

Deck Deconstruction Seminar: Breakout Decks from the U.S. Regionals

Featuring Randy Buehler, former Pro-Tour Champion and resident Magic expert

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WizO_Unicorn: Welcome! Tonight Wizards Online features a special Deck Deconstruction Seminar with Randy Buehler. Randy chooses one of the breakout decks from U.S. Regionals to pull apart and he'll clue you in to what the pros know. Randy, what specifically will you be deconstructing for us tonight?

WotC_Randy: I'll start with a brief overview of our subject—Control Black decks—and then we'll go into question and answer mode shortly thereafter.

The top decks at US Regionals last weekend were Replenish, MonoBlue, Stompy, White Weenie and Mono-Black. Mono-Black is more of a spectrum of decks—it's not one consistent deck. In fact, Mono-Black can be divided into two basic decks; Suicide Black and Control Black. The easiest way to tell them apart is that the successful Suicide Black deck uses Flesh Reaver and Lurking Evil while the Control Black deck didn't bother. Control Black uses removal spells (like Vendetta and Snuff Out) instead, along with more Vampiric Tutors, Stupor, Powder Keg, and even more interesting cards like Thrashing Wumpus and Rain of Tears.

12 people qualified for Nationals with Mono-Black and I believe nine or ten of them played Control Black. Decklists varied a lot, but they all included the staples of the Suicide deck, such as Duress, Dark Ritual, and Phyrexian Negator. Unmask was also good against all the Replenish that ran rampant. Two cards that illustrate the difference between Suicide and Control? Tangle Wire and Yawgmoth's Will. They both turned up in both kinds of decks, but Tangle Wire fits better into Suicide while Yawgmoth's Will serves better in Control decks.

The beatdown version of Mono-Black—Suicide Black—tries to cast threats as quickly as possible, then you use Tangle Wire to prevent your opponent from recovering. Control Black is slower so it has time to build up the land base that you need to maximize Yawgmoth's Will. But Control decks nowadays aren't the nearly as slow as "back in the day"—when Blue/white killed you with Millstones.

Control Black just wants to be in control long enough to kill with some big Black nasty like a Negator or even a Skittering Horror. Tangle Wire can still buy you the time you need to win even in a Control Black deck. All in all, there's a healthy supply of good cards available to the Mono-Black mage and leaves you enough room to customize your deck to your own tastes (and your own expected metagame). Control Black should be around in one form or another at least until this fall, and probably even after *Invasion* comes out and the *Saga* block leaves circulation.

That's probably more than enough babbling for now. I'm ready to field questions!

mike_online: Sorry Randy..."metagame?"

WotC_Randy: Sure—excellent question. The "metagame" is what decks you expect everyone else to play. For example if you knew that every single one of your opponents was planning to play a Goblin/Burn deck, then you probably wouldn't play Suicide Black—because Red tends to beat fast Black decks. But if you knew everyone wanted to play a combo deck (like Replenish) then Black is a good choice, because hand destruction spells like Duress and Unmask are really good against combo decks. Basically, if you can accurately guess what decks you are likely see in a tournament, it gives you a big edge.

mike_online: So "metagame" is really just a guess at what you expect to be up against.

WotC_Randy: Pros refer to that as "playing the metagame"—instead of trying to figure out the best deck, all you really have to do to win a tournament is figure out which decks beats the decks that everyone else is going to play. Make sense?

By the way, I can field questions about more than just Control Black decks.

xxxWizardxxx: A personal question Randy , what's your age?

WotC_Randy: I'm 28.

mike_online: When I think Control, I think Blue. Does Mono-Blue do well against Control Black?

WotC_Randy: One of the advantages of Control Black is that it beats Blue, mostly because of one card: Dark Ritual. Control Black decks can break out a fast threat (usually creature) with a Dark Ritual before Blue can get mana for a Counterspell into play. Throw in the fact that Blue Control is susceptible to hand destruction and card drawing (like Duress and Yawgmoth's will) and I think Control Black will beat control Blue. However, the more anti-creature cards you put into the Black deck, the worse it is against Blue.

If you have a very anti-creature Black deck, Blue can probably take it. On average, though, and especially if you get the Ritual-Fatty draw, I think Black should beat Blue.

witch_king: It seems that everyone is playing "Lin Sivvi" decks lately, I tried out a pirate deck against one and Rising Waters stopped it completely. So what's the big hype?

