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Shield Bearer and Me

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Learning Curve

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The original plan here was to throw down a couple of lines about **Mesa Pegasus** (Hey, I could have done a two-parter on the Pegasus and covered Flying AND Banding weeks!) and find a clever segue into talking about team formats. A wrench was thrown into that plan when Anthony Alongi sent out a preemptive e-mail to the other writers of this site laying claim to the Theme Week Dodge before I could. The letter was addressed to everyone but Anthony is a cagey politician from years of multi-player games and I could read between the lines...

It was made clear to me that no matter how many **Mana Flares** and **Howling Mines** I put into play I would be the first man down in any **Magic** experience that involved more than two players. The Godfather of multi-player didn't say anything directly but it was clear I would sleep with the Islandfishes if I didn't stay on topic. So without any further ado...

Shield Bearer and Me

I have been playing **Magic** for almost as long as it has been around and certainly as long as it was commonly available on the East Coast of the United States. But it was not until the release of *Ice Age* that I actually began to understand the game so that I wasn't just slapping at pieces of cardboard and making up my own rules as I went along. I began to play in Sealed Deck tournaments and played heads-up Sealed Deck against friends constantly.



Heads-up Sealed deck was when you and a friend would each build a Sealed Deck as if in a tournament but only play against each other. This was back in the days of ante and we would often play for ownership of all the cards. Later I would begin fumbling around with Constructed decks with the emergence of what would come to be known as the Standard Format but not until I found a way to stop losing my cards to Cary Newburger.

One of the benchmarks for finding my way out of total scrubdom was understanding how Banding worked. Believe me it took a while. I can certainly understand why it was removed from the game. It was one of the most difficult concepts in the game for newer players to grasp but I was sad when it went away—I felt like I had lost a hard earned edge. Banding was complicated enough but—to go back to the **Mesa Pegasus** for a moment—when you had a non-flying creature band with a flying creature it was sure to prompt an argument during blocking.



Basically what it came down to was if any creature in the band was blocked then all of the creatures in that group were blocked even though the Pegasus had flying. (I don't why I am using the past tense, banding creatures have not been purged from the game. I guess they are just so far removed from my day to day **Magic** experience that in my mind they are the same to me as pre-*Sixth Edition* rules. Like the idea of tapped blockers not dealing combat damage—they don't exist any longer.) There were similar issues with creatures that had protection from a color. For example if a **White Knight** banded with a

Benalish Hero—wait let's make it more confusing. If a **Black Knight** banded with a **Benalish Hero** you would get stopped by your opponent right there. Since the **Black Knight** had protection from white they would claim it could not band with a white creature. Once you convinced them that they could get past their differences and band together there would be issues about whether or not they could block your band with a white creature. As long as they declared the white creature as blocking the **Benalish Hero** they could indeed block and the whole band would be stopped.

Then there were issues with how many creatures you could band together. Basically to attack with more than two creatures in a band you needed all but one of the creatures in that band to have banding. What would confuse matters for many players was that on defense it was entirely different. I could block your **Craw Wurm** with all of my creatures and as long as one of them had banding I would be able to assign the damage from your **Craw Wurm** however I darned well pleased. To make this even more complicated, you did not actually declare banding when



blocking, instead it was an ability that you got to use during damage assignment.

It was certainly the most confusing aspect of the game and there was not the little italicized reminder text to explain it. Covering all of the pertinent information would have required 3 point type and some creative text kerning so it is just as well. My guide through my struggles to understand banding (To be fair, as I write this I have multiple IM windows open to confirm that banding did work the way my sometimes faulty memory wants me to believe it did, so one could say those struggles are ongoing.) was the **Shield Bearer**.

Where **Mesa Pegasus** only seemed to confuse things with his fancy flying, the **Shield Bearer** did nothing except band. The guy didn't even have any power. I know I bashed the **Ornithopter** last week for giving you nothing for nothing while the zero power **Shield Bearer** cost $1*$. But he had banding. Although I ignored him at first—my bias against zero power creatures has deep roots—I began to wonder why he was printed in the first place and started to explore the dark mysteries of banding.



When playing *Ice Age Limited*, the format would often come down to a lone evasion creature pecking away for two points a turn. Whether it was a **Kjeldoran Skycaptain** or a **Barbarian Guides** giving your men Snow-Covered Something-Walk it was usually a matter of holding the ground while you plinked away turn after turn. (I always preferred the idea of opening a **Stormbind** but failing that I was content to fly over for two points a turn.) With a **Shield Bearer** sitting on my front lines I could hold off early beatdown with an 0/3 body—much the way I have an unnatural fondness for the **Lumengrid Warden** in *Mirrodin Limited*. I also could throw all my men in the way of any giant green monster my opponent would send into the as-of-yet-unnamed Red Zone. If I wasn't able to distribute the damage around in such a way that all my creatures would live I could just pile all of the damage on my worst guy.

It was not until the release of *Fifth Edition* that I began to explore the offensive possibilities of the **Shield Bearer**. The format for the second Pro Tour to visit New York was *Fifth Edition/Visions* draft. In helping friends to prepare for the event I fell into the habit of drafting red-white. I would take **Brassclaw Orcs** early and **Shield Bearers** late. Together they would create a formidable 3/5 attacking band. It would require four points of damage for the defender to kill one of the creatures—the creature of your choice—and

if you had any sort of trick, such as **Heal**, it could be devastating.

Recently I have had multiple situations where I had both the ballyhooed **Bonesplitter** in play as well as the maligned **Slagwurm Armor**. In almost all of those situations my opponent was forced to use his/her lone artifact removal spell on the **Slagwurm Armor**. Even though the **Bonesplitter** can be devastating it still allows for the possibility of trading creatures in combat. **Shield Bearer** had a similar effect on the game when he was in play. After a sequence of lopsided skirmishes opponent's would find themselves having no choice but to use a precious removal spell on a lowly 0/3 man.

Once I started playing with the **Shield Bearer** and understanding the ability he provided my game improved rapidly. In addition to lessons he taught me regarding banding, he helped me develop an appreciation for combat tricks and damage prevention. He helped me to understand many subtleties of combat and, although banding was almost exclusively a Limited-format ability, he even affected my constructed game.

The confidence I developed playing in Limited served as fuel to encourage me to test my hand at Constructed. Sure the first deck I built was a **Norritt/Prodigal Sorcerer** deck with **Skeleton Ship** and **Merieke Ri Berit** but it was the first step in a long journey that has turned me into a reasonable deck builder with a number of decent creations to my credit.

And I owe it all to **Shield Bearer**.



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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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