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A Skull in the Snow

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The Week That Was
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This was a very exciting week for the **Magic** community as a new era of the game was kicked off when the first Professional tournament in the history of the game took place this past weekend. Wizards of the Coast was out in New York in full force and took over downtown Manhattan's Puck Building to oversee players from eighteen different countries competing for a staggering and unprecedented \$60,000 in cash and scholarships.

The format for the tournament mandated that players use a minimum of five cards each from *4th Edition*, *Chronicles*, *The Dark*, *Fallen Empires*, *Ice Age*, and *Homelands*. In the weeks leading up to the event there was quite a bit of speculation about which cards from the various sets would make it into people's decks but the only card that anyone was talking about on Saturday morning was **Snow-Covered Island**—the island of Manhattan, to be precise.



From left, Alexander Blumke, Mu Luen Wang, Mark Justice, and Henry Stern on the Staten Island Ferry

The city was hit with yet another snowstorm over the weekend, causing interminable delays and obstacles for anyone trying to get to the tournament site. It didn't matter if you were coming in by plane, train, or automobile—or even trudging downtown from Neutral Ground—it was almost impossible to make it to the tournament site on time. The tournament was held up until noon (four hours later than the original posted starting time) and almost everyone who phoned in was able to get there and play for the largest cash pool in the game's short history.

There were plenty of Neutral Ground and New York **Magic** regulars in attendance and they posted good results. Since the criteria for playing in the tournament was to have successfully called in and be put on a list, you may be wondering whether or not me and the guys from Neutral Ground played. We got together shortly before the start time to call in and debated whether or not we were going to play. In the end we decided to make ourselves available to assist in judging at the event and to gather information about the future of tournament **Magic**. (Of course, when Nathan Wildgrube made the Top 16 with a blue-white control deck that I had a strong hand in designing, I wished I had made the call.)

Top 8 in each bracket:

Seniors

- 1 Michael Loconto Grafton, MA
- 2 Bertand Lestrée France
- 3-4 Leon Lindbäck Stockholm, Sweden
- 3-4 Preston Poulter Irvine, CA
- 5-8 George Baxter Dallas, TX
- 5-8 Mark Justice West Valley City, UT
- 5-8 Sean Regnier Manchester, NH
- 5-8 Eric Tam Toronto, CAN

Juniors

- 1 Graham Tatomer Santa Barbara, CA
- 2 Aaron Kline Linden, NJ
- 3-4 Maxwell Suver Seattle, WA
- 3-4 Ross Sclafani Brooklyn, NY
- 5-8 Brendon Herzog Portland, OR
- 5-8 Jon Finkel Sanwood, NJ
- 5-8 Jason Norment Hackettstown, NJ
- 5-8 Nate Foure Devon, PA

Ice Age cards in the Top 8

The set that generated the most talk about what five cards would see play had to be the disappointing most recent expansion. The decisions regarding what *Homelands* cards to play were not very difficult and most players seemed to opt for four copies of **Serrated Arrows** and one **Wizards' School** to make their quota. There were a handful of **Spectral Bears** and a smattering of **Abbey Gargoyles**—there was even an **Apocalypse Chime** in one of the top deck's sideboard—but there was nothing that came as a great surprise.

The more interesting decisions were definitely reserved for the *Ice Age* component of the decks—a wide variety of cards were played from that expansion. The winning deck featured such *Ice Age* staples as **Adarkar Wastes**, **Icy Manipulator**, **Zuran Orb**, and **Swords to Plowshares**, but what really surprised people was Michael Loconto's inclusion of **Hallowed Ground** in his blue-white control deck. With two white mana available, he could protect his Mishra's Factories from enemy **Swords** and **Strip Mines**. Loconto also included **Deflection** and **Blinking Spirits**—and let us not overlook the **Hydroblasts** and **Jester's Cap** in his sideboard.

