

On The Road To The World Title

Monty Ashley

Monday, August 23, 2004



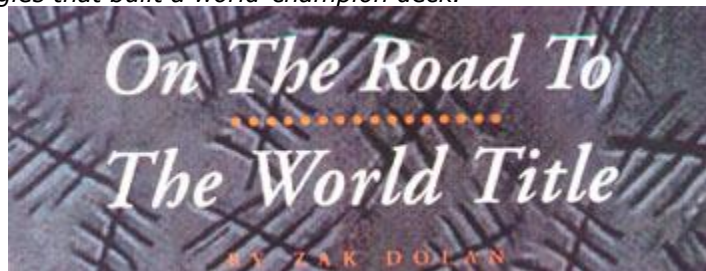
- [Monty Ashley Archive](#)

Currently in his first semester as a graduate student at Stanford University, Zak Dolan has had an eventful year. At GenCon™ this August, Zak beat Bertrand Lestreé, the French National champion, in the finals of the **Magic: the Gathering** World Title tournament. Here he discusses his introduction to the game and the development of the strategies that built a world-champion deck.

On The Road To The World Title

by Zak Dolan

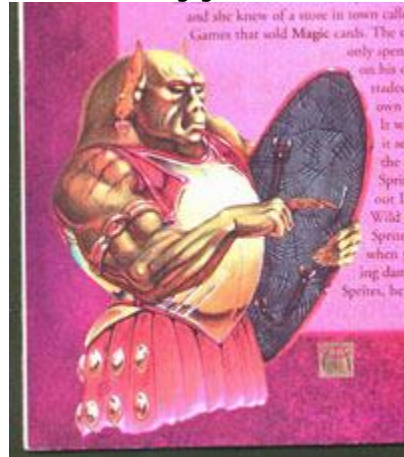
Magic Hits Home



I was first introduced to *Magic: the Gathering*™ in late 1992 at Eclipse Books and Games in Rolla, Missouri. Shirley, the owner, said that there was a hot new game out that I might like. Paul, a friend of mine, was in the store at the time, so I asked him if I could play with his cards to see if I liked the game. We split his deck in half and played a game. I loved it.

I immediately bought eight booster packs and remember getting a [Force of Nature](#), because no one had seen a creature that big before. I did a little trading out of my extra cards, and was proud to get a [Shatter](#) and one of each of the [Circles of Protection](#). Fortunately, I was only trading off duplicates for things I didn't have, or I probably would have been murdered in trading.

The next few weeks, I played **Magic**™ with my fraternity brothers in Pi Kappa Phi. Since I was the only one who had **Magic** cards, we took my stack of about two hundred cards, shuffled them, and divided them into decks randomly. With all five colors and no deck-tuning, this made for some long and interesting games. This all changed, however, when I went home for Christmas.



In Idaho Falls, I introduced my sister, Meg, to the game, and she knew of a store in town called Games, Games, Games that sold **Magic** cards. The owner, Kent, had only spent about four dollars on his own cards but had traded them to make his own deck: [Scryb Sprites](#). It was solid green, and it seemed like a third of the cards were [Scryb Sprites](#). He would get out [Llanowar Elves](#), [Wild Growths](#), and [Scryb Sprites](#) right away, and when you were busy taking damage from the Sprites, he would be putting out more serious cards, like walls, [Giant Spiders](#), and [Craw Wurms](#). If you made the mistake of attacking with everything, he would [Fog](#) and then counterattack. If he got low on life, he would use the [Llanowar Elves](#) and the [Wild Growths](#) to cast a huge [Stream of Life](#). After watching his deck, I started to like green.

Another person in the store, Mark, had a suitcase full of cards. Out of about a dozen decks, I played against his deck of [Plague Rats](#) and his deck of [Lured Regenerating Thicket Basilisks](#). This was about the time that *Arabian Nights™* came out, so I bought a bunch of them and started using them in my deck.

I began to learn that the different cards and colors all had peculiar personalities, and each had its own appeal. My sister was fond of blue, especially [Flying Men](#). I still liked green, especially [Wyluli Wolves](#) and [Naf's Asps](#). I made a deck of nothing but Wolves and Asps and had fun with that for a while. When my sister played blue against me, she would win, but when I tried to play blue against her, I would lose. Obviously, I had not figured out how to use blue effectively.

