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Famous Red Decks in Magic History



The origin of "Sligh" and more

Alex Shvartsman · Week In Review
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Red decks have a special place in the hearts of many a player. Whether it be a weenie strategy, land destruction, control decks or pure burn, most of us have given in to the allure of Mountains at one time or another.

The most successful and – I will venture – the most important red deck ever is Sligh. This name references a mono-red deck featuring small, fast creatures combined with direct damage. This archetype is especially key because it advanced the overall **Magic** strategy by making the concept of *mana curve* mainstream. Mana curve is an application of math to **Magic** where you attempt to maximize your chances of utilizing every point of mana that you are able to generate every single turn. That means playing with a certain number of creatures/spells that cost one mana, two mana, three mana, etc. The math an original Sligh deck was built upon breaks down approximately like this:

- 1 mana slot: 9-13
- 2 mana slot: 6-8
- 3 mana slot: 3-5
- 4 mana slot: 1-3
- X spell: 2-3
- Removal/Burn: 8-10

The deck is named after Paul Sligh, who played it at a Pro Tour Qualifier held in Atlanta on April 21, 1996. Although it is commonly told that he won the qualifier, Sligh actually finished in second place, losing to a Necropotence deck in the finals. The tournament organizer for this event made a post to the message boards during the week after the tournament commenting that "Up till now, I still do not understand how this deck got as far as it did, but it did. The math worked out, I guess!!!"

Indeed, Sligh's deck list featured a number of cards never before seen at the top tables in a competitive **Magic** event.

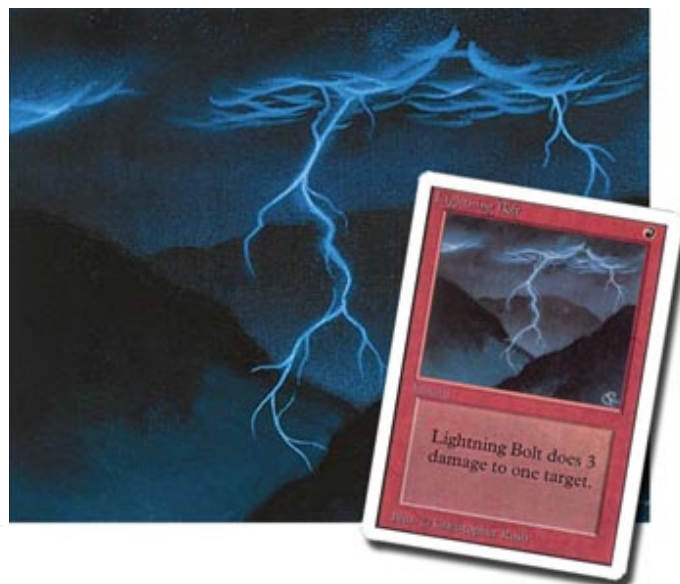
Paul Sligh		
Paul Sligh's Orcish Librarian Deck		
Main Deck		Sideboard
61 cards		
4 Strip Mine	1 Black Vise	1 Shatter
4 Mishra's Factory	1 Shatter	1 Detonate
2 Dwarven Ruins	1 Detonate	1 Fireball
13 Mountain	4 Lightning Bolt	1 Meekstone
23 land	4 Incinerate	1 Zuran Orb
	1 Fireball	3 Active Volcano
2 Dragon Whelp	1 Immolation	2 Serrated Arrows
2 Brothers of Fire	13 other spells	1 An-Zerrin Ruins
		4 Manabarbs

2 Orcish Artillery	
2 Orcish Cannoneers	
4 Ironclaw Orcs	
3 Dwarven Lieutenant	
2 Orcish Librarian	
4 Brass Man	
2 Dwarven Trader	
2 Goblins of the Flarg	
25 creatures	

15 sideboard cards

One of the things to remember looking at this deck list is that the format it was played in required you to build the deck using 5 cards from every legal expansion set (this was the format used in Pro Tour 1 and the subsequent round of qualifiers for Pro Tour 2).

