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# Talon of Pain



Adrian Sullivan · Single-Card Strategies  
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A little bit of pain can be a good thing. Back when I was in high school (and fit), one of my coaches let me in on the secret: a bit of pain can mean that you're accomplishing something. Of course, this isn't a hard and fast rule. Sometimes pain just means you're hurting yourself too. In **Magic**, this second idea is usually more true than the first one. And with this week's card, **Talon of Pain**, you don't want the little bit of pain if you're going to accomplish something; it's your opponent's pain that matters.

If you're like most people the first time that you saw **Talon of Pain**, your eyes boggled out of your head and you might have said a naughty word. Almost nobody gets this card right the first time that they see it. If you just read the card really quickly, you'll get it wrong. Unless you already have the card imprinted on your brain, try it, and you'll see.



Did you do it too?

Most people when they read **Talon of Pain** that first time do what I did, and what I've seen the last several people do when they read the card. They've imagined the card as a kind of reverse **Sun Droplet**: every time the opponent takes damage, put a counter on the card (for each point of damage)! Bam! That card is extremely exciting; sure it takes a bit of mana to activate, but the result is a slowly activated **Furnace of Rath**. But they compensate us by letting us hit creatures with it too! Wow!

All of those exclamation points would be well justified if that was indeed what the card did. A careful reading or two later, and you'll have what the card really does: every time something of yours hurts your opponent, the **Talon of Pain** remembers that and rewards it with a *single* counter.

## Making the Most of It, or at Least Making More of Them

In a sense what we're talking about here is a card that is solid, then, rather than nuts. That is a good thing, though. When we have a card as good as I had *imagined* **Talon of Pain** to be, it's actually a pretty scary thing. I mean, already one of the more exciting things you can do with **Talon of Pain** is to have *two* **Talon of Pain** out.

The text here of the tap ability is very, very important. "Remove X charge counters from Talon of Pain: Talon of Pain deals X damage to target creature or player." What makes that important is that in **Magic**, when a card refers to itself by name, it isn't referring to *other* copies of the card. It is only referring to itself. So, when I first misread the card, I had images of the card being completely insane: I would tap X mana on one Talon and give X counters to the other one, and then give them back again when I spent another X! Even if it isn't that good, being able to power up Talons even a little bit by having a second one out isn't something to sneeze at.

That said, getting out multiples is one nice way to make Talons go a little nutty. Take some Talons, some **Sculpting Steels** (and/or **Copy Artifacts**, for those of you who have them), stew them with some nice other cards, and you have something nice to chew on. With even a few pingers like **Spikeshot Goblin**, **Granite Shard**, or **Lightning Rift**, it would be pretty easy to make all of the Talons into a machine-gun army. I especially like the idea of **Lightning Rift** since cycling a card makes it easier to find another Talon or **Sculpting Steel**.

## Help for the Little Guy

One of the other ways that the Talon is good is with a bunch of little guys, especially if your guys can't actually kill anyone other than your opponent. The best examples of this that spring to mind are the mono-white or mono-green decks out there. These decks don't have a whiff of direct damage or creature kill. White can half-way take out a creature with cards like **Pacifism** or **Arrest**, but these always seem to get removed at the worst times, turning the best attack into something bad. Green, on the other hand, has had almost nothing like this in its whole history (**Unyaro Bee Sting**, anyone?), and generally has killed creatures by blocking or being blocked. A trick or two can help out, but this still leaves the decision of creature combat mostly up to your opponent.

Sometimes when you're making a deck, you're in a place when you're required to stay that one color, but you really feel like you need that extra ability to kill something. Talon of Pain can really work wonders here. Both Green and White have the ability to get a little bit of damage through, either with a card like **Predator's Strike** bringing a Green guy's damage straight to your opponent's melon, or by having something else that makes the creature hard to block (**Silver Knight** versus a few red men, **Leonin Skyhunter** against someone who can't fly). Even without evasion or a trick, just having the Talon can change the way a person blocks.

In these situations, the **Talon of Pain** is great because of its ability to hit creatures. Just by letting creatures through, the Talon gets better and better. As it gets better, the Talon can start picking off your opponent's creatures, thus giving you more opportunities to get through and make it better yet. Once it tastes blood, it can often start a snowball effect.

What's more, once your opponent starts getting hit, sometimes the Talon can just turn the game into a footrace since it can also just do damage straight into someone's face to end the game. As a game comes to a close, you can get to a point where people are forced into a number of bad blocks just because the Talon is out on the table.

Lastly, it's important to point out that in a mono-colored deck like we're talking about here, it's always nice to have creature removal that can potentially take out opposing creatures annoying enough to have protection from *your* particular color.



## A Fistful of Burn

I love burn. Since I like casting spells straight to people's head, **Talon of Pain** comes to mind pretty quickly for that too. One of the problems with casting a burn spell right at someone, rather than at their creatures, is that they start to get too many creatures. Try an easy thought experiment:

You have a broken **Lightning Bolt** machine. On your turn, your machine casts **Lightning Bolt**, doing 3 damage right to your opponent. They have a **Grizzly Bear** machine. On their turn, their machine makes a 2/2 Bear. Who will win?