I returned to Rolla after Christmas with a rudimentary knowledge of deck construction, namely that it's okay to use only one or two colors in your deck, and that a 40-card deck works as well or better than a 150-card deck. I had about four decks put together at the time, so I looked up my friend Paul and invited to play the best three out of five duels with an ante each duel. He was playing about 150 cards, all five colors, with a lot of good rare cards. He never did more than 3 points of damage to me in any of our games, and I quickly won three cards from him, including a [Veteran Bodyguard](#). After I traded the Bodyguard back to him for some rare cards I needed, he said, "You've got to play my friend Dave for ante!" I think he wanted to see Dave get creamed.

Dave was very proud of his deck since he had traded for all the best rare cards in the town. We agreed to play the best two out of three sets, with each set being the best three out of five duels. In one of the games, he got me down to 16 life, which by this time particularly impressed Paul. I won six cards in a very short time. From that day on, deck construction changed drastically in Rolla.

Checking Out The Competition

I tried to get one of every card, and this eventually put me in search of dual lands. Since a couple of people I traded with had insisted on trading only dual lands for dual lands, I took every opportunity to pick up extra dual lands. Because of this, I ended up with several [Bayous](#), so I decided to make a green/black deck. I put all my favorite green and black cards in the deck: [Gaea's Liege](#), [Thicket Basilisk](#), [Ley Druid](#), [Birds of Paradise](#), [Wall of Brambles](#), [Lure](#), [Instill Energy](#), [Regrowth](#), [Tranquility](#), [Demonic Hordes](#), [Sengir Vampire](#), [Hypnotic Specter](#), [Royal Assassin](#), [Nettling Imp](#), [Black Knight](#), [Demonic Tutor](#), [Will-o-the-Wisp](#), [Dark Ritual](#), [Terror](#), [Unholy Strength](#), and others. I liked playing with only one of each non-land card because it gave my deck variety.

I played the deck against a lot of different people and afterwards I would usually ask them how I could improve my deck. Once, when I was playing Paul, he suggested that I consider adding a third color, blue, reasoning that I could then [Clone](#) or [Doppelgang](#) the best monster on the board and have two or more [Gaea's Lieges](#) in play at once. He also pointed out that I was one of the few people who had enough split lands to make this work.

I liked his suggestion, and added blue cards to my deck. I put in [Vesuvan Doppelganger](#), [Clone](#), [Prodigal Sorcerer](#), [Ancestral Recall](#), [Time Walk](#), [Timetwister](#), [Counterspell](#), and [Old Man of the Sea](#). I also had a [Mox Sapphire](#), a [Mox Jet](#), a [Mox Emerald](#), a [Sol Ring](#), and a [Black Lotus](#) in the deck. I played a game with Clint in which I brought out a [Sengir Vampire](#) on my second turn. He put a [Control Magic](#) on it his second turn and proceeded to pummel me with my own creature. Needless to say, after that I added [Control Magic](#) to my deck. I referred to the deck affectionately as my "tournament" deck, even though I had yet to play in a tournament.

About this time, I decided that I wanted a second good deck. A few weeks before, Paul had made a huge trade with me to get the only Stasis in the area. He decided to sell me his collection, and I asked him why he traded so hard to get the [Stasis](#). He said he was going to build a deck with four [Serra Angels](#), four [Clones](#), and four [Vesuvan Doppelgangers](#). This appealed to me, although I didn't have enough Doppelgangers, and I didn't think I would need four of everything. While I was working on this deck, I also discovered the [Deckmaster™](#) newsgroup on Internet and saw a post on "killer combinations." Incorporating these into the deck I was building seemed like a good idea, so I put together a deck based on the [Instill Energy/Stasis](#) concept and started testing it out.

Since I was taking a very light course load in the spring of 1994, I spent a lot of nights playing **Magic** with a group of about twenty people at a dormitory. This gave me a lot of different deck construction strategies. Each time I played, I would not only look at the other person's deck to see what strategy it was built around, but I also asked for suggestions on improving my deck. By doing this, my deck improved steadily.



The Road Back To Rolla

My first attempt at tournament play was in a blind deck tournament at CogCon I, a convention being held in Rolla. Each participant had one starter and four boosters and had to use 100 of the 120 cards to build a deck. Trading time was very limited, and you were only allowed to trade with your opponent for the next match. I placed third in the tournament. Looking through a lot of the decks afterward, I realized that the two people in the finals were the only ones who had eliminated a color completely from their decks.

