attending all the European events at that stage of his career, but with university looming on the immediate horizon he decided to shake things up and go overseas for an event. He took a trip down to the travel agency and looked into tickets for an upcoming Canadian tournament, but the high ticket prices made that seem unlikely.

On a whim he decided to look into travel costs to Shizuoka for a Grand Prix that was taking place that very weekend but the prices were still too high. The travel agent advised him that he might have better luck if he went straight to the airport to buy a ticket. That was all the push Olivier would need. He went to the university to register for classes, asked permission from his mother, and avoided any contact with his brother in the hopes of surprising him by appearing in the Shizuoka standings.

He made it to the ticket counter with only hours before the last possible flight that could get him there in time was due to depart. He haggled for a price that would fit within his meager budget and somehow managed to secure a ticket with the very last of his cash. Not knowing for sure that he would be able to get to Shizuoka from Tokyo in time and with only his backpack for luggage, he was off to his first overseas Grand Prix.

"At this point I had no money, no idea if I would be able to make it to the GP, no hotel, no one I knew in Japan, and university starting three days later," said Olivier, marveling in his younger self's naiveté. "It was stupid to go, but I did go."

"I managed to catch the very last train to Shizuoka, but I got a bad surprise when I arrived there. My credit card could only withdraw money in Citibanks. Therefore, I couldn't pay for a cab to the site, nor dinner. But at least I was there, with nine hours to manage and walk to the site. After a 30-minute walk, a young couple offered to drive me to the site. As you can guess, I was not in a position to say 'no.' Once in front of the site, I had to wait in the cold for 8 hours."

After only about a half-hour of huddling by the entrance to the site, a carload of Japanese **Magic** players arrived and one of them recognized the French player. It was Tsuyoshi Fujita—the only Japanese player Oli knew at all.

Lifetime Grand Prix Top 8s

1. Olivier Ruel 22
 2. Alex Shvartsman 21
 3. Itaru Ishida 17
 3. Antoine Ruel 17
 5. Masahiko Morita 16
 6. Kai Budde 14
 7. Raphael Levy 13
 8. Tsuyoshi Fujita 12
 8. Kenji Tsumura 12
- Complete List

"So there I was, in the middle of nowhere, about to sleep outside on my own when the only person I knew in Japan arrived and offered me a blanket and a pillow for the night!" exclaimed Olivier, still amazed at the serendipitous experience. "The tournament went great. After two losses on Day One I won my first five matches of draft and ID'd into Top 8. After losing my semifinal and winning my first **Magic** trophy ever, it was time to call Antoine and announce him I was in Japan and I had made Top 8."



Olivier in Shizuoka back in 2001, his first trip to Japan.

"Helloooo, guess where I a..."

"Did you win your semis?"

"...well, no..."

"Dude, you suck!"

"Then I spent a great week in Japan and fell in love with the country. I now attend to every event I may in Japan."

Next up for Olivier is this weekend's Grand Prix-Vienna, where he will be playing Cephalid Breakfast. With exams eating precious playtest time in between GPs, there has been little time to switch decks despite some dodgy matchups.

"It's the deck I've played in Vancouver and it loses to Red Deck Wins and Next Level Blue but just wins to everything else. With no time to test, I'd rather gamble and try and avoid the two most played decks of the metagame," he half-joked.

Rookie Profiles

After last week's interview with New York's Jason Imperiale, I received an email from one reader who complained about the North American focus of both mine and Flores's columns in regard to looking at PTQ results. I would very much like to include more stories from around the world, but the Top 8 decklists page that both Mike and I mine for stories features primarily North American results.

I have in the past done stories about players from all over the World. When those stories come from outside of my home continent it usually means that someone—a player, reporter, or the tournament organizer—reached out to share the story with me. I strongly encourage players to prod—and I am talking high-voltage cattle prod here—their local tournament organizers to send me Top 8 decklists, stories, and player profiles.

Just this past week, my friend André Coimbra dropped me an email about a local Portuguese player who had just qualified for his very first Pro Tour. João Cavaleiro is the brother of Worlds competitor Pedro Cavaleiro and a playtest partner of Andre's. Similarly, Oscar Flores, a Wizards board moderator, let me know about a friend of his—Justin Cavanaugh—who also qualified for his first Pro Tour. Both players were from small towns and have done little traveling.

Regardless of where these two players originate, they are both heading to the same place—Hollywood. Let's find out how they got there.

BDM : *Let's start off with the basics... age, occupation, and hometown?*

Justin: My name is Justin Cavanaugh and I am from Wilmington, N.C. born and raised. I work at the Wilmington Athletic Club in the After School Program.

