

Just in time for *Judgment*

Deconstructing Green/White Prison

Brian David-Marshall

Monday, May 06, 2002



- [Brian David-Marshall Archive](#)

The Powers-That-Be at MagicTheGathering.com must love the underdog. This is my third "Deconstructing Famous Decks" article and it is the third time that the deck under the microscope didn't actually *win* anything. Not that I am complaining. I'm a lifelong Mets fan, which should give you an idea about how I feel about underdogs.

Playing a Prison deck is not unlike rooting for the Mets. It is never easy. A classic Prison deck has the ability to negate an opponent's threats in the early game, and then in the late game it prevents them from attacking, casting spells, drawing cards or even taking turns. If you have played with or against a [Static Orb/Opposition](#) deck then you have an excellent point of reference for a modern Prison deck.

Such decks usually revolve around depriving your opponent of resources he needs for his deck to function. *Icy Manipulator and Winter Orb: the cornerstones for most old-school Prison decks.*

Whereas [Armageddon](#), [Winter Orb](#), [Icy Manipulator](#), [Black Vise](#), and [Balance](#) are all staples of old school Prison decks, the new Type 2 environment is a laboratory where deckbuilders have been experimenting with cards like [Time Stretch](#), [Plagiarize](#), and [Orim's Chant](#) (more on this later!) as key components for another Prison deck besides Orb/Opposition. (Check out Alan Comer's Sideboard Deck Clinic for his take on a [Plagiarize deck](#).)

A friend of mine had a Prison deck back in the dark ages of **Magic** that used [Island Sanctuary](#) and [Howling Mines](#) to deck his opponents while a [Winter Orb](#) and [Icy Manipulator](#) combo locked down their lands. It was a frustrating deck to play against, to be sure, but my friend often found himself running out of time to deck his opponents 2 out of 3 games in tournament play.

THE BAXTER BUILDING

Speaking of **Magic's** Dark Ages... In the months leading up to US Nationals in 1996, the Goliath that was the mono-black [Necropotence](#) deck sent many players in search of a David. This search yielded the [Stasis](#) deck. Mono-black Necro had only [Nevinyrral's Disk](#) to deal with enchantments. The Disk -- as most of you are probably aware -- comes into play tapped, which is not going to be very helpful against a [Stasis](#) on the board. As a result of this development, Nationals 1996 was looking very much like a two-deck metagame.

Enter George Baxter and his green/white (with just a tiny dash of blue for sideboard cards) Prison deck. Baxter's build had more than enough offensive threats to kill his opponents in the required

amount of time. His build had the [Winter Orb/Icy Manipulator](#) duo which was good against both Necro and Stasis. Main deck [Divine Offering](#) and [Disenchant](#) were great cards against both decks respectively. Creature decks would fair little better with plenty of creature removal at Baxter's disposal. We'll cover all of this in more detail below. First, let's get a look at Baxter's creation.

Green/White Prison



Main Deck

61 cards

- 3 [Adarkar Wastes](#)
- 4 [Brushland](#)
- 1 [City of Brass](#)
- 1 [Forest](#)
- 3 [Mishra's Factory](#)
- 7 [Plains](#)
- 4 [Strip Mine](#)

23 lands

- 1 [Deadly Insect](#)

1 creature

- 3 [Aeolipile](#)
- 2 [Armageddon](#)
- 1 [Balance](#)
- 1 [Black Vise](#)
- 2 [Disenchant](#)
- 3 [Divine Offering](#)
- 4 [Fellwar Stone](#)
- 4 [Icy Manipulator](#)
- 1 [Land Tax](#)
- 4 [Serrated Arrows](#)
- 4 [Swords to Plowshares](#)
- 1 [Sylvan Library](#)
- 2 [Titania's Song](#)
- 3 [Winter Orb](#)
- 2 [Wrath of God](#)

37 other spells

Sideboard

- 1 [Adarkar Wastes](#)
- 1 [Disenchant](#)
- 1 [Disrupting Scepter](#)
- 3 [Hydroblast](#)
- 1 [Ivory Tower](#)
- 3 [Serra Angel](#)
- 2 [Sleight of Mind](#)
- 1 [Winter Orb](#)
- 1 [Wrath of God](#)
- 1 [Zuran Orb](#)

15 sideboard cards



Baxter's decklist appears odd in this modern era of redundant and highly-focused efficient decks. It is unusual to look at a Type 2 deck list that features so many 1-ofs and 2-ofs. It is worth noting that there were actually cards on the banned and restricted list in Type 2 at the time.

