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It'll Never Last

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Learning Curve
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When I signed off last week's column I had intended to bring you a post-game report from my local 10th Anniversary Global Celebration event this week. Unfortunately I was unable to attend, but on the positive side, Aaron asked all of us to sift through our store of **Magic** memories and share our favorites to commemorate **Magic's** double-digit birthday.

I have had the good fortune to experience **Magic** in a variety of ways. I have been a tournament organizer, store owner, writer, reporter, player and collector in my nine-odd years with the game. My memories jumble together and it is difficult to narrow down my favorites but I will give it a try.

The Halcyon Days of Youth

I first became aware of **Magic** in early 1994 just after the release of Beta and prior to the release of Unlimited. I was working for a chain of comic shops in New York when an endless procession of potential customers came in asking for something called Magic. Apparently, The Compleat Strategist—the only game store in New York City at the time—had just sold out of Beta and there was no more coming until the release of the first set of white-bordered cards. After one desperate customer grabbed me by my figurative lapels and literally shook me in frustration, we realized that **Magic**—whatever the heck it turned out to be—was a product we wanted to carry.

Upon the release of Unlimited, myself and a group of friends all purchased a handful of starters and began to play. I was hooked. While I am still extremely close with that crowd, I am the only one that still plays to this day. One of my closest friends, Tony, is the source of my all time favorite **Magic** anecdote. The group of us were out in a bar one Friday night hanging out. Tony and I whipped out starter decks and began to play. At the time, Tony was not in a relationship and his eagerness to be in one kept tripping him up. As we played, a rather attractive waitress in the bar became fascinated with our game and sidled over to Tony to get a closer look. She leaned in close and literally purred at him, "The art on those cards is beautiful. What game are you playing?"

As long as there has been **Magic: The Gathering** there has been no good answer to that question. Tony may have found the worst possible answer in **Magic's** short history: "You see, we're two wizards—"

As the waitress walked away shaking her head, I hit Tony over his with a newspaper in my best Skipper/Gilligan fashion. That was the first time I became aware of the division between players that saw **Magic** as a competitive game of skill and others that saw it as a fantasy role-playing game they could carry in their pocket. To add to the problem, the rest of the world always assumed it was the latter.



Big Apple Tournaments

Not too long after that I began running tournaments with New York **Magic**—later renamed Gray Matter Conventions. Our first handful of tournaments went beyond our wildest expectations. When we expected 75 people to show up, we got 250. When we expected 300, we got almost 800. We began running tournaments every month and the New York **Magic** community began to take shape.

At the time, there was no place to play games in New York other than Chameleon Comics in Queens and Dragon's Lair in—I think—the Bronx. We would occupy the grand ballrooms of our tournament sites way into the morning hours—no one wanted to leave. We would run 100-person Grand Melees with countless prizes for everything from first kill to bounties. If you killed a player with a bounty on his or her head you would win that prize. We rarely put the bounties up ourselves; spectators would plop packs or rares in front of players who had eliminated them from the main event or even the Melee itself to find some measure of revenge. It was all in good fun and was probably more exciting than the main event.

It was a special time for **Magic** in New York City. Lifelong friendships were formed and we had more than a few couples meet and get married as a direct result of coming to our tournaments. When I noticed that players simply refused to go home it occurred to me that there was void in the city waiting to be filled. In early 1995 we opened Neutral Ground and never looked back.

NEUTRAL GROUND™

My First Favorite Deck

The one side effect of running tournaments and opening a game store was that I never got to play any **Magic**. It was not until the release of *Ice Age* and the acceptance of the Type 2 format that I began to play again—much to the chagrin of my partners in Neutral Ground. I started by playing *Ice Age* sealed deck and I quickly became addicted to cantrips (cards that replace themselves when you play them). My favorite cards were **Force Void**, **Flare**, **Urza's Bauble**, and **Barbed Sextant**. When **Feldon's Cane** was unrestricted in Type 2, I set out to build a Cane deck that revolved around cantrips.

