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Deckbuilding on a Diet

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House of Cards
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

Playing **Magic** Online for the past month has reminded me of a very important consideration of deckbuilding: Access to cards. **Magic** Online won't allow me to play even casual games unless I use cards from my virtual collection, and that collection very recently started at zero.

The result is that I have fallen into some old habits. I have started making decks out of the rares of which I have -- through chance -- obtained four copies. I have started making "bad rare" decks because someone will trade me multiple copies of **Zoologist** for my foil **Chainer's Edict**. I have started valuing uncommons highly. I guard my four copies of **Call of the Herd** as if they are my children.

In short, I have started caring about the rarity of the cards.

You may have noticed that in previous weeks I've been, shall we say, cavalier about the use of rares in my decks. Part of me is okay with this habit, since my articles are meant to spur your creativity, not give you off-the-shelf decks to use. The other part of me, though, realizes that I just didn't think about it. Rarity has not been a deckbuilding factor for me in a long, long time.

So today, let's focus on decks that cost very little to assemble. I won't call them "cheap" decks, because that just sounds bad. Instead, think of them as decks on a spending diet.



Deck options are often limited to what cards you can get your hands on.

WHY TO DIET

From my perspective, decks from a limited card pool fall into two categories.

1) "Actualization" decks are those whose owners know what deck they *really* want to make, but they've substituted for cards they don't yet own. Instead of those last two **Hell-Bent Raiders**, they use **Goblin Chariot**. No **Iridescent Angel**? **Glimmering Angel** is fine for now. Not surprisingly, the decks using this approach look fairly hodge-podge and inconsistent most of the time.

"Actualization" decks are commonplace and usually harmless, but I worry about believing that a card can easily substitute for another card. It ignores the nuances of deckbuilding.

2) "Underdog" decks are those built with an inexpensive card pool in mind. Owners of Underdogs take immense satisfaction in stomping those \$500 foil netdecks. To the Underdog player, chase- rares aren't worth chasing, **Blastoderm** was the best card ever printed, and "breaking" bad rares is a way of life. That's right: Underdog is more a state of mind than a deck category.

Although the people who wield them tend to be annoying, I really like Underdogs. Their creations are similar to [Torment-only decks](#); they creatively use a limited card pool. But Underdogs are even more ambitious because they also attempt to make that limited card pool compete with a much larger one.

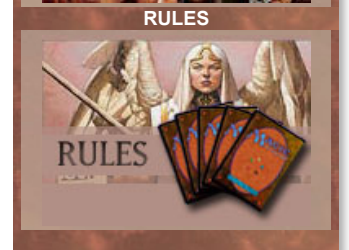
For your future Underdog decks, here are some basic guidelines for using a card pool of commons and uncommons. I'll assume, for the purposes of this article, that you have access to all commons, most uncommons and no rares.*

HOW TO DIET

Step 1: Pick Your Color(s)

As with all deckbuilding, decide the format of your deck. Once you have a format in mind, take a close look at your collection and decide either a) what color gives you the best pool of cards, or b) what color most suits your style. As a starting point, make decks in that color. Yes, one of the first tenets of "lite" decks is that they are usually better monocolored.

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It's certainly fine to make two- or more color decks with no rares, but it is also harder to justify not using the rare dual lands that would make your deck more consistent. The key to an Underdog is not apologizing for your card choices, and the cold hard truth is that most Extended blue/white decks are more reliable with **Adarkar Wastes** and **Tundra**.

Any format will have its exceptions to the monocolored guideline. Green generally allows for inexpensive mana diversity with cards like **Harrow** and **Rampant Growth**. Artifacts like **Chromatic Sphere** help too. Most recently, the **Torment** dual lands mean that a base black "lite" deck can easily splash a second color.

Step 2: Identify Your Power Cards

Chase down the ubiquitous uncommons in your color and format -- those cards that show up almost every time you use that color in a deck. You are already avoiding the rares, so don't further limit yourself by denying key uncommons too. Make a bunch of decks with pen-and-paper and you will see some of the same cards show up again and again. Those are the cards you want in your collection.

As a sidenote, this is where I think many people get frustrated with rares like **Call of the Herd**, **Nantuko Shade**, and **Spectral Lynx**. These cards are awfully hard to justify leaving out of any decks in their colors. Still, I think making solid decks without ubiquitous rares is more than possible even if it is annoying to exclude them.

For Type 2, consider finding four copies of: **Adlle**, **Chainer's Edict**, and **Zombie Infestation** in black; **Fact or Fiction** in blue; **Barbarian Ring** and **Flametongue Kavu** in red; **Longbow Archer** and **Voice of All** in white. (The **Invasion** dual-lands -- like **Coastal Tower** -- are also uncommon and valuable for when you do want to start diversifying your mana.)

