

I . . . AM . . . IRONMAN!

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Mark Gottlieb
Thursday, October 23, 2003

Warning! This article contains scenes of graphic card violence

Has he lost his mind? (clearly)
Can he see or is he blind? (I had LASIK 3 years ago)
Can he walk at all,
Or if he moves will he fall? (can someone help me up?)
Is he alive or dead? (alive, but very sleepy)
Has he thoughts within his head? (debatable)
We'll just pass him there
why should we even care? (because he's writing an Ironman article!)

Yes, this past Monday, I orchestrated the first (and almost certainly last) Wizards of the Coast *Mirrodin* Ironman tournament. Ironman, renamed Iron-non-gender-specific-person, then renamed Ironmyr, is a nerve-testing, gut-wrenching format dating back to the earliest days of **Magic**. It was a time when playing for ante was in the rulebook. It was a time when people ripped up their Chaos Orbs. It was a time when Ironmen roamed the earth.

The idea behind the Ironman format is simple. When a card goes to your graveyard, it really goes to your graveyard. It's dead. It's never coming back. It's ripped into pieces.

Seriously.

I take a lot of, shall we say, artistic license with my facts, but this is true. Grizzled veterans are nodding in agreement. Grizzle-free novices are picking themselves up off the floor where they fainted. Why do such a crazy thing? To prove your mettle. To be subversive. To show that you're bigger than these stupid little cards and you're not going to be held in thrall by them.

I'm told the legal department objects to the phrase "stupid little cards." I'm told the marketing department is greatly in favor of one-time-use **Magic** cards and encourages everyone to shred their cards after using them once.

Heavy Metal

He was turned to steel
in the great magnetic field
When he travelled time
for the future of mankind



I've wanted to hold an Ironman event ever since I played in a small one at Dragonflight, a local gaming convention. It was a 6-person single-elimination event (no, that doesn't work too well) that used **Magic** theme decks. It was uneven because theme decks are not balanced between sets, and the *Scourge* decks just trounced the *Onslaught* and *Legions* decks.

I waited to host my own event until *Mirrodin* came out. It's one of the most conducive sets for Ironman ever (especially the dumb format I wanted to play). For those of you wondering, *Odyssey* is the worst Ironman set ever. Flashback? Threshold? Not so much.

In my event, any card that went to the graveyard was ripped into little pieces. Any card that was removed from the game was ripped into little pieces. There was an exception for imprint: A card removed from the game via imprint was ripped into *big* pieces because the card was still relevant to game play. You had to be able to read it. I've seen some variants in which cards that are *temporarily* removed from the game (by Astral Slide, for example) are not ripped up. That's just silly.

Once the ground rules are laid out, there are some options for the type of Ironman event you want to run. And yes, I'm suggesting that you can do this too. It's not just for Wizards of the Coast fat cats with cards to spare. It can be a bizarre change of pace for your casual play group. Hey, how often do you ever reuse the non-rare cards that you crack open in a sealed deck? Here are a couple of reasonable formats:

- All-common constructed. You keep playing until the night is over or you run out of cards, so your starting deck size should probably be in the 120-card range.
- Single-game, single-elimination sealed deck. You start out by building a 40-card minimum sealed deck as normal. When you defeat someone, you add all of that player's remaining intact cards (both deck and sideboard) to your own. Then you use your new card pool to make a new 40-card minimum sealed deck and continue.

What we did was flat-out dumb. My format was that each player got one sealed *Mirrodin* tournament pack, opened it, shuffled it all together, and played with it. When you lost a game, you were out. When you won a game, you added all of the defeated player's unshredded cards to your own, shuffled them together, and proceeded. No deck construction, no fine-tuning, not even any weeding out of basic lands. Just insanity.

*Nobody wants him
He just stares at the world
Planning his vengeance
that he will soon unfurl*

Now you see why I was waiting for *Mirrodin*. With so many colorless cards, a five-color format wouldn't be too painful. It was still somewhat painful, but I have no problem with that.