WotC_Randy: Not everyone is smart enough to play Pirates! Lin Sivvi is really, really good against a lot of decks. It can have problems against Rising Waters—in fact, a Waters deck beat a Rebel deck in the finals of the most recent Pro Tour—but if the Rebel player has a full share of Disenchants and Seals of Cleansing, watch out! Waters itself is amazing versus rebels...the challenge is to keep it on the table!

xxxWizardxxx: What does Control Black consist of?

WotC_Randy: Control Black has Duress and possibly Unmask for hand destruction; the creatures usually include Phyrexian Negator, at least one masticore, Skittering Skirge, maybe Skittering Horror, and I really like Thrashing Wumpus. Ascendent Evincar is also decent. The spells include some combination of Powder Keg, Vendetta, Snuff Out, Tangle Wire, and Yawgmoth's Will. The deck usually includes some Vampiric Tutors so you can go get whatever you need, and the Tutors make it worth running one copy of some really powerful but situational cards like Massacre (take that, evil rebels!)

Rax_Delvar: What kind of decks does Lin Sivvi beat? Every time I see the deck, it loses. Trample kills it, Black kills it, Blue control kills it, and even Red burn decks kill it.

WotC_Randy: It's good against Green if they don't have any Trampers. I find it's really good against Blue Control—I'm surprised that you think Blue Control beats it. If the Rebel play plays correctly then each of his creatures can recruit an entire army into play. That makes each recruiter a must-counter/must-kill threat. That's also why Rebel decks tend to beat removal decks (like Red). The thing with Green is, how much Trample can you really play? Rancor, of course, but what else? In my experience, it's hard for Red to kill each and every creature, especially before they get the chance to start recruiting. Maybe the rest of the world and I have been wrong—maybe they suck! But I doubt it. Rebel decks aren't unbeatable, but they are pretty good

witch_king: All this goes to show is that any deck can be beaten on any day nothing is invincible! Plain and simple.

WotC_Randy: True ... true.

VirusX: You've heard of the infinite Sliver combo, right? You can't beat that!

WotC_Randy: Combo decks have to be beaten before they set up their combo. The trick is to either break up the combo before your opponent gets it started or win the game before it's set up.

mike_online: Is Control Black Mono-Black?

WotC_Randy: Control Black decks are indeed Mono-Black. They do use Rishadan port and occasionally Dust Bowl or Phyrexian Tower, but all the rest of their lands are swamps.

VirusX: Ill try to explain the infinite Sliver combo.

WotC_Randy: Slivers are creatures that share abilities with each other.

VirusX: They are cheap and they share techniques.

WotC_Randy: Slivers debuted in *Tempest* and *Stronghold*...

VirusX: Including the Sliver Queen.

WotC_Randy: The queen is 7/7 and makes more Slivers, but she costs one mana of each color! But Virus, I don't know what is "infinite" about your friend's deck.

VirusX: I get a headache when he explains how it works.

WotC_Randy: It sounds like he plays a lot of creatures . . . does he use Heartstone?

VirusX: Yea, he has that, too.

WotC_Randy: In any case, it will take him many turns to get all the Slivers he needs into play

WotC_Randy: OK . . . so Heartstone reduces the cost of all creature abilities by onw mana, and Sliver Queen can make more Slivers for two mana. So if you get out 2 Heartstones and a Sliver Queen then you can make all the Slivers you want for free. Also—Acidic Sliver lets you sacrifice Slivers to deal two damage. That ability costs two mana, but once again, if you have two Heartstones, its free. SO, (deep breath) if you have Acidic Sliver, Sliver Queen, and two Heartstones, then you do infinite damage and kill your opponent. Virus—maybe you should try running spells that can destroy the Heartstone. Simple commons like Disenchant and Shatter could really mess him up. You can also kill his queen, though that's not as easy since she's 7/7. Make sure your spells are cheap enough that you can cast them in time. The queen's biggest drawback is that she's really hard to cast—one of each color is hard to come up with. There are a number of ways to kill Slivers that aren't targeted. For example, Pestilence will kill Slivers even when Crystalline Sliver is out. So will Earthquake and Thrashing Wumpus. Wrath of God will do the trick if you are playing White. Powder Keg will also kill Slivers.

fluxinhen: What is Pestilence??

WotC_Randy: Pestilence is a Black enchantment that does one damage to all creatures and players for one Black mana.

Rax_Delvar: What's in a good rebel deck?