João: I'm an 18 year-old Physics student from Figueira da Foz, Portugal.

BDM: *What are your previous **Magic** accomplishments before finally qualifying for the Pro Tour last weekend?*

João: I qualified first for Nationals—then my brother did.



Cavanaugh is on his way to his first Pro Tour.

Justin: I made top 4 at a Star City Games 1k event playing Perilous Storm, as well as at the previous Regionals with DragonStorm, and ninth at my last PTQ with the same deck: Monored Burn.

BDM: *How did you learn how to play **Magic**?*

Justin: I learned how to play **Magic** back when I was in high school, friends played and I was intrigued by it.

João: My brother and friends in my hometown.

BDM: *How long before you began to play competitively?*

João: I've been playing PTQs for a couple of years now.

Justin: It was about a year before I started actually going to the store in my town and began with Limited then moved to Constructed. There was so much more to the game then I knew at the time.

BDM: *How many PTQs have you played in before last weekend, and what was the closest you have come to qualifying before?*

Justin: This would be about my sixth or seventh PTQ. This was my third of this season: played Doran Rock earlier this year, then Monored Burn the other two times. Closest I got before this last one was my ninth place at Charlotte the day after the 5k event.

João: I've played some PTQs in the last few years and had some Top 8s. The week before this last PTQ I got to top 4 with the same decklist.

BDM: *How did you prepare for this weekend's tournament? Did you do anything different than you normally do?*

João: I'm from a small city and last year I moved to Porto to study so I've been testing way more than I did before. The results are positive: the last two weeks I played my first PTQs since I first moved and I got to the Top 8 of both. For this tournament I've been helping André Coimbra test his deck for GP-Vienna and he has been helping me test to get me through the PTQ season along with some other friends and my brother.


Justin: The whole week before I was unsure if I even wanted to go, I liked the deck but I had been play testing the new Weiss deck Desire Swath, I really liked it and it was fun but after seeing Vancouver I was not too sure how it would do against Previous Level Blue or Blue-green Tron. So I decided to play burn as I felt comfortable with it and I knew it had decent game in the field.

BDM: *What deck did you play and why?*

Justin: I chose Monored Burn because it has a great game against most forms of Rock and Zoo, and has a decent game against the blue-based decks in the format. I decided that before the PTQ that I wanted to put the Sulfuric Vortexes into the main deck and I cut the Flames of the Blood Hand as they do pretty much the same thing.

Justin Cavanaugh		
Main Deck <i>60 cards</i>		Sideboard
4 Barbarian Ring 3 Blinkmoth Nexus 3 Darksteel Citadel 4 Great Furnace 7 Snow-Covered Mountain <hr/> 21 lands 4 Keldon Marauders 4 Mogg Fanatic 4 Spark Elemental <hr/> 12 creatures	2 Chain of Plasma 2 Incinerate 4 Lava Spike 3 Magma Jet 4 Rift Bolt 4 Shard Volley 4 Shrapnel Blast 4 Sulfuric Vortex <hr/> 27 other spells	3 Flaring Pain 3 Pithing Needle 4 Pyrostatic Pillar 3 Shattering Spree 2 Sun Droplet <hr/> 15 sideboard cards

João: I played Red-black Goblins because I think it was the deck for the Portuguese PTQ metagame. I have a tough time against TEPS, but as I expected there were nearly none at the PTQ and almost no Engineered Plagues at all.

João Cavaleiro		
Main Deck <i>60 cards</i>		Sideboard
4 Auntie's Hovel 2 Blood Crypt 4 Bloodstained Mire 4 Mountain 3 Mutavault 1 Overgrown Tomb 1 Pendelhaven 1 Wooded Foothills <hr/> 20 lands 2 Earwig Squad 3 Gempalm Incinerator 4 Goblin Matron 4 Goblin Piledriver	4 Chrome Mox 2 Patriarch's Bidding <hr/> 6 other spells	2 Ancient Grudge 4 Cabal Therapy 1 Earwig Squad 1 Gempalm Incinerator 1 Goblin Sharpshooter 3 Krosan Grip 3 Tormod's Crypt <hr/> 15 sideboard cards

4 Goblin Ringleader
1 Goblin Sharpshooter
4 Goblin Warchief
4 Mogg Fanatic
4 Mogg War Marshal
4 Skirk Prospector

34 creatures

BDM: How did you do in the Swiss rounds? Were you ever on the edge of being eliminated? Was there a critical moment to you making the Top 8?

João: I went undefeated through the Swiss (6-0-2).

