



[ARTICLES HOME](#) > [ARCHIVES](#) > Latest Developments

THE POWER OF THE SKULL

Posted in **Latest Developments** on December 6, 2002



By Randy Buehler

[Archive](#)

SHARE ARTICLE ▼

It's not very often that a **Magic** card changes your life, but that's exactly what [Necropotence](#) did for me. How could anything else be my favorite card?

My relationship with "the skull" began shortly before the first Pro Tour qualifier I ever played in. A buddy of mine had discovered that there were these Usenet newsgroups where people talked about **Magic** and something called a "Necro deck" was all the rage. He printed out a decklist and I put it together and the first time I played it was like a revelation. The deck was amazingly powerful yet at the same time it was incredibly interesting. There were all these cool situations that would come up where you had to look ahead to future turns in order to figure out what the right play was and the deck really opened my eyes in a lot of ways, teaching me how skill-testing **Magic** could be.

I tweaked a few cards and went off to the qualifier and marched straight into the Top 8. I don't remember the sideboard, but the main deck went something like this:

RANDY BUEHLER'S FIRST NECRO DECK



DECKLIST

STATS

SAMPLE HAND

SORT BY:

Creature (11)

4 Hypnotic Specter

4 Order of the Ebon Hand
 2 Dancing Scimitar
 1 Ihsan's Shade

Sorcery (8)

4 Hymn to Tourach
 4 Drain Life

Instant (6)

4 Dark Ritual
 2 Demonic Consultation

Artifact (6)

4 Nevinyrral's Disk
 1 Zuran Orb
 1 Ivory Tower

Enchantment (4)

3 Necropotence
 1 Dance of the Dead

Land (25)

17 Swamp
 4 Mishra's Factory
 4 Strip Mine

60 Cards

(There were so many people playing with [Ernham Djinn](#)s and/or [Serra Angel](#)s in my area that I swear, that [Dance of the Dead](#) was actually good ... honest!)

I didn't win that qualifier, or the next one, but eventually (after moving to Pittsburgh and learning a tremendous amount by getting continually bashed by the guys at Carnegie Mellon University) I did qualify for the Pro Tour.

My first Pro Tour was Chicago '97 and Team CMU spent a lot of time preparing for it. Three of us were making our PT debut (me, Mike Turian, and Dan Silberman) plus Erik Lauer was going to just his second. I for one wanted to make sure that if I didn't do well, it was going to be because I just wasn't good enough, not because I hadn't done my homework. We went through a lot of decks, but the one that caught my eye (and kept it) was a 3-color Necro deck that Lauer had put together on the theory that [Firestorm](#) should be really good if you fuel it with the power of the skull. Erik's other innovation was to put a full complement of 4 copies of [Demonic Consultation](#) into the deck. Looking back on it now it's hard to believe that isn't how they were always built, but people were afraid of Consult back in the day. Some people were afraid it would just deck them and so they didn't play any. Others were convinced you never wanted to draw multiples because you surely wouldn't be able to cast it twice. Personally I had been growing more and more fond of the card after I started Consulting for restricted cards in qualifiers. Sure there was a chance that my one [Zuran Orb](#) would be in the top 6 cards and I would immediately lose the game, but if I immediately won the game the other 80-something percent of the time then I was ok with those odds. When Erik proposed running all 4 I was game to try it out and we never seriously considered taking one out once we started playtesting.

([Demonic Consultation](#) was actually my #2 choice for what to write my "Favorite Card" article about. I particularly enjoy looking at the historical trend in Necro decks that won major events. Dennis Bentley had just 3 Necros and no Consults when he won

US Nationals in 1996, but then Paul McCabe needed 4 Necros and 2 Consults to win Pro Tour - Dallas later that year. It just makes sense that the PT Chicago '97 winning Necro deck would need all 4 Necros plus all 4 Consults.)

Anyway, I tweaked and tested and tweaked and tested that Necro deck until I knew it inside and out. Late in testing we realized that since [Hypnotic Specter](#) had been banned there just wasn't anything exciting to cast with a first turn [Dark Ritual](#), plus the loss of card advantage could kill you if a Counterpost deck stopped whatever you sank your Ritual into, and so we took them all out. Meanwhile [Disenchant](#) seemed like a much better answer than [Nevinyrral's Disk](#) to all the [Land Tax](#) we expected to see. Disk was just too slow – most Necro decks ran Disks because they assumed they needed to blow up their own Necro in order to win, but not this one. With 4 Consults we could just assume that Necro would be in play and then we optimized the deck to work best after you were “potent.” Disk was too slow, as were all the expensive creatures other people were running ([Nekrataal](#) and [Wildfire Emissary](#) seemed like good creatures at first, but when you have all the cards you could want thanks to the skull, you just want them to be cheap so you can cast as many of them as possible.) Anyway, here's the deck I ended up running:

LAUERPOTENCE



DECKLIST

STATS

SAMPLE HAND

SORT BY: Overview ▾

Creature (8)

4 Order of the Ebon Hand
4 Knight of Stromgald

Sorcery (8)

4 Drain Life
4 Hymn to Tourach

Instant (15)

4 Demonic Consultation
3 Disenchant
2 Firestorm
2 Incinerate
4 Lightning Bolt

Enchantment (4)

4 Necropotence

Land (24)

3 Gemstone Mine
 3 Lake of the Dead
 2 Bad River
 4 Badlands
 4 Scrubland
 8 Swamp

Other (1)

1 Ishan's Shade

60 Cards**Sideboard (15)**

1 Disenchant
 2 Circle of Protection: Black
 2 Mind Warp
 3 Terror

1 Firestorm
 3 Honorable Passage
 3 Pyroblast

(If you want to read more about this deck or that tournament, you can check out the tourney report I wrote at the time. It's archived a number of places on the web including [here](#).)

The rest, as they say, is history. I won that Pro Tour and suddenly my hobby had put \$25,000 into my pocket. I started traveling around the world to Pro Tours and Grand Prix and suddenly grad school didn't seem quite as important to me. I figured I would take a year off and just play **Magic** full-time – after all, I had been in college for 9 years by that point and my PhD thesis would still be there waiting for me after I had had my fill of **Magic**. After 2 years of playing on the Pro Tour I got to know some of the guys from Wizards of the Coast and eventually they let me know there was a job opening in R&D and they thought maybe I should apply. Three years have gone by since I changed teams and started trying to break the cards *before* they get printed, and now I'm the Director of **Magic** R&D.

When the skull started powering combo decks like Trix and Pebbles, it had to go...

The skull's career has also taken some twists and turns since it won that Pro Tour. Players finally started to give it the respect it deserved. After years where only the good players knew how to use it (or maybe it would be more accurate to describe those as years where the skull taught players how to be good), suddenly everyone caught on. Next thing you know the skull was being employed in every combo deck that came along and it was no longer having a healthy impact on tournament play.

Opinions vary about when Necro should have been banned, but most people agree that in the beginning it was actually quite an interesting card to have around. When *Ice Age* was first released, for example, most people dismissed it out of hand as an

awful card (*InQuest* rather famously gave it just 1 star). It took years for the **Magic**-playing public to figure out how good it actually was, but by the end of its reign there was universal agreement that it was one of the most powerful cards in the history of the game. The skull taught us a lot, but in the end it had to go. Almost two years ago it was finally banned from Extended and now it shows up exclusively in Type 1 tournaments and in casual play.

It's been a long, strange, crazy trip that has left me with a lot of great memories and a lot of stories to tell whenever anyone asks me what my favorite card is. I'll shut up now...

Last Week's Poll Results:

How do you feel about "Creature - Human [Class]"?

Thumbs Up	4827	53.7%
Thumbs Down	4169	46.3%
Total	8996	100.0%

Close one! You'll be able to see what we decided once Bacon comes out.

Randy may be reached at latestdevelopments@wizards.com.

Posted in **Latest Developments** on December 6, 2002

 **SHARE ARTICLE** ▼

FEATURED ARTICLES

DAILY MAGIC UPDATE

NOVEMBER 14, 2017

The November 14, 2017 Update

Blake Rasmussen

CARD IMAGE GALLERY

NOVEMBER 14, 2017

Unstable

Wizards of the Coast

CARD PREVIEW

NOVEMBER 13, 2017

Unstable Mechanics

Matt Tabak

EVENTS

GRAND PRIX PORTLAND

Show up or tune in for Grand Prix Portland, broadcast on [Twitch.tv/magic](https://www.twitch.tv/magic).

➤ [LEARN MORE](#)

PRODUCTS

Ixalan is yours to uncover!

[➤ EXPLORE IXALAN](#)

MTG ARENA



Closed beta is now in sight!

[➤ SIGN UP NOW!](#)

LATEST LATEST DEVELOPMENTS ARTICLES

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Changes

by, Sam Stoddard

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Things I've Learned

by, Sam Stoddard

ARTICLES

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS ARCHIVE

WHERE TO PLAY AND BUY



Find a location to buy or play
Magic: The Gathering near you.

Enter your city or postal code

FIND NOW !



Select your language:

English

WIZARDS BRAND FAMILY

MAGIC | D&D | WPN | DUEL MASTERS | AVALON HILL

[Terms of Use](#) | [Code of Conduct](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Customer Service](#) | [Cookies](#)



© 1995-2017 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.