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Michael Loconto

Blue-White Control - Pro Tour New York Winner



Main Deck

63 cards

1 Wizards' School
4 Adarkar Wastes
4 Island
4 Mishra's Factory
7 Plains
1 Ruins of Trokair
1 Strip Mine
2 Svyelunite Temple

24 lands

2 Blinking Spirit

2 creatures

1 Circle of Protection: Red
1 Feldon's Cane
2 Fountain of Youth
2 Icy Manipulator
1 Ivory Tower
1 Jayemdae Tome
3 Millstone
1 Zuran Orb
1 Balance
4 Disenchant
2 Hallowed Ground
2 Land Tax
4 Swords to Plowshares
4 Wrath of God
2 Control Magic
4 Counterspell
1 Deflection
1 Recall

37 other spells

Sideboard

2 Aeolipile
1 Jester's Cap
2 Serrated Arrows
1 Divine Offering
1 Control Magic
2 Hydroblast
2 Sea Sprite
2 Steal Artifact

13 sideboard cards

Loconto played a three-game match against France's Bertrand Lestrée and his ErnhamGeddon deck. They were scheduled to play a best-of-five match, but after splitting the first two they agreed to truncate the series to a more traditional best of three (and split the prize money evenly) in the interest of time—these were not what you would call speedy games. It was vindication for the American player.

"The final match was exciting for me because it was my chance to get revenge against Bertrand. He was the only player to beat me on Saturday in the qualifying rounds," said Loconto. He went on to explain how he won. "With my deck, which is different from a lot of decks, I let my opponents get out whatever they want and I bust it up later. I take care of them with *Wrath of Gods* or *Swords to Plowshares*."

This was the third time in a row at a major **Magic** event that a French player made the finals only to lose, prompting Wizards of the Coast president Peter Adkison to ponder "will the French ever win a major

title?"

Lestrée didn't startle anyone with his *Ice Age* choices. Preston Poulter made the Top 4 with a similar deck with *Essence Filter* in his sideboard—about as startling a deck choice as you can make for an ErnhamGeddon deck. Even then it was not an earth-shattering development on par with one of the most reviled cards in the *Ice Age* expansion—at the core of a deck that took third place in the tournament!



If you wanted to find a startling deck in the Top 8, look no further than Leon Lindbäck's all-black creation that was running cards that had been previously deemed unplayable—*Necropotence* and *Demonic Consultation*. I was working upstairs as part of the judging crew for the Junior Pro Tour and I kept hearing stories about Leon's deck. They started as derisive snickers early on Day One:

"There is some guy playing with *Necropotence* downstairs—he just paid five life to draw five cards. I don't know how he won."

"That guy just cast *Demonic Consultation* and removed half his library from the game. What is he thinking?"

As the weekend wore on, the tone of the stories changed as people realized that their first impressions of both cards may have been incorrect. (To be fair, Neutral Ground employee Ben "Poker Face" Bleiweiss has been playing a *Necropotence/Zur's Weiriding* deck for

just about forever, but it is not going to be confused with Lindbäck's deck anytime soon.) Here's just how quickly popular thinking can change:

"Good lord. That guy just cast *Dark Ritual* and *Demonic Consultation* for *Hymn to Tourach* and Hymned his opponent. He had another Hymn for turn two and then played that enchantment and drew seven new cards on turn three! I think his deck might be good." I don't know who pulled that off but I would definitely nominate that as the best play I have heard all week!

Here is the deck Lindbäck used to tie for third place. I think you might be seeing more of it in the future. Top-16 competitor Sean Fleichman lost to Lindbäck in the first elimination round after the cut to sixteen. Sean had seen the power of *Necropotence* during the qualifying rounds, but in the elimination bracket it all came down to the aforementioned *Hymn to Tourach*. "He Hymned me a lot and I lost game three with no hand and no permanents in play," groaned Fleichman.



