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# Your Opponent's Worst Nightmare

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Learning Curve  
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Welcome to my contribution to the Halloween Special. The focus of each column this week is supposed to be on frightening **Magic** cards. Whenever there is a theme week a Ben Bleiweiss column is sure to follow and this week was no exception. In Ben's Halloween 31 he took his readers on a graveyard tour of **Magic**; highlighting the [31 scariest Magic cards](#) in terms of art and flavor.

Overlooked in his list are fifteen cards that are perhaps the most terrifying to **Magic** players-especially newer players. Fifteen cards that are so scary that they demand their own column. Don't be mad with Ben for overlooking them since these cards are terrifying as a collective whole and not for their flavor or art. I am talking, of course, about **Constructed Deck Sideboards!**

There is no task more daunting for the new player than trying to figure out how to build their sideboard. They would sooner creak down the steps to their cellar in the dead of night in search of a tripped circuit breaker. Players spend so much time on their deck and yet their sideboards are often an afterthought - an unpleasant task to be put off to the last moment. Now that might not seem very scary but when you consider the fact that you play at least half and as much as two-thirds of your games sideboarded in Constructed it is enough to raise goose flesh on your arms.

There are a lot of different approaches to building a sideboard. Since the release of *Judgment* and up until *Odyssey* block rotated out of Standard, sideboards were fundamentally changed by the presence of the Wishes. *Living Wish*, *Cunning Wish* and *Burning Wish* brought about an era of silver-bullet sideboards that featured upward of twelve different cards.

Silver bullets are usually single copies of cards that are remarkably effective against a specific deck. *Mana Short* against a control deck and *Perish* or *Hibernation* versus green decks are two recent examples. The term is usually referred to in conjunction with some sort of Tutor effect. Originally silver bullet decks would have a handful of narrow cards in their main deck and the ability to search for them with *Vampiric Tutor*. When *Judgment* saw tournament play sideboards were dramatically overhauled to feature an arsenal of utility cards that a player could access for all three games thanks to the Wishes.

With the departure of the Wishes sideboards have returned to their tighter builds of olden days with as few as four different cards-ahhhhh...the old four-four-four-three. A good sideboard allows you to play the most versatile build of your deck possible without having to sacrifice too much to specific match-ups. Last week I posted a Green-Red Control deck called *Moldy Hermit* that a number of my friends ended up playing at their respective State Championships (I ended up waking up too late to play in mine) and I want to illustrate some of my points with the sideboard that Mike Flores took to New York States-he finished in the Top 16 while two different friends made the Top 8 of NY and NJ with more or less the same deck.



## Moldy Hermit

Standard States deck

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 Contested Cliffs</li> <li>7 Forest</li> <li>7 Mountain</li> <li>4 Shivan Oasis</li> <li>4 Wooded Foothills</li> </ul> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>24 lands</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 Creeping Mold</li> <li>2 Hammer of Bogardan</li> <li>4 Plow Under</li> <li>4 Starstorm</li> <li>4 Stone Rain</li> </ul> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>18 other spells</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 Bird of Paradise</li> <li>2 Krosan Tusker</li> <li>4 Molder Slug</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 Flashfires</li> <li>2 Krosan Tusker</li> <li>2 Naturalize</li> <li>4 Pyroclasm</li> <li>4 Viridian Shaman</li> </ul> <p>15 sideboard cards</p>

4 Ravenous Baloth

4 Vine Trellis

18 creatures

I was very worried about Goblins when building this deck and in addition to the main deck **Starstorms** you can see that I had four **Pyroclasms**. The reason that **Starstorm** is in the main deck is that it is more versatile than **Pyroclasm**. Since it cycles it is rarely a dead card against creatureless decks and while it is good against Goblins it is also capable of killing creatures with a toughness greater than two. Plus, **Starstorm** is an instant which can come in handy when your opponent makes an army with a cycled **Decree of Justice** during your end step.

**Starstorm** is a more versatile card that shines against a variety of decks. Now if you were facing Goblins or a White Weenie deck with equipment you would want to have the **Pyroclasms** as well. Not only will it bring you up to eight 'wrath' effects against weenie horde decks but its converted casting cost and color requirements are less intense. Against a deck with tremendous early pressure you want to be able to cast your spells as reliably as possible.

It is one thing to know what you are bringing in it is another to know what you are bringing out. Even experienced players with well thought out sideboards can be seen agonizing over their decisions regarding what cards need to sit on the bench to make room for their sideboard selections. Flores was taking out four **Birds of Paradise** each game for the **Pyroclasms**. He figured why leave in all of his one toughness creatures when you are going to have eight spells that deal damage to all creatures.