How to Keep an Idiot Busy	
Old School Standard deck	
Main Deck 61 cards	
8 Island	0 creatures
2 Mishra's Factory	
10 Mountain	
2 Strip Mine	
22 lands	
3 Barbed Sextant	
4 Counterspell	
4 Feldon's Cane	
4 Flare	
4 Force Void	
4 Incinerate	
4 Jester's Cap	
4 Lightning Bolt	
4 Nevinyrral's Disk	
3 Urza's Bauble	
1 Zuran Orb	
39 other spells	

The deck relied on frantically digging with cantrips to find **Jester's Cap** and systematically removing the most pressing threats from your opponent's deck. Burn, counters, and—most importantly—the Disk kept you alive and dealt with any threats. Eventually you would win by decking your opponent. The deck was a lot of fun and much better than it seems—thanks largely to the Disks.

For some reason or another I was heading down to Dragon*Con in 1996 where Wizards was going to debut the new Arena league. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to unleash my first attempt at a constructed deck since before *Arabian Nights*. I signed up and looked forward to my opponent's frustrated expression as I ran him out of cards. When my opponent sat down and started taking his deck out of his bag, *he* got to enjoy *my* pained expression. He kept reaching into his bag and piling stacks upon stacks of cards until his deck eventually weighed in at about 300 cards.

I thought about packing it in right there but it wasn't in me to just quit, so we began to play. I was hoping to burn him out, but his deck was a green horde deck that topped out with **Deadly Insects** and **Autumn Willow**. I had to use my burn on his other creatures and deal with his untargetables with **Counterspell** or **Nevinyrral's Disk**. I decided to see if I could deck him—I had four Canes after all. I resolved not to use my Canes until there were no cards left in my library and all four **Jester's Caps** had been used. At one point I capped away a **Feldon's Cane** of his but the gleam in his eyes told me he was holding at least one more and I had to keep a **Counterspell** in hand at all times.

He did have the Cane—in fact, he had two them. He tried to draw out a counter from me with an **Autumn Willow** and when I didn't bite he laid down the first Cane, which was countered. He had one mana up when he played the second but I was holding two **Force Voids** and I was able to counter that as well. I never did actually get to run him out of cards. My **Jester's Caps** left him with a deck consisting of something like 50 or 60 lands while I still had two Canes left to use so he conceded, but the lone game had taken hours and I had to head out to meet someone. It was the only “official” game I ever got to play with the deck in that incarnation.



Going Pro

The next time I got to go to Atlanta was for a four-slot Pro Tour Qualifier for Pro Tour – Los Angeles. There was not such thing as a Grand Prix yet and a four-slot qualifier was a heady event. About a dozen New York area players all got together and we rented a van to travel to the tournament. MagicTheGathering.com columnist Ben Bleiweiss and future **Shadowmage Infiltrator** Jon Finkel were among the passengers. We departed late in the afternoon the day before the tournament and people took shifts driving throughout the early evening and into the night.

Adam Katz—who would go on to Top 8 at Pro Tour – Los Angeles the following year—was such a bad driver that trucks pulled off the road for miles ahead of us as terrified truckers used their CB radios to pass the warning ahead. Adam was replaced by Hogan Long for the last leg of our journey. We were disheartened as we saw a sign that told us we were 240 miles away from Atlanta with just over two hours to get there. Somehow, Hogan

managed to get us there in just enough time. I never dared to look at the speedometer despite riding shotgun for that last blur of the journey. I did the math afterward and was glad that I did not.

I actually still have the two decks I used to finish fourth in that tournament. Back then there was no draft in the Top 8—only another sealed deck to build. I managed to cruise through the Swiss somehow with my black-blue-red deck and despite a messy-looking Top 8 deck I won the one round I needed to qualify for the Pro Tour before falling to Randy Ellis in the semifinals. It remains the only time I have ever qualified for an individual Pro Tour.