Restricted List

- [Balance](#)
- [Zuran Orb](#)
- [Feldon's Cane](#)
- [Ivory Tower](#)
- [Black Vise](#)

Banned List


- [Mind Twist](#)
- [Channel](#)
- [Ante cards](#)

Between his deck and sideboard, Baxter used four of the five restricted cards. Two other cards in his deck were powerful enough to warrant later restriction in Type 2: [Strip Mine](#) and [Land Tax](#).

THE PRISON WALLS


Let's look at the deck's card interactions and its victory conditions. As I stated earlier, the most dominant deck at the time was Necro featuring [Nevinyrral's Disk](#) and [Drain Life](#), [Knight of Stromgald](#), and [Order of the Ebon Hand](#) as kill cards. Baxter's deck ran roughshod over that specimen. [Winter Orb](#) completely shuts down the Necro deck's ability to cast big Drain Lives or pump its creatures turn after turn. (If you forgot, Winter Orb costs 2 mana and mandates that each player only untap one land per turn if Winter Orb is untapped.)


[Icy Manipulator](#) costs 4 and allows its controller to tap any permanent other than an enchantment, and thusly combos very nicely with [Winter Orb](#). At the end of your opponent's turn you can tap the [Winter Orb](#), shutting it off and allowing all of your lands -- and your Winter Orb -- to untap, leaving your opponent with access to very little mana each turn. As you add more Icys to the board, you are able to create a situation where your opponent only has access to the one land they are able to play each turn. Unless they have a spell for one mana that will destroy or tap the Winter Orb on your turn (like [Crumble](#) or [Twiddle](#)), you can essentially create a hard lock.

Five spells that destroy artifacts are in the deck to insure that a opponent's [Nevinyrral's Disk](#) never untaps. [Disenchant](#) also destroys enchantments but I'm sure the more narrow [Divine Offering](#) was in the deck almost exclusively for Larry Niven's All-Purpose Tool. For *, [Divine Offering](#) destroys target artifact with the added bonus of causing you to gain life equal to the artifact's casting cost.


Against those Knight and Clerics, Baxter had no shortage of options at his disposal for their...err...ummm...disposal. [Serrated Arrows](#) costs 4 and comes into play with 3 Arrowhead counters. You can tap it to remove a counter and put a -1/-1 counter on target creature -- pretty good against 1 toughness creatures. I don't think I need to explain what [Wrath of God](#) does. Let's just say that it was a nice option against an early horde of pumpable creatures.

[Aeolipile](#) is a 2 mana artifact that sacrifices to deal 2 damage to any target: good colorless creature kill and sometimes the last few points of damage you would need to finish off an opponent.


[Swords to Plowshares](#) was usually a dead card against the 8-10 protection from white creatures that the Necro decks packed. In addition to the Knights and Clerics, the Necro deck often ran [Ishan's Shade](#), a 5/5 pro white monster for . I assume that the sideboarded [Sleight of Minds](#) were there for just that threat.

[Balance](#) is one of the most powerful spells ever printed in **Magic**. For * the player with the most lands, cards in hand, and creatures must sacrifice those cards until both players' totals are the same in each category. In the hands of the virtually creatureless Prison player this often simulates a [Wrath of God](#), with a [Zuran Orb](#) in play it becomes [Armageddon](#), and if need be it can become a [Mind Twist](#). [Armageddon](#) was yet another spell that made the Necro player sad, since it neutralized the chance for large [Drain Life](#) spells. [Land Tax](#) allowed Baxter's deck to recover far more quickly from a 'Geddon than his opponents. An enchantment that cost a single *, [Land Tax](#) allows you to search through your library for up to three basic lands and put them in your hand -- if you control fewer lands than your opponent. Under pre-*Sixth Edition* rules, if both you and your opponent had the same amount of land but one of your lands was a [Strip Mine](#), you could use the [Strip Mine](#) on one of your opponent's lands creating a brief moment during which you had fewer lands than your opponent and could activate [Land Tax](#). [Land Tax](#) also served as an excellent counter measure to [Hymn to Tourach](#), regaining card advantage and protecting key cards in your hand with a grip full of land. I am surprised that Baxter couldn't find room for more than one copy of this powerful card drawing machine. Another one-of in Baxter's deck was [Sylvan Library](#). Against a deck packing [Hymn to Tourach](#) he could keep "hiding" a card he wanted to protect until it was needed. For example, rather than draw a [Disenchant](#) and risk having it Hymned away, he could keep selecting another card from the three possible each turn and leaving the instant on the top of his deck. When his opponent finally played a Nev's Disk, he would draw the [Disenchant](#) and use it before the Disk untapped. [Sylvan Library](#) also combos nicely with the [Land Tax](#) which lets you shuffle your deck so that you can see three new cards each turn.

