

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

Third Time is the Charm

Brian David-Marshall
Swimming With Sharks
Wednesday, February 11, 2004



Welcome to the first installation of my third different column for magicthegathering.com. When I first started writing for the site almost two years ago I produced [Deconstructing Famous Decks](#) every three weeks or so. The title pretty much sums up the goal of the column and I had a blast writing it.

Last January I was given the opportunity to fill Ben Bleiwess' shoes each Wednesday with a new column called [Learning Curve](#). The idea behind the column was to write about very basic fundamentals such as mana curves, land counts, understanding priority, etc. Somewhere in the middle of the year I was given a little more latitude to write about tournament **Magic** and the column began to drift inexorably in that direction.

While this is my third column for magicthegathering.com I am not taking into account the series of articles I did for [Sideboard](#) about attempting to qualify for the Pro Tour. The series started with [Walking to Houston](#) and detailed my exploits with a blue-green threshold deck, a Solitary Confinement deck, and I believe a Wake deck. Other installments included [Swimming to Venice](#) and [Staggering to New Orleans](#). The series' titles were recently spoofed by Osyp Lebedowicz in his [Wind Surfing to Kobe](#) series.

My new column is going to combine elements of all three of my past columns. This column will be dedicated to tournament **Magic** and my goal is to help you gain an understanding of what is happening each week on the competitive **Magic** scene. I'm not talking about news or gossip but rather the nature of the tournament environment as it is occurring. The term metagame is thrown around quite a bit but it best describes what I will be trying to describe to you each week.

I will certainly continue to look to decks of the past for future inspirations. I continued to use my model from the [Deconstructing Famous Decks](#) series from time to time in [Learning Curve](#). When preparing for State Championships I put forth Aaron Forsythe's [Angry Hermit](#) deck and updated it with [Molder Slug](#) and [Starstorm](#) into a deck that has actually become a Standard mainstay—[Moldy Hermit](#). With Regionals approaching I hope to find similar success poring over successful decks of the past.

Fundamentals will remain in focus as well. My approach will differ in that I will be talking about them from the perspective of a tournament level **Magic** player as opposed to the beginner audience my column was originally designed to address. Depending on the week and current format we will look at things ranging from building your deck and sideboard to interacting with tournament staff in the most effective manner possible.

Finally, I hope through my tournament experiences as both a player and event coverage reporter to bring you an understanding of the week to week environmental shifts you need to be aware of to stay current. I am not only going to look at the decks that people are playing and winning with. I am also going to talk about what you need to know to win, whether it is the current thinking behind land counts, under-drafted colors at the Top 8 tables of PTQs, or what sideboard cards you can expect to be raining down on you for the remaining two games of each match. Think of me as your **Magic** weatherman.

San Diego Qualifier Season Begins

This past weekend marked the kickoff for the [Pro Tour San Diego qualifier season](#). It was also the first weekend that [Darksteel](#) was on sale and legal for use in Limited tournaments other than the Prerelease. Anyone playing in PTQs this past weekend had to grapple with building their Sealed Decks with two fewer packs of [Mirrodin](#) and two packs of the mysterious [Darksteel](#).

I had to miss this weekend's PTQ at Neutral Ground, which was a big disappointment. The only times I seem to make Top 8 of limited PTQs are when a new set is introduced. Instead I was at [Grand Prix Oakland](#) watching the best players in the country puzzle out the new set. It was quite assuring to see that the game's best players have the same struggles with card evaluations as the rest of us.

Prior to round one of the tournament I did a deckbuilding feature with Ben Stark. Ben is clearly among the elite players in this country. Coming into the event he had made the Top 8 of his last two Grand Prix tournaments. It was clear to him looking at his deck that he was going to play a fast green-black deck. He had the option of splashing red for two artifact removal spells but opted to keep his deck down to two colors.

As he put the final touches on his deck there was a pair of black creatures hovering just outside of his pile of cards that were definitely in the deck. He considered the [Nim Abomination](#) and [Grimclaw Bats](#). He had no



experience with *Darksteel* other than a couple of friendly drafts the night before and opted for cards he was more familiar with; *Clockwork Condor* and *Slith Predator*—the latter being a pet card of his.

