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Flying, huh?

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Learning Curve

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Flying, huh?

Regular readers of my column know that I usually try to find some tangential way to fulfill my contractual obligation to theme week and go on to talk about something else entirely—like sideboards during Halloween Week. I had decided that I was going to stay on topic for the next theme week no matter what. But this week's theme seemed rather daunting. Flying is such an essential component of the game that I have never given it much thought. I looked for an angle...

I try to draft fliers whenever possible.

I like **Tradewind Rider**—he flies...



...and...ummm...so does **Bog Imp**.

I quickly started to explore my digressive possibilities when I realized that I did in fact have some very strong feelings about flying...sort of. I decided I would do both—stay on topic while veering slightly to the left. None of the cards I will talk about today will actually have flying. Mostly, I will be talking about green's relationship to flying with at least one non-green anecdote to boot.

Two of my favorite abilities are "May block as if it had flying" and "Cannot be blocked except by creatures with flying". Green specializes in those abilities. There is not much to say about the creatures with the latter except that they can, in fact, be blocked by creatures possessing the former. In a battle between a **Treetop Rangers** and a **Tel-Jilad Archers** the Archers will always win. I swear.

The Tel-Jilad Archers are just the latest in a long line of "spiders" that go all the way back to Alpha and the **Giant Spider**. (I will refer to any green creature with a toughness that exceeds its power and the ability to block fliers as a "spider".) While neither of the creatures bracketing the category have made—or are likely to make—an impact on the Constructed **Magic** scene a couple in the middle have shown up from time to time. The first real appearance and high finish of a spider in constructed **Magic** was in 1996 when Olle Rade won **Pro Tour--Columbus** with the following 18 land/61 card monstrosity.


Olle Rade		
Pro Tour Columbus '96 (61 cards) - Ice Age/Alliances Constructed		
Main Deck		Sideboard
61 cards		
7 Forest	2 Giant Growth	1 Anarchy
4 Karplusan Forest	4 Incinerate	2 Essence Filter
7 Mountain	1 Jokulhaups	1 Icy Manipulator
18 lands	2 Lava Burst	1 Jester's Cap
	2 Lodestone Bauble	1 Jokulhaups
	3 Pillage	1 Monsoon
4 Deadly Insect	1 Pyroclasm	1 Primitive Justice
4 Fyndhorn Elves	3 Stormbind	2 Pyroblast
4 Giant Trap Door Spider	4 Urza's Bauble	2 Pyroclasm
1 Gorilla Shaman	22 other spells	2 Vexing Arcanix
2 Orcish Cannoneers		1 Zuran Orb
2 Storm Shaman		15 sideboard cards
4 Woolly Spider		
21 creatures		



It should be noted that under my previous definition of spider, the **Giant Trap Door Spider** is not considered a spider since it does not actually block fliers. The **Woolly Spider** did meet my criteria and it the reason it is included in this piece. Of course, I don't know if Olle ever actually blocked a single flier all weekend. The reason for the

high toughness to power creatures in his deck was to survive **Pyroclasm**. The field was awash with 2/1 pump knights, 1/1 soldier tokens, and 6/1 insects and Olle's creatures were selected to live through the popular board sweeper.

There are not that many notable appearances by spiders in Constructed until the tail-end of the *Mercadian Masques* Constructed block PTQ season when Jon Becker made the quarter-finals of a PTQ with his own 61 card creation—apparently spiders and 60 card decks were mutually exclusive!


Jon Becker		
Lost World - Masques Block Constructed		
Main Deck		Sideboard
61 cards		
2 Dust Bowl	3 Chimeric Idol	0 sideboard cards
22 Forest	4 Predator, Flagship	
24 lands	2 Rath's Edge	
	2 Reverent Silence	
4 Blastoderm	4 Saproling Burst	
4 Rib Cage Spider	4 Skyshroud Claim	
3 Spitting Spider	19 other spells	
3 Squirrel Wrangler		
4 Vine Trellis		
18 creatures		

Jon actually did block fliers with his deck. There were a number of fast blue flying decks around at the time as well as the dreaded Rebel decks, which had their fair share of flying as well. Jon could block the early beatdown with his **Rib Cage Spiders** and then later in the game with his **Spitting Spider**. Lost World would get abundant land into play with **Skyshroud Claim**—the predecessor to **Explosive Vegetation**—and he could do some nasty things with all that mana.