Justin: I did not play a deck twice throughout the Swiss rounds. Starting from round one I played against Zoo, Flow Rock (like Sullivan's Version), Teps (my loss in the Swiss—very close game), Goblins, Affinity, Previous Level Blue, and ID in round 7 with Zoo (same guy I played in finals).

I was on the draw all day; I only played first [in] Game 1 twice. Looking back that might have been a good thing because drawing that extra card might have been game breaking. My play group and I have a running joke about round seven being my choke round, I have been in a streak where I need to win that round and ID in, but my deck just seems to not fare well in that round. Which made this day even greater was that it was only seven rounds, which meant that round seven was the last round and I got to ID, it which made me very happy. I did not just break the streak, I slaughtered it.

BDM: What were your matchups like in the Top 8? Any memorable plays/top decks/decisions?

Justin: I was a little bit nervous, but I found out that my first-round opponent was a friend of mine—Mike Ward. So playing the first round of Top 8 was nice because we just had a good time playing and it calmed me down. Going into top 4 I played against Kenny Mayer and we had a good game, Game 1 he ended up taking 7 extra damage from his side—four to Thoughtseize me off a dual and then three off a Bob revealing Doran (not good for him). In finals I played against Domain Zoo which is a good match for me. Game 1 I got a fast draw and burned him out. Game 2 he decided to keep and I picked up half my hand one at a time to see my first three cards were Vortex, Vortex, Vortex and I paused. I picked up the rest and it was Keldon Marauders, Mountain, Nexus, and Shard Volley. Being on the draw I decided to keep. We went back and forth for a bit. One turn he peeled his miser's Armadillo Cloak and put it on Tarmogoyf—I had no Vortex in play yet. I blocked with Marauders and Shard Volleyed it to trade. He then continued to draw nothing but land with four cards in hand, making me play around Gaea's Might and Tribal Flames as not to get blown out.



João: Quarterfinals I won 2-1 to Ideal, semifinals I won 2-0 to Monored Burn, and in the finals I won 2-1 to Monored Burn. I drew the Patriarch's Bidding at a crucial turn to change the course of action, get myself in control, and a couple of turns later I won.

BDM: What were you thinking after you won and what did you do to celebrate afterwards?

João: "Finally!" I was so, so tired that I went home to get some rest.

Justin: Felt like it was a dream. I was excited and immediately started thinking about who to call about accommodations for that weekend. I have a few people I know who are already qualified. It is exciting and my play group is going to help me test to find something we hope will do well with *Shadowmoor* being legal.

We went to Steak and Shake which happened to be really close and my friends bought me dinner and we got some shakes to celebrate. We thought about getting some cake but the shakes were really good.

BDM: *How will you prepare for Hollywood? Who will you work with? What are your expectations for the Pro Tour?*

Justin: My play group is going to test on paper and with my clan on **Magic Online (Wave)** and find something that does fairly well in the format. Hopefully *Shadowmoor* will bring some fun and good stuff to the format. I have loved combo ever since I started playing *Dragonstorm*, so a good combo deck would be something I would feel comfortable with and would have fun with. This being my first Pro Tour, I am a little anxious about it but I feel as long as I focus and know my deck I should do fairly well.

João: I'll be testing with André Coimbra and Pedro Cavaleiro. I must say I'm hoping for a Top 50.

BDM: *How often do you travel normally?*

João: Like never, but I intend to start travelling more often from now on.

Justin: I travel around my state of North Carolina a lot for events and to Roanoke as well. I do not go farther than that too often. I did join Oscar Flores from my group in Baltimore last year when he was qualified for Nationals. I went and had a good time, I tried to grind in and got close. It was a fun event and I would like to go again this year. Let's hope I can hit Level 2 so I am qualified, that would be nice.

BDM: *Will you be playing in a GP this weekend?*

Justin: No, Philly is a little far but I do have a friend going and I hope he does well...be nice to meet him in Hollywood.

João: I'll be playing GP-Vienna.

BDM: *Is there anything else you want to add?*

João: Goblins are never outdated.

Justin: I am really excited about going to my first Pro Tour and that it is in Hollywood, makes it a lot easier to be in the U.S. I hope to do well and I will be playtesting a lot to make sure I find a deck that I feel comfortable with and like. I should say thanks to my play group for ideas and making time to test. Also, that my deck was helped in design by my clan Wave and I could not have done it without them.

Firestarter: Vienna vs. Philly

There are two Grand Prix tournaments taking place this weekend. Make sure to tune into the Tournament Center for Tim Willoughby's Vienna updates as well as my coverage of Grand Prix-Philadelphia. Which of these two events will have the most Pro Points going into the Top 8? Head to the forums and make your case.