Ben went 7-1 with his deck but made a point of telling me that he felt he had misbuilt the deck. He almost always sided in his artifact destruction and should have played it in his main deck with two Mountains and a *Darksteel Ingot* to fuel it. More importantly he always brought the *Grimclaw Bats* in for the *Slith Predator*. He wanted to make sure that readers of the coverage knew not playing the Bats was a mistake born of inexperience with the new set.



He did not play the *Nim Abomination* and remained leery of its drawback. I saw a few people playing "suicide" black draft decks with multiple Abominations and *Grimclaw Bats*. The worst enemy that an Abomination deck can face is someone playing *Arrest*. Barring that you only have to take three from it the turn it comes into play. There are also a number of really good common removal spells you want to be taking with your early draft picks in *Darksteel*.

Nim Abominations are efficient beaters that you can pick up late in the black pick order. Your early *Darksteel* picks like *Essence Drain* will recoup some of your lost life while removing annoying blockers. *Echoing Decay* turns double blocks by your opponent into two for one massacres. If you have any doubts about the power of black you need only look as far as Grand Prix Champion Ken Ho's Top 8 monstrosity.

Ken's deck started with three *Consume Spirits* that were passed to him by Mike Turian who avoided having black in his deck as anything other than a splash. Later in *Darksteel* Mike passed three *Chittering Rats* to Ken who gladly snapped them up for his mono-black deck.

Ken was the beneficiary of the aftertaste of black decks left by *Mirrodin* only drafts. The common creatures available in that format were somewhat lacking in the toughness department. There are three common creatures and one uncommon in *Darksteel* that all have either a toughness greater than one or the ability to pump it up.

Nim Abomination and *Chittering Rats* offer you more butt for your buck than the Nim creatures in *Mirrodin* and offer you a power level that is not dependent on artifacts. The *Grimclaw Bats* may only have a one toughness but you can control the degree of difficulty your opponents will face in killing them by leaving black mana open.

There is also the *Scavenging Scarab* but I am not sold on this guy's unwillingness to stand in the way of an oncoming creature. It may be painful to keep an Abomination back but at least you have the option of blocking if you need to do so.

Ken Ho's deck is sure to be on the mind of player's as they draft around the Top 8 tables over the coming weeks. One of the reasons that Ken could draft the deck so confidently was that there was no one else competing with him for the black cards. Mike Turian took one *Consume Spirit* that he saw but passed the other three that made Ken's seventeen Swamp deck so deadly in the late game.



Mike also passed the *Chittering Rats* through to Ken. If even one more player had gone into black or if Mike had made a heavier push for black cards there might have been a very different outcome for this tournament. While it might be nice to try and draft Ken's deck I don't know that you will be the only player at the table with that goal in mind.

I am sure that Ken did not sit down with the goal of drafting a mono-black deck. When he started seeing late *Consume Spirits*—I believe his first two came seventh and eighth pick—it was a clear signal that no one at the table was heavily into black after the first pack. Even his MVP *Promise of Power* was not a first pick. It came to him third pick overall in the draft—a nice rare to get third after opening a *Proteus Staff*.

Anyone at the table could have made a push for black. Mike Turian was in the best position to do so. After taking a *Skeleton Shard* he took a *Consume Spirit* out of a mediocre pack. He passed two more when there were green cards he could take over them. His black was mostly in the support of *Skeleton Shard* and he indicated that he probably would have splashed for it had another color presented a reasonable option to complement his green. I noticed that a number of the Pros were taking *Skeleton Shard* much higher than in *Mirrodin* only drafts. The reason was the modular guys. With the Shard in your deck you can easily draft to support it with cards like *Krark-Clan Grunt*, *Atog*, and *Krark-Clan Stoker*. All of the modular guys were drafted pretty highly even the modular one guys like the Stinger and the worker.

Looking forward I don't know if I will be able to play in the PTQ in my area that is coming up. Saturday is Valentine's Day and I have a sneaking suspicion my wife will want to spend some time with me. Thanks to the good folks at Gray Matter Conventions I should still be able to bring you the details of what to expect at your typical PTQ tournament as far as the winning Sealed Decks and the Top 8 draft. I will also take a look at some of the MVPs from *Darksteel* two weeks into the season.



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.



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Brian David-Marshall](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#)

© 1995-2008 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