Which glides me nicely into “Gains flying” territory. Jon's deck featured four copies of **Predator Flagship**—add this deck to the previous list of decks with four copies of legends. He could pay two mana a pop to give his opponent's creatures flying and then he would sacrifice some Forests—rarely needing to munch more than two or three—and wipe out their entire team. It also meant that he could send his guys over the top in land locked board positions. (Of course, the **Predator Flagship** was a pretty quick way out of a locked board. For seven mana—two to toss a creature in the air and five to skeet-shoot it out of the sky—you could pretty much kill anything.)

Spiders seem to be lacking the necessary beatdown qualities to be included in many Constructed decks. Jon took some amount of teasing from his friends for playing the **Rib Cage Spiders** main deck over his four sideboarded **Silt Crawlers**. So much teasing that he ultimately pleaded with a very big-hearted editor to withhold his sideboard when the top decks from that weekend's event were posted. Ironically, the only card we now know from that sideboard are the infamous **Silt Crawlers**.

Their deficiencies on offense have mostly relegated spiders to the sideboards of Constructed decks in more recent times. Once in a while you will hear about **Silkflash Spider** getting a start but mostly he is limited to game two and three action. One of those rare exceptions came at State Championships. Aaron Muranaka took the Moldy Slug deck design that I posted here a few weeks ago and made a few changes—including a main deck **Silkflash Spider**—and won the Utah State Championships with it—and with a miserly 60 card build to boot!

Aaron Muranaka		
Spidey Slug - Utah State Championship Winner		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
2 Contested Cliffs	4 Creeping Mold	4 Molten Rain
8 Forest	4 Plow Under	4 Naturalize
6 Mountain	4 Starstorm	1 Obliterate
3 Shivan Oasis	4 Stone Rain	4 Pyroclasm
4 Wooded Foothills	16 other spells	2 Silkflash Spider
23 lands		15 sideboard cards
4 Birds of Paradise		
4 Molder Slug		
4 Ravenous Baloth		
1 Silkflash Spider		
4 Troll Ascetic		
4 Vine Trellis		
21 creatures		

Silkflash Spider is at the heart of one of my favorite tournament plays of all time. I was playing during last year's Extended PTQ season with a black-green deck that ran a lone **Silkflash Spider** in the sideboard. I was up against a blue-green opponent and had boarded it in for reasons that will become obvious later. I had a **Faceless Butcher** sitting on one of my opponent's **Arrogant Wurms** and I had the Spider in play. It was holding off another **Arrogant Wurm**, a **Wild Mongrel**, and a 6/6 Wurm token threatening to go on the offensive.

My opponent had been clinging to one card for most of the game despite multiple opportunities to pitch it to his **Wild Mongrel**. I was completely out of cards and my opponent had only that one mystery card, which I assumed was a counterspell of some kind. He drew and played a **Waterfront Bouncer** and I knew that the game was going to slip away from me if I didn't rip something off of the top. I drew a **Cabal Therapy**. It did not seem impressive but I wanted to know what the card he was holding onto was and cast it naming **Circular Logic**.

I have never been so thrilled to be wrong before—it was a **Wonder**. I flashed back my **Cabal Therapy** sacrificing my Butcher to return his **Arrogant Wurm** and made him put his incarnation in the graveyard—giving all of his creatures flying. I killed everything on his side of the board with one massive activation of my Spider.

I promised one non-green anecdote and I would be remiss if I didn't follow one of my most triumphant top decks with one of my greatest gaffes. Probably the most famous card that has "gains flying" is the mighty **Morphling**. At the *Urza's Saga* prerelease I had the good fortune to open two copies of "Superman." Unfortunately, I had the misfortune to not read the card because it had too much text and just assumed it would not be good—a 3/3 **Ice Cauldron** I assumed.

I passed both of them to my right and I quickly learned of the power of **Morphling** when the **Expunges** I took over them did nothing while my mono-blue opponent bashed me soundly with his second pick bounty. Of course that owed more to "can't be the target of spells or effects" than to "gains flying," which will leave me on empty when that Theme Week rolls around.

*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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