Leon Lindbäck

Mono-Black - Pro Tour New York Third Place Tie

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
2 Ebon Stronghold	1 Ivory Tower	1 City of Brass
4 Strip Mine	1 Jalum Tome	1 Safe Haven
17 Swamp	2 Nevinyrral's Disk	1 Apocalypse Chime
23 lands	2 Serrated Arrows	1 Feldon's Cane
	1 Zuran Orb	1 Jalum Tome
3 Knight of Stromgald	1 Dance of the Dead	1 Meekstone
4 Hypnotic Specter	1 Dark Banishing	2 Nevinyrral's Disk
4 Order of the Ebon Hand	4 Dark Ritual	3 The Rack
11 creatures	4 Drain Life	1 Serrated Arrows
	4 Hymn to Tourach	1 Ashes to Ashes
	4 Necropotence	1 Stromgald Cabal
	1 Soul Burn	1 Torture
	26 other spells	15 sideboard cards

Upstairs/Downstairs

While Leon Lindbäck was finishing in third place on the ground floor of the Puck Building, the Necropotence deck was also making quite an impression in the Junior community upstairs in the hands of Graham Tatomer. Graham earned himself \$12,000 toward a college education when he defeated New Jersey's Aaron Kline and his White Weenie deck in the finals.

I had a heck of a time prying this decklist loose and I don't doubt that I will get flack for posting it on this newsgroup but it seems too significant a deck to overlook. I wasn't even able to get the sideboard but the main deck that Tatomer used to win was as follows:

Main Deck 60 cards		
4 Mishra's Factory	4 Hypnotic Specter	4 Dark Ritual
18 Swamp	4 Order of the Ebon Hand	3 Demonic Consultation
2 Strip Mine	3 Sengir Vampire	4 Hymn to Tourach
24 lands	11 creatures	4 Icequake
		3 Necropotence
		2 Paralyze
		1 Ivory Tower
		3 Nevinyrral's Disk
		1 Zuran Orb
		25 other spells

The big difference between the Necropotence decks in the senior and junior division seems to be how they approached dispatching an opponent. While both players had staple black creatures such as **Hypnotic Specters** and pump knights, Lindbäck also had four **Drain Life** and a **Soul Burn** that could be used to either kill creatures or finish off an opponent. "This deck is a really fast deck with a lot of direct damage. It's very offensive, you know—damage, damage, damage. The objective, of course, is to gain many cards," Lindbäck explained after the event.

Both players had **Nevinyrral's Disks** to serve as everything removal—everything including their own **Necropotences**. Since you no longer get to draw a traditional card with the enchantment in play you are no longer able to draw cards once you hit one life. The Disk resets the board and the deck can resume card-drawing even at one life.

Bad Beat of the Week

Neutral Ground regular Ross Sclafani built a deck for himself, Steve O'Mahoney-Schwartz, and Dan O'Mahoney-Schwartz to play in the tournament. It was an interesting red-white deck with tons of good cards. Ross, who has a flare for the dramatic, decided to enhance his cards with a fat, black permanent marker. He drew pictures and wrote quotes on almost every card in his deck. He wrote "Mountain" on his Plains and "Plains" on his Mountains. His **Orgg** taunted opponents with, "You're not going to college!" and his man-lands were labeled "Mishra's Fat Trees."

The deck performed very well for him but midway through the qualifying rounds the judges ruled that his cards were unsporting and if he wanted to continue playing in the tournament he would have to replace his entire deck with cards that were not defaced. Ross was in contention for the Top 16 at that point and had to scramble to build an entirely new copy of his deck—a feat he managed with just seconds before the start of a round. He went on to

finish in a tie for third place in the Junior division despite his harrowing quest to replace his deck between rounds.

Sources tell me there is going to be an addition to the Duelist Convocation rules to forbid the defacing of **Magic** cards in tournament decks. You have been warned!