One of the decks most punishing cards against Necro had to be the [Black Vise](#), which is also a pretty quick kill once the Winter Orb/Icy lock is on the board, since your opponent's hand will quickly fill up with uncastable spells. This was not Baxter's only road to victory though. [Mishra's Factories](#) were

lands that became 2/2 Assembly Workers for 1 mana with the added bonus of giving target Assembly Worker +1/+1 for . This gave Baxter an early creature that would not die to his [Wrath of God](#) and could finish off an Orb/Icy locked opponent in enough time to complete a round.

[Deadly Insect](#) is probably the oddest card in the deck. Six mana for a 6/1 untargetable creature doesn't sound that amazing until you remember that this was pre-*Sixth Edition* rules. The only way to deal with the Insect was to either Wrath or [Balance](#) it away or block it. Blocking it wasn't a great option before the new rules came into effect; tapped blocking creatures did not deal damage back then and an [Icy Manipulator](#) spelled doom for any creature blocking the bug. I imagine that the main reason Baxter included the [Deadly Insect](#) was in anticipation of other decks that relied on targeted removal or [Icy Manipulators](#) to control creatures, such as mono-red decks or -- more likely -- other Prison decks.

I remember following the progress of Nationals on the newsgroups as word spread of Baxter's use of [Titania's Song](#). The addition of this card is what makes Baxter's creation so memorable in the annals of Prison decks. An enchantment that costs , the Song makes all artifacts into creatures with power/toughness equal to their casting cost. In addition, they lose their normal abilities. With NINETEEN artifacts in his deck, Baxter was capable of overrunning his opponent seemingly from nowhere. As a bonus he was also able to shut off a Nev's Disk by giving his opponent a 4/4 creature that he could Swords, Wrath, or Balance away if the situation dictated. (Do you get the impression that Baxter hated [Nevinyrral's Disk](#)?)

In addition to dominating the mono-black Necro match-up, Baxter had a favorable match-up against the other Necro slayer -- [Stasis](#). Main deck [Disenchant](#) was good for obvious reasons and [Icy Manipulators](#) kept the Stasis player with a minimum of available mana, making [Stasis](#) harder to manage. [Black Vise](#) would cause the Stasis player to shuffle for the next game all by its lonesome. It is my guess that Baxter chose to not play with [Howling Mines](#) anticipating the presence of the [Stasis](#) deck. The [Serra Angels](#) in the sideboard would support the idea that Baxter was expecting [Stasis](#) to make its presence known. Interestingly, the Stasis decks that made Top 4 at Nationals both sported [Wall of Air](#) in their sideboards -- no doubt expecting the Serra to come in game two and creature removal to leave the main deck. Ah, the metagame.

In the end, mono-black Necro didn't fare too well, and THREE Stasis decks made the Top 8. Baxter managed to make it to the finals to square off against Dennis Bentley who was running Necro, but instead of the mono-black/[Drain Life](#)/Disk version, Bentley ran a red/black deck that used Necro to replenish his hand with cheap burn spells and creatures. Unlike its more mana intensive cousin, Bentley's deck could operate under a [Winter Orb](#) with 1 and 2 casting cost burn spells.

In the end, Baxter settled for second place, a slot on the US Nationals team with Bentley, Mike Long and Matt Place and a hallowed place in the history of Prison decks.

PRISON REFORM

Prison decks have taken many different forms over the years. One of my favorite decks was a G/W deck that kept casting [Abeyance](#) and [Gaea's Blessing](#) effectively handcuffing an opponent after blowing up all of his creatures and lands. I had been trying to build a similar deck around [Orim's Chant](#) for quite some time but until *Odyssey* was released I could not find an effective build.

Prison Reform



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Brushland	3 Beast Attack
2 City of Brass	1 Disenchant
6 Forest	4 Harrow
9 Plains	4 Heroes' Reunion
4 Sungrass Prairie	4 Holistic Wisdom
_____	4 Howling Mine
25 lands	4 Life Burst
_____	3 Order // Chaos
0 creatures	4 Orim's Chant
	4 Vengeful Dreams

	35 other spells



[Download Magic Online .dec file](#)

The way this deck works is it gets out [Howling Mines](#), draws lots of cards, and eventually recurs [Orim's Chant](#) every turn via [Holistic Wisdom](#) and the twenty-odd other instants. It is always interesting to watch the decision-making process of a control player when you cast [Howling Mine](#) against them. Despite wanting the extra cards, they realize that you wouldn't be playing with the card unless your deck revolved around it -- which this deck does. I don't think you can win unless you resolve a Mine or two.