No green cards? Interestingly enough, green has probably the strongest selection of uncommons, but by my count none fall into the "ubiquitous" category.



Good uncommons: the affordable backbone of any deck arsenal.

Step 3: Understand Your Limitations

Mark has already explained [why cards are rare](#). Those reasons carry implications for the dietary deck. First, complex cards usually aren't available in the common and uncommon slots, so don't force a complex strategy onto your lite deck. If you get too clever, your deck will start to look like it needs **Tainted Pact** or, heaven forbid, **Teferi's Puzzle Box**.

Also, for the most part you will be missing out on board-sweeping effects like **Wrath of God** and **Earthquake** as well as fatties like **Rith**, **the Awakener** and **Hypnox**. Instead, you are relying on spot removal and efficient creatures to win your games.

Again, the whole point of being an Underdog is challenging anyone to question your card choices. Know your boundaries and build within them.

Step 4: Build, Baby, Build

What I'm advocating, then, are mono-colored decks with more straightforward strategies and smaller effects. Sound bland and discouraging? Bah, you're not Underdog-minded. The eyes of the Underdogs just lit with fire. They have already started deciding which of the guidelines I've laid out that they can ignore. As with any card pool, there are brilliant and miraculous decks waiting to be discovered. They just require an imagination, and a friend, and...

Oh, sorry. Marketing pitch alert.

Seriously, though: If you can't make a deck that competes with the 3-color, 40-rare decks at your local card shop, consider asking the store owner to host a non-sanctioned tourney in which rares are banned. Or just make house rules with your friends. There is nothing saying you *must* be consumed with the Underdog desire to topple the big guys. Simply having a small collection is enough to motivate your creativity. And if creativity isn't enough, then House of Cards shouldn't exist at all, right?

I'M LOSING WEIGHT

Below you'll find some Type 2 rare-free decks from me. I've tried to throw a few mono-colored decks in there -- a green **Gorilla Titan** deck and a revival of blue control -- along with some base-black two-color decks that focus on card-advantage and reanimation, respectively. Thanks to Scott Forster for the idea behind the black/red one. The last deck, a 5-color-green deck, is probably my favorite and the most fun to play.

I've received a lot of e-mail from you whenever an inexpensive deck has appeared in my articles. As a result, don't think my **Magic** Online epiphany is short-lived. In every future article in which I build around rare cards

(which, let's be honest, is most of my articles), I will include a "lite" deck for you Underdog-minded folks.

Best wishes and live lite-ly,

-j

*: Thus this article is NOT a cookbook for Peasant Magic. What is Peasant Magic? It's a player-created format using only commons and uncommons. Look for a Peasant Magic article or two on MagicTheGathering.com in the future.



King Kong *Lite!*

20 Forest

4 Basking Rootwalla
4 Druid Lyrist
4 Llanowar Elves
4 Wild Mongrel
4 Penumbra Bobcat
4 Gorilla Titan

4 Sylvan Might
4 Roar of the Wurm
3 Dwell on the Past
3 Beast Attack
2 Steamclaw

Lite-Go *Lite!*

22 Island

4 Wall of Air
4 Thieving Magpie
2 Air Elemental

4 Opt
4 Syncopate
4 Aether Burst
4 Memory Lapse
4 Counterspell
4 Repulse
3 Fact or Fiction
1 Rushing River

8FTK *Lite!*

4 Tainted Peak
3 Urborg Volcano
14 Swamp
2 Mountain

4 Mesmeric Fiend
4 Ravenous Rats
4 Longhorn Firebeast
4 Flametongue Kavu
4 Faceless Butcher
3 Gravedigger

4 Duress
4 Addle
4 Chainer's Edict
2 Skeletal Scrying

Bad Breath *Lite!*

4 Tainted Field
16 Swamp
4 Plains

4 Mesmeric Fiend
4 Ravenous Rats
4 Gravedigger
4 Faceless Butcher
4 Soul Scourge
4 Angel of Mercy

4 Cabal Ritual
4 Breath of Life
4 Zombify

5cGreen 2002 *Lite!*

10 Forest
4 Island
2 Mountain
2 Plains
2 Swamp

4 Anurid Scavenger
4 Thornscape Battlemage
4 Flametongue Kavu

4 Chromatic Sphere
4 Chainer's Edict
4 Evasive Action
4 Rampant Growth
4 Worldly Counsel
4 Harrow
4 Ordered Migration

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