Deck of the week

The deck that Ross, Steve, and Dan played seemed like an appropriate choice for deck of the week since it featured **Snow-Covered Mountains** and **Snow-Covered Plains** as its basic lands. Ross discovered a synergy between **Land Tax**, snow-covered lands (which can be searched up as basic lands under **Land Tax**), and the fog machines that were **Sunstone** and **Glacial Crevasses**. The deck could fog early creature damage, which would power-up the **Land Tax** and thin his deck. All of this would make it easier for him to find his **Wraths**, **Earthquakes**, and spot removal and he would eventually win with a **Serra Angel** or an **Orgg**.

Ross Sclafani		
Fog Machine - Pro Tour New York Juniors Third Place Tie		
Main Deck 60 cards		
4 Mishra's Factory	2 Orgg	4 Swords to Plowshares
5 Snow-Covered Mountain	2 Serra Angel	1 Aeolipile
4 Strip Mine	4 creatures	1 Feldon's Cane
1 City of Brass		4 Lightning Bolt
6 Snow-Covered Plains		3 Wrath of God
20 lands		4 Serrated Arrows
		3 Land Tax
		2 Glacial Crevasses
		2 Sunstone
		2 Millstone
		3 Disenchant
		1 Dust to Dust
		2 Earthquake
		4 Fellwar Stone
		36 other spells

Ross, Steve, and Dan were extremely secretive about their lists and this is as close an approximation as I could come up with. Once again the sideboard was even more closely guarded. It appears that Wizards is going to announce that future Professional Tournaments will have qualifier tournaments preceding them as opposed to having participants make a phone call. The format for upcoming qualifiers will be the same format as this past weekend's event. You can understand why people are guarding their decklists so closely.

Decks for everyone

Everyone will have access to the Top 8 decks from the Senior circuit—maybe even before the new qualifier tournaments are announced. I was told by a high-ranking source at Wizards of the Coast that there will be a commemorative set of the Top 8 decks issued for sale after the event. It was unclear whether it would include tournament legal cards, which from a retailer and collector perspective could be a disaster. Does anyone remember *Chronicles*? Here's hoping that the set is something akin to the square-cornered International and Collector's sets that were issued after the initial release of **Magic**.

Wish you were there?

It was great weekend if you love **Magic**, and not just for watching the first in a series of events that will help define the top players in the **Magic** community. There were artists signing cards and selling artwork, Richard Garfield was on hand and graciously talked to the endless procession of the game's fans that approached him, and there were countless Wizards of the Coast and Duelist Convocation staff on hand to talk to about how the game works and what the future holds.

There were also cameramen on hand shooting footage all weekend long. Apparently, in addition to the Top 8 decks, they will also be producing a commemorative video of the event. There was in-depth video coverage of the Top 16 with commentary by Mark Rosewater and I'm sure you'll want to see some of the **Magic's** finest players playing for the largest stakes in the game's short existence.

Upcoming events

Wizards did announce the schedule for their upcoming tournaments and it is included below. If this tournament series catches on you will likely see me writing a lot more about it in these forums. See you then!

1996 Pro Tour Schedule

Location	Date	Purse
Long Beach, Calif.	May 3-5	\$100,000
Columbus, Ohio	July 4-7	\$125,000
Seattle, Wash.	August 17-18	\$200,000
Atlanta, Georgia	October	\$175,000
Dallas, Texas	November	\$190,000

That is a lot of money. There was a lot of excitement among the players as they fantasized about the idea of playing **Magic** for a living. Michael Loconto has already made himself a fair chunk of change so far. I think it is fair to say that he will be a force on the tournament **Magic** scene and should expect to be cashing a few more checks with the Wizards logo on them this year.

Don't count out the Juniors either. More than a few of them have dominated the local scene here on the East Coast. They go toe to toe with the older players and do more than just hold their own. There are even a few people who believe in the controversial position that some of these kids might be better than the adult segment of the player population. Sure, Jon Finkel and Steve and Dan O'Mahoney-Schwartz have been tearing it up lately, but does anyone think that these guys can supplant the likes of such New York **Magic** luminaries as Steve Jones, Rick Cripe, Tony Parodi, Chad Hastaba, and Sean Fleischman?

Well, only time will tell.

*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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