Although the deck ended up named after Paul Sligh, it was designed by Jay Schneider – a popular Internet writer and deck builder from the Atlanta area at the time. Schneider has designed a number of high profile decks and always strives to find innovative strategies whenever a new expansion set is released, but Sligh is by far its greatest creation.



Despite the deck's "goofy" appearance, players quickly realized that Paul Sligh and Jay Schneider were on to something here. Shortly thereafter various Sligh builds were running rampant in the metagame. Players would even adjust their Sligh decks for the mirror, using **Keeper of Kookus!** Others would play 3 to 5-color Sligh, splashing for powerful off-color cards such as **Armageddon** and **Derelor**.



While Sligh decks continued to exist in the metagame from 1996 on, it was the introduction of *Tempest* that really kicked the archetype into high gear. **Cursed Scroll**, **Jackal Pup** and **Mogg Fanatic** were all obvious additions to the deck. **Wasteland** did not hurt either. In fact, there were so many good red cards in *Tempest* that Sligh became by far the most popular and the most powerful deck in that Block format.

Dave Price, already a popular player and writer for *The Dojo* and *Duelist* magazine, earned his Pro Tour championship title using this strategy in Los Angeles. A huge percentage of the field was running

Mountains, but he beat out the competition. It's important to note that around this time was when the deck typically referred to as "Sligh" shifted from a more board controlling strategy to a much more focused beatdown approach.

Dave Price	
Sligh - 1998	
Main Deck	Sideboard

60 cards			
16 Mountain	4 Cursed Scroll	1 Apocalypse	
4 Wasteland	4 Giant Strength	2 Jinxed Idol	
<hr/>			
20 land	4 Kindle	1 Rathi Dragon	
4 Canyon Wildcat	2 Scalding Tongues	2 Scalding Tongues	
4 Fireslinger	<hr/>		
4 Jackal Pup	14 other spells	4 Shatter	
4 Mogg Conscripts		4 Stone Rain	
4 Mogg Fanatic		1 Torture Chamber	
4 Mogg Raider		<hr/>	
2 Rathi Dragon		15 sideboard cards	
<hr/>			
26 creatures			

Sligh once again returned to the premier event spotlight in the round of Extended qualifiers in 2000. Seth Burn, a New York deck builder with a weak spot for Mountains, has done much to advance the archetype. His most successful Sligh build came in this format, and like Jay Schneider he was not the one to directly benefit. Seth gave me his deck list for Grand Prix: Seattle where I made top 8 with it, losing to the eventual champion Bob Maher. I then earned two more GP top 8's with the deck that season and it could have become the most successful archetype of the format if NecroDonate had not reared its ugly head right around that time.



Seth Burn (bottom left) GP NJ '02

Alex Shvartsman Sligh – 2000			
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard	
3 Ghitu Encampment	4 Cursed Scroll	3 Anarchy	
17 Mountain	4 Fireblast	4 Keldon Vandals	
4 Wasteland	3 Hammer of Bogardan	1 Price of Progress	
<hr/>			
24 land	4 Incinerate	4 Pyroblast	
3 Ball Lightning	3 Price of Progress	3 Spellshock	
4 Jackal Pup	4 Shock	<hr/>	
4 Mogg Fanatic	22 other spells	15 sideboard cards	
3 Viashino Sandstalker			
<hr/>			
14 creatures			



Benafel, US Nationals '00

While Sligh continues to be the dominant way of building red decks, other strategies have certainly come up, and done well, over the years. Perhaps the closest to the Sligh archetype yet different enough to discuss separately is Ponza. Designed, among others, by magicthegathering.com columnist Adrian Sullivan, Ponza combines fast creature beatdown with land destruction instead of heavy burn. Some builds rely heavily on weenie creatures while others play very few creatures in favor of a more controllish strategy. One of the most successful such builds was played by Chris Benafel to a second place finish at U.S. Nationals in 2000.