WotC_Randy: A buddy of mine won the Ohio Regionals with a good one: It doesn't have a lot of Rebels, but it's pretty fast. He used Ramosian Sergeant plus all the two mana 2/2 Rebels (Steadfast Guard and Fresh Volunteers) Then he added Mother of Runes, Longbow Archers, Crusade, Armageddon, Disencahnt, Parallax Wave, and Reverent Mantra, the appropriate lands, and you've got a good aggressive white weenie/Rebel deck. Don't forget the 4 Rishadan Ports in the land!

witch_king: How long have you been playing, Randy?

WotC_Randy: I started playing around the time *Homelands* came out—that was 1996, I believe. Not at the very beginning, but I've been around for a while now. I started about the same time the Pro Tour started and then it took me two years to get good and get onto the Tour.

VirusX: I have this card called the Grim Monolith: When tapped gives me three mana(colorless) and stays untapped until I pay four. How do I use

this as a source without losing any mana to untap and use it again and again.

WotC_Randy: It can't be done in any way that is legal in Standard tournaments, but it can be done.

VirusX: How?

WotC_Randy: There's an obscure card in *Antiquities* (which was one of the very first expansions) called Power Artifact. It reduces the cost to untap the Monolith down to two mana—instant infinite mana! And Power Artifact only costs two blue. There are lots of scary, overpowered cards in some of the very early sets. That's why you can't use them in tournaments (except the occasional "Vintage" tournament).

xxxWizardxxx: Wouldn't Twiddle do the trick?

WotC_Randy: I think he was looking for a way to do it over and over again. You'll always run out of Twiddles eventually!

VirusX: So how do I use it correctly?

WotC_Randy: The Monolith or the Power Artifact?

VirusX: The Monolith.

WotC_Randy: In general, the way to use Monolith is to play it on turn two for a burst of speed—on turn three you'll have 5 or 6 mana. It's actually really good to get that early boost and cast something big on turn three. That's how most people use it—as a sort of colorless Dark Ritual.

Nethya: Is Thran Turbine worth putting in a Rebel deck?

WotC_Randy: No, I don't think so. It's a good idea though—and here's something similar: A card which is even better than Thran Turbine at generating a large amount of colorless mana is Gaea's Cradle. It produces one Green mana for each creature you have in play. Well you don't need Green, but just use it all as colorless! And the more Rebels you recruit the more mana you get!

mike_online: So how do you work your way up from just common play to the Pro tour?

WotC_Randy: The key is actually pretty simple: lots and lots of practice. The more you play the better you get. And the best way to play is to seek out players who are better than you. It doesn't help much to beat up on people who aren't good. Find the good players and then watch them play and ask them why they are doing certain things when you would have done something different. Tournaments are a good way to find good players and also to get valuable practice.

witch_king: I started in '95, when Fourth Edition was still in print, but never got into tournaments because of my location(Iowa). How do you get recognized in an area like this?

WotC_Randy: Hmmmm ... that's a tough one. There are lots of people talking on the Internet—in chat rooms just like this one. You can usually get information this way. But then you'll have to travel if you want to play tournaments. You can't get to the Pro Tour without playing in a lot of tournaments—there's just no other way.

ol_merlin: Perhaps witch_king could organize a tournament to generate interest in his area....ask a gaming store or something.

WotC_Randy: That's an excellent idea—if there's any card store at all then you could probably drum up some interest there. The local card store is the place where almost everyone starts playing tournaments.

ol_merlin: I gave my friends a bunch of cards to start with, now they are hooked.

WotC_Randy: I've done that several times—most longtime players have extra cards, especially commons. And it's always great to find new people to play against . . . so start them out with some free cards!

VirusX: How do I use Predator, Flagship strategically?

WotC_Randy: One use is to give all your creatures flying, so you can attack with them—but that is not the best use. The best thing to do with it is to treat it as a re-useable creature destruction effect. First, give an opponent's creature flying...and then just tap five mana to kill it! Next turn, repeat.

mike_online: Do you ever make visits to the local play areas to encourage people to play? Sort of like cameo visits?

WotC_Randy: Why do you think I'm here? *winks*

mike_online: In real life?

WotC_Randy: I don't make a lot of trips to stores, but I have made a few. What I do more often is "gunsling" or just talk to anyone who approaches me at tournaments. You might see me at the Pro Tour or a Grand Prix or even Regionals ... I don't bite. And this chat happens on the second Tuesday of every month.