Mirage Sealed Deck		
PTQ 6-0-2 record – Brian David-Marshall		
Main Deck		
40 cards		
5 Island	1 Azimaet Drake	1 Chaos Charm
7 Mountain	1 Burning Shield Askari	1 Grinning Totem
6 Swamp	1 Cadaverous Knight	1 Kaervek's Purge
18 lands	1 Dirtwater Wraith	1 Meddle
	2 Ekundu Cyclops	1 Power Sink
	1 Gravebane Zombie	1 Ray of Command
	1 Kukemssa Serpent	1 Spitting Earth
	1 Pyric Salamander	1 Stupor
	1 Shadowmage Guildmage	1 Thirst
	1 Skulking Ghost	
	1 Subterranean Spirit	9 other spells
	1 Vlashino Warrior	
	13 creatures	

I was in over my head when I got to Los Angeles. It was the first major Rochester Draft tournament and I was in no way prepared for the format despite abundant practice with some of New York's top players. I think I drafted reasonably well but the level of play was more intense than I was prepared for and I dropped after only three rounds. I did manage to eek out one win along the way but I realized I had a lot of work to do before I would be truly ready for the Pro Tour.

Team Effort

The next time I got back to the big time was the second team Pro Tour. The venue was Madison Square Garden and my team earned an invitation based on our high rating. Monkey Dog had done well at Grand Prix Cannes and won a handful of small team events. I struggled to keep up with my teammates Eric Kesselman and Brook North all of day one and a crucial mistake on my part cost us a shot a day two although we remained qualified of rating for the following year.

After making yet another critical mistake during round one of *that* tournament I resolved to play better and we did not lose another round until the end of the day and I found myself preparing to play on day two of a Pro Tour for the first time in my career. We fumbled through our drafts with a series of humorous signals and even more humorous draft picks. I had a [feature match](#) against Aaron Forsythe that I won despite my team losing the match and the weekend ended with a shot at redemption.

We had played against Eric Taylor's team in the first round and we were facing them again in the last round of Day Two. Neither team was in contention for Sunday but the winner would definitely finish in the money. After the draft my match-up against Taylor seemed favorable. Brook seemed to have a favorable situation against Rich Frangiosa but Kesselman seemed doomed in his match with Joel Priest who had multiple [Annihilates](#) plus [Stormscape Battlemage](#) and [Cavern Harpies](#) with which to abuse it. We were confident in our good match-ups and Kesselman decided to throw caution to the wind and played with [Overabundance](#) to accelerate out his fatties.

I won my match and Brook lost his and we sat back in wonder as Kesselman—at times, one of the best players I have ever known—rode his [Overabundance](#) to an impossible victory and a \$3,000 money finish for our team.

We have been qualified on rating for the next two events but did not play together last year due to a vacation conflict for Brook. I ended up doing coverage for the Sideboard that weekend and my passport has been getting a workout ever since. I wanted to play with my friend Mike Flores for this past qualifier season and told my teammates that if we somehow managed to qualify I would be playing with Mike this year.

We started off in good shape with a finals appearance in a Grand Prix Trial but hardly got to play together due to my recent traveling for Sideboard. We got mauled at GP Boston and our third Q'd with another team. With one PTQ left in the season, Mike and I dragged Tim McKenna to play with us. I had won money at Grand Prix – New Jersey with Tim the previous season and we were optimistic about our chances.



Kesselman, North, and David-Marshall: Monkey Dog.

We went down 2-0, 2-0, 2-0 in the first round to a decent team and we thought about dropping. But we stuck it out, and much like my last Pro Tour experience we did not lose again until the final round of the Swiss. We advanced to the Top 4. I had to face occasional MagicTheGathering.com columnist Toby Wachter and his 6-0-1 record and managed to defeat him while one of my teammates found the other victory we needed to advance to the finals.

We faced a relatively inexperienced team and managed to beat them despite their superior card quality in the draft. Somehow Mike, Tim and I found ourselves qualified for the Pro Tour. It was also the only time I have ever won a PTQ in my **Magic** career.

The last ten years have been chock full of memories and new ones come along every day. I am glad that all the naysayers along the way that swore **Magic** would never last were wrong. I'll be back next week with a look forward at the beginning of the next ten years when we look at the Core Set's impact on constructed decks.

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*Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is Top8Magic.com, the publishing house that is releasing Michael J. Flores: Deckade.*



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