Chris Benafel

Ponza - 2000

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Rishadan Port	3 Cave-In	4 Boil
3 Dust Bowl	3 Earthquake	4 Cursed Totem
4 Ghitu Encampment	3 Fire Diamond	1 Earthquake
14 Mountain	3 Hammer of Bogardan	2 Tectonic Break
25 land	4 Pillage	4 Thran Foundry
4 Avalanche Riders	4 Seal of Fire	15 sideboard cards
3 Masticore	2 Shock	
7 creatures	4 Stone Rain	
	2 Tectonic Break	
	28 other spells	

Another historically important mono-red build is "Red Deck Wins" (also referred to as RDW, Red Deck Wins 2000, RDW2K, you name it) by John Ormerod. Ormerod is one of the top deck designers in the game and has worked with many of the game's best-known players, including Zvi Mowshowitz and Kai Budde. He's also enjoyed recent success by winning this year's England National Championships. His Red Deck Wins creation was played by Dan Paskins in the 2000 English National Championship. It went on to show up at the top of the standings both at the European Championships and Worlds that year. Sigurd Eskeland made top 16 at Euros with this build.



Sigurd Eskeland

Red Deck Wins – 2000

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
16 Mountain	4 Hammer of Bogardan	2 Viashino Heretic
3 Ghitu Encampment	2 Lightning Blast	2 Lightning Dragon
4 Rishadan Port	3 Rhystic Lightning	1 Pillage
23 land	4 Shock	2 Thran Foundry
4 Goblin Patrol	4 Seal of Fire	2 Fault Line
1 Kris Mage	3 Pillage	3 Scald
4 Goblin Cadets	4 Arc Lightning	3 Cave-In
2 Viashino Cutthroat	2 Parch	15 sideboard cards
11 creatures	26 other spells	

From that year on, Dan Paskins (who also wrote [this week's feature article](#) on [magicthegathering.com](#)) became the champion of the Red Deck Wins strategy. He has been updating the deck year after year, always trying to find the best way to win with Mountains.

It wasn't Dan, but Wolfgang Eder who made the most recent important addition to the strategy of Mountains. He splashed Patriarch's Bidding into his goblin deck at GP Antwerp. Eder did not make a splash however, finishing a respectable top 16, but a bunch of Japanese players took notice. They brought the archetype to the world's attention by using it to dominate at Grand Prix: Bangkok a few weeks later. Goblin Bidding was born and it remains one of the top archetypes to this day. In fact, it helped Olivier Ruel win [French Nationals](#) this past weekend. (For more on the history of Goblines decks specifically, don't miss BDM's great article Wednesday, "[Gob-volution](#)".

Olivier Ruel

Goblin Bidding – 2004

60 cards

13 Mountain
3 Swamp
3 City of Brass
4 Bloodstained Mire

23 land

4 Skirk Prospector
4 Goblin Sledder
4 Goblin Sharpshooter
4 Goblin Warchief
4 Siege-Gang Commander
3 Clickslither
4 Sparksmith
4 Goblin Piledriver

31 creatures

4 Electrostatic Bolt
2 Patriarch's Bidding
6 other spells

French players clearly knew this would be Red Week! Ruel won the tournament with Goblin Bidding, defeating Nassif's mono-red land destruction (which you might call Ponza) in the finals. They are joined on the national team by Alexandre Peset, who also played Goblin Bidding. A total of 6 of the top 8 decks in that tournament were mono- or primarily red!

It seems that it has become an established pattern in **Magic**. Formats change, individual cards change, but every year or so a mono-red deck shows up to wreak havoc on what is often thought of as a very established, no-surprises metagame. Will some kind of a red deck show up to dominate at the World Championships this year? If so, will it be one of the currently popular designs, or is there something completely new out there, waiting to be discovered? Whatever the players end up bringing to this year's Worlds, you can bet there will be plenty of Mountains in the Standard portion of that event!



Ruel, Nassif, and Peset

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