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It's 1am and you've finally gotten to your hotel room after a pair of airplanes took you half way across the country ...what do you do? Well, if you're me you head downstairs to check out the 'Grinders. Every year at US Nationals Wizards hands out a bunch of money, crowns a national champion, and determines who will represent the USA in the Worlds team competition. That's all well and good, but I think the real action and excitement is in the "Meatgrinders." Every year over a thousand **Magic** players make the journey to the event without an invitation to play in Nationals. They get there early so they can spend their Thursday playing in as many 256-person single elimination tournaments as they can. The top 4 from each event earn an invitation to play in the main event. The pressure of knowing you have to win six matches in a row without a single hiccup gave these tournaments their nickname, and they really are Meatgrinders.



Seven years ago I made one of my first trips to a major **Magic** tournament. US Nationals was held at Origins that year and the first 'Grinder started at midnight Wednesday night/Thursday morning. I thought the big crowds were just because of the associated gaming convention, but over the intervening years it has become obvious that it's all about the 'Grinders. When Nationals moved to Orlando, the Grinders were still packed. When Nationals moved across the country to San Diego, the crowds were lining up hours in advance because only the first 256 of them would get to play in each of the tournaments. This year Nationals is back in the middle of the country, in Kansas City, and only the midnight Grinder has started as I'm typing this, but it had fully 216 participants, each dreaming of a national title. Actually, I'm not sure how many of them actually think they can win a national title. I think most of them just really want to game, and chasing that title is a convenient excuse to play **Magic** all day.

When I played my first 'Grinder back in '97 I didn't win. I had a first round bye, and then I won one round, but then my dream ended. I didn't have much luck in the second one I tried, either, but I did have a lot of fun. I started playing **Magic** when we got to the site around 11pm and I just kept playing all night, all day, and part of the way into the next night. I did finally head for the hotel room after about 28 hours of **Magic**, which might sound like a lot except my teammate Andrew Cuneo kept on going for another 24. We got there Wednesday night and he didn't sleep until early Saturday morning.



*Dave Price, top 4 at the **Magic**
Invitational, Sydney '00*

They also held a national championship tournament that weekend, of course. Jon Finkel (who at the time had had some success on the Junior Pro Tour, but had yet to establish himself as a "master") qualified through a 'Grinder and made it all the way to the Top 8, but he fell one win short of making his first US National team. Justin Gary won the main event that year, but all the buzz I heard over in the main tournament hall where I was playing in Pro Tour Qualifiers was about David Price.

He ran the table in the Standard constructed portion of the event by pretty much single-handedly inventing the mono-red beatdown deck. "Dwarven Soldiers - he's playing with Dwarven Soldiers!" The 2/1 from *Fallen Empires* I asked myself as I overheard these descriptions? What's going on?! There had been mono-red decks before. The Sligh deck was around, introducing the world to the concept of a mana-curve, but it was primarily a control deck. That deck's goal was to disrupt your strategy with utility creatures like Orcish Artillery so it could hit you with Ironclaw Orcs ten times. Price's "Deadguy Red" strategy (which in that event included Lava Hounds) was single-mindedly devoted to dealing 20 damage as quickly and efficiently as possible. After *Tempest* came out that fall, Price's strategy got even better and he used it to win Pro Tour Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, I was knocked out of the last PTQ of the weekend by a guy named Elihu Feustel playing a Sands of Time / Equipoise combo-lock deck that I fell in love with. I built my own copy when I got home and tuned it for weeks until it finally won me my first invitation to a Pro Tour.

By the next US Nationals I was a well-established Pro Tour player and my team had some great tech that we were looking forward to unveiling at Nationals. Our Oath of Druids deck was really good and we didn't think many other players would have figured out how to use this seemingly innocuous looking enchantment from the brand new *Exodus* set. That's when I got to observe first-hand as the 'Grinders did what the 'Grinders do: several players who showed up with Oath decks won invitations with them and all the pros who were paying attention now knew how good that card actually was.

In the years since then the 'Grinders have just gotten better. 2002 US National Champion Eugene Harvey was completely anonymous when he entered one in 2001, but by the time that weekend was over not only had he qualified for Nationals, but he also won a spot on the national team and he's been one of the best Americans on the Pro Tour ever since.



Eugene Harvey, US National Champion '02

As I walked around downstairs and looked on as hundreds of players shuffled up their decks, I couldn't help but wonder which one of them would be the next big thing on Tour. I'm pretty sure several of this weekend's 'Grinder participants are going to win Pro Tours some day, but which ones? Who was running new tech hat



could turn the metagame on its ear? And who was the next Jon Finkel or Eugene Harvey? Only time will tell, I suppose, but it should definitely be fun to watch.

To read more coverage of US Nationals, including the final results of all the Meatgrinder tournaments as well as the top 8 decklists from the constructed 'Grinders, don't miss magicthegathering.com's live coverage of the event starting Friday, 10am PST.

Last Week's Poll Results

Do you plan to participate in the Selecting <i>Ninth Edition</i> promotion?		
yes	22971	86.3%
no	646	2.4%
maybe	3002	11.3%

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