It's interesting how the Ironman format changes the value of certain cards. Skeleton Shard, for example, goes from broken to just plain broke. Tel-Jilad Stylus, on the other hand, can literally save your cards by sending them to the bottom of your library—where they'll still be in one piece when the next game rolls around—instead of to the graveyard of no return. Synod Sanctum is an odd case. Its normal function of rescuing your permanents is clearly shot. But it's one of the few ways *Mirrodin* has of letting you shred your basic lands. In the dumb format we were playing, decks would get increasingly mana-flooded from one game to the next as spells and creatures met their doom but basic lands didn't. By destroying excess lands, you could prepare a more balanced deck for future rounds.

Showdown in R&D

*Now the time is here
for Iron Man to spread fear
Vengeance from the grave
Kills the people he once saved*

*Dan Myers, wannabe designer,
creates Frankencard*

The 16-person tourney I set up had all the big names from Wizards of the Coast. Devin Low! Matt Place! Paul Sottosanti! Oh, trust me, they'll be famous soon. Web page deserter Aaron Forsythe was in attendance, as was **Magic** rules manager Paul Barclay. **Magic** editor Del Laugel took down Wizards Invitational winner Bill Rose in the first round. R&D wunderkind Brian Tinsman brought a portable paper shredder to the proceedings. Dan Myers (of Daniel Myers Fan Club fame) designed his very own **Magic** card.

One person at the event was not a Wizards employee. Matt Ruhlen, who works at a local mom & pop computer outfit I'll call MacroHard for the sake of anonymity, was my human-interest story. He was the everyman in this sea of insiders. He was the one competitor who actually *paid* for the cards that he was about to rip up. I was going to follow him all the way through—express his hopes, his fears, his highs, his lows. You, gentle reader, would forge a connection with him as you saw your own aspirations mirrored in his courageous endeavor. Then he lost the first game to a turn 3 Neurok Spy he couldn't stop. You know, it turned out to be kind of a luck-based format.

But of course, there was still a natural hero left: me! By now, you all know me well enough to invite me to your weddings. (For the love of god, please don't.) Like many of the competitors, I chose not to look at the contents of my deck before shuffling up to play. As if the format wasn't random enough, now I wouldn't even know what might be coming. Well, what wasn't coming was creatures. While I was playing Dream's Grip and Incite War, my opponent Justin Webb was playing Fangren Hunter and Tel-Jilad Archers. I, like many other players, discovered that Raise the Alarm is beautiful in Ironman: when you shred the spell, it provides its own counters! But they merely served to chump, and I was quickly bounced out of my own tournament. After losing, I scanned my deck to discover Wail of the Nim, Irradiate, Terror, Consume Spirit, and Betrayal of Flesh all hiding out somewhere south of my (and now Justin's) Platinum Angel.

Elsewhere in the first round, there was a race to see who would be the first to *Respect my Authority!* destroy a card. Game designer Mike Selinker and Aaron, in separate games, each played a Neurok Familiar on turn 2. They each flipped over a non-artifact card, which meant it was shreddin' time. But Mike was momentarily flummoxed by the white card he revealed ("Is that an artifact?"), so Aaron beat him to the punch. A bit later, there was an audible cry when Devin's Assert Authority *really* removed Aaron's Mindslaver from the game.

Future Sight

*Nobody wants him
They just turn their heads
Nobody helps him
Now he has his revenge*

One of the reasons I was eager to try this format is because the format itself affects play decisions. Spite plays a factor! When Devin determined that he couldn't escape defeat at the hand of Justin in round 2, he Deconstructed Justin's Titanium Golem. Devin mana-burned himself out of the game with that play, but he prevented Justin from having those two good cards for the next round.

It works the other way around too. In round 1, Devin was solidly beating Aaron. Aaron played Bosh, Iron Golem and Devin had a choice to make: Annul it or not? He chose not to Annul it, and played

around Bosh the rest of the game, because he wanted to assimilate it into his deck.

Instants and sorceries are one-shot deals. So when Del's husband Randy Buehler found a Terror in his game 1 opening hand, he saved it for the entire game. He could have used it, but he never absolutely *needed* to, so it was still in his deck for game 2. He drew it in that game as well. Randy also came up with a method for thinning his deck of basic lands: hoarding cards in his hand until he had to discard at the end of his turn.

