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A Wandering Eye

Brian David-Marshall
Learning Curve

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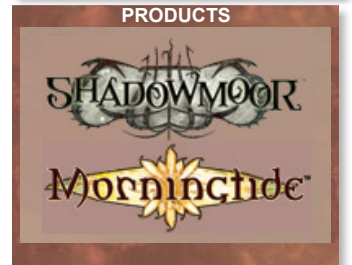
How ironic that I find myself longing for a theme week. After all my evasion tactics to get around past theme weeks I am chomping at the bit for next week's theme. I have been putting in some extra time for that column and when this week's deadline rolled around it caught me by surprise. And with no predetermined topic to write about.

My drive to play Constructed **Magic** is tied to major events. It doesn't matter if they are State Championships, PTQs, or Grand Prix. With States receding in our collective rearview mirrors there is a clear stretch of highway ahead with no Standard reststops for miles. To carry the metaphor perhaps a little too far I have no outlet to relieve the pressure I am experiencing. There are some constructed PTQs going on right now but I am not overly concerned with qualifying for Kobe. I will play Extended both before and after the bannings go into effect but it is not a format that lends itself to the type of innovation that normally attracts me to Constructed **Magic**. But when you gotta go you gotta go!

I did play last week in a Grand Prix Trial for Anaheim at Kings Games in Brooklyn. It was an interesting tournament experience because I am used to being able to trade for (or borrow) all of the cards I need for a deck. I will regularly show up at Constructed tournaments several cards off from my desired build and fill out the deck on site. When I got to the store I was surprised to find almost no one with an ample supply of Extended cards in attendance.

The deck I was trying complete was a variant of RDW. Short for Red Deck Wins, I based my build off of Dan Cato's deck that carried him to an impressive ninth place finish at Pro Tour New Orleans. Instead of **Cursed Scrolls** I decided to play with four copies of **Blood Oath**. **Blood Oath** has always been an intriguing card. Two different friends of mine, Scott McCord and Jon Becker, have had the pleasure of splitting **Fact or Fictions** into piles of five and zero in tournament. In Scott's case his opponent had flipped over five lands. Scott feigned not caring and offered his opponent a pile of five lands or nothing. When he took the five pile Scott finished him off with a **Blood Oath** for fifteen points of damage. The best part is that later in the tournament he was able to make an opponent take a zero pile when he bluffed the **Blood Oath**!

After deciding to play with **Blood Oath** I couldn't find any in my poorly organized collection of cards. Fortunately, those I was able to trade for although I could not secure a fourth **Jackal Pup** or **Rishadan Port**. I had been proxying the fourth Pup with a **Grim Lavamancer** and he ended up making the deck in place of the fourth beater. I didn't know if it would be any good but I figured it would be fun!



Red Deck Grins	
Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
4 Ancient Tomb	3 Ensnaring Bridge
13 Mountain	2 Keldon Vandals
3 Rishadan Port	4 Lava Dart
4 Wasteland	2 Pyrostatic Pillar
24 lands	4 Rack and Ruin
4 Blistering Firecat	20 other spells
1 Grim Lavamancer	15 sideboard cards
3 Jackal Pup	
4 Mogg Fanatic	
4 Slith Firewalker	
16 creatures	

There was modest turnout of eighteen players with the most notable being Gerard Fabiano who was playing Twiddle Desire (hence the Pillars in my board!). This meant five rounds of Swiss cutting to a Top 8 elimination. I won my first three rounds. I sandwiched victories over George W. Bosh in between one over a rogue Stompy deck. I never got to cast **Blood Oath** once. I drew the next two rounds to assure myself a spot in the Top 8 and squared off in the Quarterfinals with a Scepter Tog deck.

The first game was demoralizing as my opponent locked up the board with a pair of **Isochron Scepters**—one set on **Fire/Ice** and another on **Mana Leak**. Game two was all about **Tanglewire** as I kept him tied up for long enough to force a game three with a series of burn spells. In the final game my opponent mulliganed down to six and I was forced to make a decision about whether or not to do the same with my hand. I was holding a **Rishadan Port**, **Ancient Tomb**, **Tanglewire**, two **Blood Oath**, **Rack and Ruin**, and **Jackal Pup**.