There are a number of changes from last week's sideboard that was posted to the one the Flores eventually played. One of the keys to building a sideboard is realizing that it is constantly in flux based on what other people in your area are playing. Once the Moldy Hermit list went up on this site a number of players in and around Neutral Ground decided to play it and as the tournament approached it appeared that land destruction was going to be a significant part of the field. We added two **Krosan Tuskers** to the sideboard specifically for the mirror match.

Players who were playing white decks-blue-white, mono-white and black-white-started trading for **Sacred Ground**. This necessitated additional enchantment removal in the sideboard and the **Naturalizes** were added. Not only were they good against **Story Circle**, **Sacred Ground** and **Ivory Mask** but they were also an option against Affinity decks and **Astral Slide**. We decided to forgo the **Spreading Algae** against black decks—a match-up we felt confident in—and added the two aforementioned cards.

Although Mike only played in one mirror match all day long he ended up siding in the two **Krosan Tuskers** every game in every match. At first glance that might make you think that the Tuskers should automatically be included in the main deck of subsequent builds but it is not that easy a decision. While the Tuskers came in every game regardless of match-up, the cards that went out were different each time. If every game Mike was siding out two **Starstorms** or two creeping Molds and bringing in two Tuskers their inclusion in the main deck would be a simple matter.

I am reminded of a similar situation a couple of seasons ago when Dave Price played a deck with four **Blood Oath** in the sideboard. He would bring all four in for every game two and three but because he wanted his deck to have the maximum utility for every game one he chose to leave them in his board until he knew which of his more essential cards he would not need for the rest of his match. The Tuskers may very well not find their way into the main deck but continue to sub in for weaker cards in the latter two-thirds of each match.



The sideboard for Moldy Hermit was pretty straight-forward and traditional but there are other routes to take. With the advent of the **Onslaught** fetch lands it is not uncommon to see a Goblin deck sporting a lone Forest and some **Naturalizes** in their sideboard. With four copies of **Wooded Foothills** in the main deck they would have five cards they could draw to access green mana after boarding to dispatch the pesky **Sanctimony** and COP. I know of a few black decks that were running an Island and **Mind Bend** in their sideboards so that they could hose **Karmas** that they were anticipating out of white sideboards. Last year I had a Blue-Green Threshold deck that had a Plains and two **Worships** in the sideboard for goblin decks.

One of the more challenging aspects of sideboarding is the guessing game between you and your opponent after game one. If you know that your opponent is bringing in **Karma** you can bring in your Island and your **Mind Bend**. At the same time if you opponent suspects that you are bringing in **Mind Bend** they might choose to leave their **Karmas** in their sideboard to give you dead cards to draw.

A better example of that came last year during the block constructed season when Red-White **Astral Slide** players would side out their enchantments and bring in additional creatures like **Stoic Champion**. If the

other player brought in a package of enchantment removal they could find themselves quickly run over by 6/6 **Stoic Champions** and **Exalted Angels** while their hand was clogged up with useless **Naturalizes**.

This is sometimes called a transformational sideboard. This goes back to the old days of **Magic** when one of the most powerful decks was a creatureless control deck that would win with **Millstone**. Expecting that their opponent would sideboard out all of their **Wrath of Gods**, **Swords to Plowshares** and the like, the **Millstone** player would bring in **Serra Angels** and **Mahamoti Djinn**s to catch the opponent without any way to deal with them.

Sideboarding can become a game with in the game with each player trying to bluff which strategy they are going to be boarding into. Rather than give away to much information about how many cards they are bringing in, many players will simply shuffle their entire sideboard into their deck and remove fifteen cards. The opponent can't tell how many cards-if any-they are bringing in. Other players will make a big show of putting in some number of cards only to take those same cards and put them back in their sideboard hoping to provoke unnecessary countermeasures from their opponent.

Basically, the key to building a sideboard is being aware of the decks that are being played in your area. I'm not talking about hosing your friend Jon's deck. While it can be fun to watch steam come out of Jon's ears when you play a **Sun Droplet** that was sitting in your board just for his **Prodigal Sorcerer** deck it won't do you much good if that is the only deck it is good against. (Actually, **Sun Droplet** might not be bad against a weenie horde deck...hmmmm...) While you may or may not approve of playing net decks it is certainly worthwhile to know what those decks are. Going into most tournaments you can probably figure out what the prevalent archetypes are going to be. While your deck should be able to handle most of them in game one-otherwise why play it-you can have a little something extra in your sideboard for them for the remaining games.

Hopefully something scary.

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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](http://Top8Magic.com), the publishing house that is releasing Michael J. Flores: Deckade.*



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