The bloodiest game was Randy's round 2 match with R&D gadabout Tyler Bielman. Randy got Mesmeric Orb going, and the card fragments were flying! There was no overt strategy to this: the cards were sloughed from the top of each player's library, so there was no land-thinning involved. Both players had such thick libraries that neither one was ever in any danger of being decked. It was just a rippin' good time. Well over 100 cards were destroyed by the Orb that game, including such useful cards as a Pentavus, two Shatters, and a foil Pyrite Spellbomb. (It was discovered that the foil layer is surprisingly difficult to tear through.) The only long-term benefit, besides the oohs and aahs elicited from the crowd of spectators, was that the winner's deck would be much easier to shuffle in round 3.

That game also featured a very interesting political ploy. Tyler dropped a Pyrite Spellbomb into play and threatened Randy: "Stop attacking or I'll use it!" Randy would *foiled again!* much rather see such a useful card in his game 3 deck than in little pieces, so he stopped attacking. He attempted to burn Tyler out via Charbelcher instead. The truce lasted for quite a few turns until Tyler started to seriously threaten Randy with some flying creatures. Randy blinked first: Figuring that the Spellbomb was going to come flying at his head soon, he attacked with his 2/2 to spare himself 2 damage.

The Strong Survive

One semifinal showcased ex-**Magic** editor Bill "Quill" McQuillan vs. brand-new **Magic** editor Justin Webb. This was Justin's first day on the job, and I don't think he'll forget it anytime soon. It was also his first time playing with *Mirrodin* cards! Crediting his victories to his lucky Chelsea shirt (the British football team, not Bill & Hillary's daughter), he advanced to the finals.

I was watching the other semifinal match, an epic showdown pitting Robert Gutschera, director of (non-**Magic**) trading card games, against Randy, director of yes-**Magic** trading card games. Neither player mulliganed, a decision influenced by the unpleasantness of shuffling up their by-now teetering stacks of cards. An early Omega Myr faced off against a Silver Myr (Robert: "My Myr is bigger than your Myr") before Randy, with the help of a Seething Song, played out his entire hand by turn 4. This fast start let him knock Robert down to 7, but Robert stabilized behind an Icy Manipulator, a Soldier Replica, and the fact that Randy's next nine draws were eight lands and an Isochron Scepter. Randy's Arrest attempt was countered by Assert Authority (Randy, with a straight face: "Removing it from the game?"), and Robert turned the tide thanks to a Chimney Imp(!) beefed up with Dragon Blood counters and Vulshok Gauntlets.

The finals matched Robert's 12.5 cm tall deck against Justin's 16.5 cm tall, 542-card monstrosity. The plays of the game belonged to Robert, though he wasn't lucky enough to draw the craziest card in his deck: Myr Incubator ("I make 100 tokens?"). On turn 2, Robert played the utterly useless Synod Sanctum because he figured he might as well. On turn 4, when Justin attempted a Pewter Golem with mana acceleration from a Viridian Joiner, Robert was able to play Override—which he topdecked *after* playing the Sanctum—to sink it for 1. The Sanctum came through! By turn 8, each player had a Tower in play to match their towers of cards. Robert had Tower of Champions to go with his attacking Somber Hoverguard, and Justin had Tower of Eons. Thanks to the crazy mana ratios by this point in the tournament, the Towers were both active, so they canceled each other out! Between the two of them, they spent a collective 16 mana so that Justin could gain 1 life a turn. Then Robert peeled the

card that sent all of us (except Justin) into hysterics. The MVP of the Ironman finals was . . . Brown Ouphe! Now that he could shut down Justin's Tower, Robert's flying 9/8 creature ended the game in short order. Robert Gutschera, *Mirrodin* Ironman champion!

The fact that Robert is my boss is a complete coincidence.

Until next week, have fun with paper shredders.

Mark

*Heavy boots of lead
fills his victims full of dread
Running as fast as they can
Iron Man lives again!*

Mark may be reached at houseofcardsmail@yahoo.com. Send rules-related **Magic** questions to ask@wizards.com.

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