I knew coming into the tournament that my decision to play **Ancient Tomb** over fetch lands or additional red mana could be dangerous. I was drawing and my opponent was already down one card to his mulligan. I decided to keep my hand and even if I didn't draw a Mountain for a few turns I reasoned that I could by some time with **Tanglewire**. What would you have done?

The Mountain did not come for a long time while my opponent set up with two Scepters again. One on **Accumulated Knowledge** and another on **Mana Leak**. I was angry with myself for keeping the hand and was playing too fast and without thinking. With a Mountain finally in play I passed the turn back to my opponent who was at eighteen. He activated his AK on a stick and drew two cards. He then used **Intuition** to find two Togs and a **Cunning Wish**. This left him with only four mana open and when he proceeded to cast the **Cunning Wish** I leaped into action and cast **Blood Oath** in response.

IN RESPONSE!?!

He only had one mana open—a mistake on his part really, he thought his other Scepter was a **Chrome Mox** and believed he had left counter mana open—and was presumably getting an instant from his board. Since I was going to be naming instant I should have waited for the Wish to resolve. He was holding five of them and he took fifteen. He would have taken eighteen had I waited for the Wish to resolve. He retrieved a **Corpse Dance** and used it to kill me with his Tog on the next turn.

I was just playing without thinking and I could have won what had seemed like an unwinnable game with the very card that had motivated me to want to play in the first place. It was demoralizing and I was stunned by it for the rest of the day. Not that I had lost the tournament but by my lack of thought before casting the spell I wasn't thinking over my plays and weighing all of my options thoroughly.



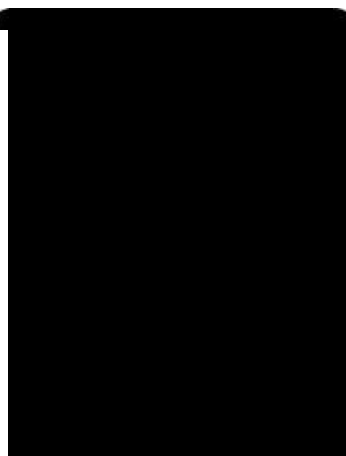
The only time I have ever won any money on the Pro Tour was at PT New York in 2001. I was playing on Team Monkey Dog with Eric Kesselman and Brook North. We practiced for the event constantly and at some point found we were missing something in our efforts. Eric realized that we were making game play decisions without being able to articulate why we made them. We were acting on familiarity and not thinking things through. Casting an instant in response to another player's instant without at least thinking about letting it resolve first is an example of what I am talking about.

Eric decided that we would playtest for the remainder of the time leading up to the Pro Tour as if there was a **Wandering Eye** in play at all times. It does not even remotely resemble actual game play—unless of course there IS a **Wandering Eye** in play—but it was extremely useful for us.

We were able to identify tendencies toward certain play patterns. Practice became less like a game of bluffs and more like Chess with each player trying to not only cope with the tricks on board but the ones in hand as well. Instead of grappling with the question of whether or not an opponent had a certain card we were forced to grapple with how to deal with it if they did.

My friend Pat was playing in a PTQ in Columbus the same weekend I was playing Brooklyn and he was knocked out of the tournament when he attacked into a **Soul Nova** with a triple equipped creature. His opponent had abundant mana open and Pat had considered that his opponent might have the white instant. After debating about whether or not his opponent had the **Soul Nova** he guessed wrong and attacked. When we were talking about the play later, Pat realized he could have forced his opponent to burn the **Soul Nova** without getting his best equipment or force him to not cast spells to keep his mana open in the hopes of getting more than one for one removal.

His play and mine at the Trial made me think about the **Wandering Eye** sessions and how we would have both benefited from having to talk through our decisions and justify them—even if just to ourselves—before committing to them. I am often distracted from writing by my lovely Sony Trinitron television that I treated myself to with my winnings from that Pro Tour. I have been wanting to upgrade it to a Plasma television...



I have no delusions about winning a new entertainment system in Kobe--especially since I will most likely be there as a *Sideboard* reporter--but I will be opening the *Wandering Eye* to reexamine how I play the game. Give it a try and let me know what you think about this as a practical exercise for improving your game.

As for reporting, I will be at GenCon: SoCal this weekend covering the last major Extended event before the bannings go into effect. I will also be continuing to develop information for next week's theme topic. I can't wait!

Brian may be reached at brian@fightlikeapes.com.



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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