The new lockdown: Howling Mine and Holistic Wisdom combine to perpetuate an endless stream of Orim's Chants,

[Holistic Wisdom](#) is begging to be broken. This extremely powerful card makes the deck tick. With [Vengeful](#)

preventing the opposition from attacking or casting spells.

[Dreams](#) or [Order/Chaos](#) in your graveyard, your opponent has to think long and hard before attacking. Against a fast deck, you can play [Heroes' Reunion](#) or [Life Burst](#) turn after turn to stay alive until you get [Orim's Chant](#) recursion. Or you can simply play a [Beast Attack](#) every turn and eventually make them unblockable with the red half of [Order/Chaos](#) courtesy of a [City of Brass](#).

[Orim's Chant](#) says that your opponent can't cast any spells this turn, and that's what makes this a prison deck. Nothing says "You Lose" like the inability to cast any spells at all. For an additional kicker of * creatures can't attack that turn either. Beautiful. [Orim's Chant](#) also serves as an instant-speed [Duress](#). Let's say your opponent has two [Psychatogs](#). Rather than cast [Orim's Chant](#) during his upkeep to prevent him from attacking, you can use the Chant during his attack step to bait out a [Counterspell](#). If you have [Holistic Wisdom](#) in play you can cast the same Chant twice for 4 mana (no need to pay kicker -- he's already attacking) to draw two counters out. Once you get the Chant to resolve or feel confident that you have baited all of his counters you can cast [Vengeful Dreams](#) and remove those smiling monsters from the game!

One way to win is by decking your opponent. Even if you cast your [Harrows](#) (and you usually don't want to cast more than two; the rest are fuel for the [Holistic Wisdom](#) engine) he will still draw more cards than you because he draws the first card off of every [Howling Mine](#). It is important to keep track of cards drawn if you plan to deck them.

[Beast Attack](#) means you don't have to deck them and gives you a time efficient way to win if you are playing a tournament with timed rounds. And why flashback when you can regrow? With [Holistic Wisdom](#), the number of Beast tokens you make is only limited by the number of instants you draw. There is definitely a short list of cards you never want to see. [Pernicious Deed](#) is terrible for you and I recommend multiple copies of [Bind](#) in the sideboard. Obviously you can prevent a late game Deed from being cast with Chant recursion but if it resolves in the early game it will often prove fatal. In my area it is unusual to see decks running more than eight counterspells -- a number that you can deal with... unless some of those counterspells are [Liquify](#) or [Syncope](#). Having your Chants removed from the game is awful for you.

Instant speed Enchantment removal is also on that list of "things that are awful," but luckily it isn't too popular right now. If your [Holistic Wisdom](#) is not in play you will have a hard time winning. You may need to add [Nostalgic Dreams](#) or [Restock](#) to this deck at some point if that becomes a real problem. That said, this deck is an absolute beating against red/green decks. You gain so much life that they can rarely kill you before you get your engine going. Once you reach that point they have almost nothing to stop it.

The life gain is annoying for the [Psychatog](#) player as well, but they don't mind the [Howling Mine](#) cards, that's for sure. Your best path against them is to let them attack with the 'Tog and try to resolve [Orim's Chant](#) and either [Order](#) or [Vengeful Dreams](#). Once you deal with their early threats you should be able to lock them up with Chant or kill them with [Beast Attack](#). If the game comes down to decking, the [Psychatog](#) player may try to deck you with [Standstill](#). They will cast [Standstill](#) and try to break it themselves, forcing you to draw cards. It is important to remember that [Standstill](#) goes on the stack. You can respond to their spell with an instant which will make [Standstill](#) go on the stack again. Yours will resolve first and they will draw three cards from [Standstill](#). Then theirs will attempt to resolve but it will be countered by the fact that [Standstill](#) is no longer there. Stupid? Yes, but I have already had to fight over who gets to break a [Standstill](#) in at least one match and it was actually relevant to the outcome (I won the fight and the game).

With *Judgment* being the green/white set, can we expect any new tricks? Yes, if you look hard enough. Keep your eyes peeled for a green instant that can keep you from being decked, as well as another version of Order that can net you some life. Any green and white instants deserve consideration; so have that in mind when you're at the prerelease.

I am not going to tell you that this deck is going to take you to the finals of Nationals anymore than I would claim that the Mets are going to make it to the World Series this year (although they might). I can guarantee that you will frustrate your opponents with your refusal to "just die already!" And like the Mets, winning won't come easy but when it does you will savor your victory.

Brian may be reached at brian@fightlikeapes.com.