Turn	Your Life	Their Life	Bears
1	20	17	1
2	18	14	2
3	14	11	3
4	8	8	4
5	0	5	5

**Lightning Bolt** is a pretty good burn spell, but it can't race a stream of monsters. What happens though if you had a **Talon of Pain** already in play?

Turn	Your Life	Their Life	Bears
1	20	17	1
2	18	14	1 (One is killed by the Talon)
3	16	11	2
4	12	8	2 (One is killed by the Talon)
5	8	5	3
6	2	0	4 (You don't kill their Bear this turn, you Talon <i>them</i> ).


This illustrates the whole idea. In addition to such a simple situation, you also could have just let the bears keep hitting you and killed the opponent off by Taloning them for 5 on the 5th turn, but that's not how I imagine making the best use of this when you are playing against a real life opponent. Most likely, they aren't just going to be casting **Grizzly Bears**. The Talon can be used to help pick off something a bit bigger. If you can't actually kill something with your burn spell, a few other ones can make the Talon good enough to help a burn spell kill the right creature. Sometimes, it will be better to just use all of those burn spells on a creature by itself. Other times, though, it's nice to be able to cast **Chain of Plasma** right into someone's face and see if they want to send it back at you.

With all that in mind, I wanted to share my own little attempt at making **Talon of Pain** work out in the tournament world of **Magic: the Gathering**.

## Trying Out Talon of Pain for Pro Tour Kobe

Yes, I actually considered playing **Talon of Pain** at the Pro Tour in Kobe. I worked with my little think tank of magicians, Cabal Rogue. Maybe if I *had* used the Talon I would have done better than place about 1 millionth in the event, but who can say? What is interesting to me is how it came close to that in the first place.

For those of you who pay attention to tournament **Magic**, you'll know that one of the big decks of the event was going to be Affinity. **Arcbound Ravager** and **Skullclamp** were both supercharged with power, and one of the best things to go about dealing with the abundance of artifacts was to come back with an abundance of artifact kill. You can see it in [the decklists from the tournament](#): a ton of **Oxidizes**, **Viridian Shamans**, **Tel-Jilad Chosen**, and **Viridian Zealots**.

And then there was the Slug. **Molder Slug** was a great, great guy, especially with all of this other artifact  *Want to race?* kill that we were packing. The only problem is, the green decks with all of this artifact kill were often still losing way too many games. Way, way, way too many games. And one of the big reasons that this kept happening? A little guy named **Disciple of the Vault**.

**Molder Slug** does make it a bit hard to run artifacts. Affinity was so fast, though, that the Green decks just kept being unable to effectively race, even with all of the artifact kill. The Disciple was a big part of that, since even when things got back into control, a Disciple (or worse, two) would just completely change the math while making the Slug look expensive and slow.

We wanted to speed the deck up with **Chrome Mox** anyway, and **Molder Slug** and **Culling Scales** had been monkeying with that. Finally, Milwaukee's greatest export to the Northwest, Jacob Janoska wrote to the list with a concept:

*I have been thinking that the problem with the deck may be **Molder Slug**. He's so very good, but this is an artifact block, and the real power is in the artifacts. I just*

think the deck is really hurt by the fact that it can't (or doesn't) play *Lightning Greaves*.

This started the thinking juices flowing, and we were able to put in those *Chrome Moxen* and the *Lightning Greaves*. The deck was able to race more, but we still wanted to kill creatures. *Duplicant* was too expensive, as was *Triskellion*. When we hit upon the *Talon of Pain*, it made a lot about the deck really gel. Here's one of the late versions of the deck:

4 *Tel-Jilad Chosen*  
4 *Viridian Zealot*  
4 *Viridian Shaman*  
4 *Pulse of the Tangle*  
4 *Fangren Firstborn*  
3 *Glissa Sunseeker*  
4 *Oxidize*  
4 *Talon of Pain*  
3 *Lightning Greaves*  
4 *Chrome Mox*  
4 *Blinkmoth Nexus*  
18 *Forest*

In the end, the deck was abandoned, but it was a great experiment. Suddenly, not only could the deck deal with creatures pretty effectively, but it was able to start racing so much more quickly than it had before.

## Feedback. Always More Feedback.

The polls have been a great way to figure out where everyone is at with the game and with this column, and I've been really pleased with them. The most recent article poll was *really* a surprise though:

How often should there be challenges in the future?		
Often, I really liked seeing other peoples ideas	3509	56.6%
Occasionally, I might like seeing this happen again, but not very often	2348	37.9%
Never, I just want to see you look at a new card every week	338	5.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6195</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Very nearly everyone likes Challenges. In looking at these results, I think it can be safe to say that you should expect to see more of them, you just won't be seeing them constantly. Hopefully, that strikes the best balance for everyone.

For this week, I wanted to change things up a bit by focusing more on the card itself and less on the combos it creates with a ton of other cards. With that in mind, how did you like my story of investigating *Talon of Pain* for Pro Tour: Kobe?

**How did you like my story of investigating Talon of Pain for Pro Tour: Kobe?**

You didn't tell me enough! I wanted more details!

It was great. Just right.

I could take it or leave it.

Somewhat boring.

I prefer seeing more ideas for how to use the card.

Please, don't do that to me again...

Thanks everyone. See you next week.

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