This reinforced what I had believed earlier: decks work better when you have the correct mana for your spells. For a 60-card deck, with twenty to twenty-three lands, you should have a minimum of nine lands/Moxes that produce each of the colors in your deck. For a deck with one or two colors, this is relatively easy. Nine lands of each color does the trick, and this leaves you with two to five miscellaneous "lands" for producing colorless mana ([Desert](#), [Library of Alexandria](#), [Mishra's Factory](#), [Strip Mine](#), the Urza lands, and so on). For a three-color deck, four of each of the three appropriate dual lands and one of each Mox will give you nine, leaving room for a few special lands. For a four-color deck, two of each of the six appropriate dual lands, two [Cities of Brass](#), and one of each Mox is sufficient and still leaves space for some miscellaneous lands. For a five color deck, one of each Mox works quite nicely. You can also add [Birds of Paradise](#) or a [Fellwar Stone](#) to a multi-color deck to improve the chances of getting the mana you need. If you can't find Moxes, you can substitute basic lands and add a [Fastbond](#) to your deck. Similarly, if you can't find a [Black Lotus](#), try using [Dark Rituals](#) instead.

In addition to teaching me about getting the right mana for spells, CogCon showed me the importance of having a good sideboard. After the blind deck tournament, there was also a regular **Magic** tournament, and this gave me a chance to try out the deck I had built and tested. Clint played with his version of my old black/green/blue "tournament" deck. He knew Jeremy was playing a vicious, all-white deck, so he put three Gloods in his sideboard. During the semi-finals, he called me

over to see the situation he had created. He had all three [Glooms](#) out versus Jeremy, and it wasn't pretty. In the end, I won the tournament and was declared Arch Mage of CogCon. At the time, I thought that Clint had a slightly better deck than mine, so I asked him about the differences between our decks. He said that the major difference between our decks was in spells that affect creatures. His idea was that you didn't have to waste time making your own creatures stronger or unblockable with enchantments if your opponent didn't have any creatures at all. If you can destroy or steal all of your opponent's creatures using [Terror](#), [Control Magic](#), and similar methods, then not only can your creatures walk through unblocked, but you can't be counterattacked when your creatures are taped. Even if you only have a single [Scryb Sprite](#) on the board, you will eventually win.



Around this time, I built my own version of the [Plague Rats](#) deck. Through a lot of playing, I had refined it to be about the best deck of this kind I could come up with. The deck has fourteen Swamps, fourteen [Plague Rats](#), seven [Dark Rituals](#), a [Black Vise](#), a [Pestilence](#), a [Sinkhole](#), a [Terror](#), a [Howl from Beyond](#), a [Drain Life](#), and an [Unholy Strength](#). Everything but the [Black Vise](#) is common, and everything but the [Sinkhole](#) is still in print (and it can be replaced by [Blight](#) or [Strip Mine](#)). Even though it has several obvious weaknesses, such as a lack of flying defenses and enchantment defenses, this deck still wins a lot of games through speed. I use this deck to test out my tournament decks for speed, usually playing with my friend Kyle. He particularly likes the [Plague Rat](#) deck, and I made him his own copy of it. Together, we took on Kasey and Aaron in a two-on-two game. Aaron used [Glasses of Urza](#), looked in our hands, and promptly decided to call it quits. I can't say as I blame him; decks that use very limited strategies with only a few kinds of cards aren't very much fun after a while.

By this time, I had come to some other conclusions about deck construction strategy. I figured out that the more colors you have in your deck, the harder it is to sideboard against. After seeing land destruction decks in play, I decided that I wanted to be able to get mana not just from lands, but also from creatures and artifacts. After watching Clint ruthlessly demolish creatures with his deck, I decided that I didn't want to rely solely on creatures for dealing damage. I also realized that if I consistently drew more cards, had more mana, and took more turns than my opponent, I could usually win no matter what else was in my deck.

Principles To Win By

After playing in the MichCon **Magic** Tournament in Detroit, Michigan (I placed first out of twenty-four people), and the Rider's Hobby **Magic** Tournament in Ann Arbor, Michigan (I placed first out of 125 people), I realized that the number one cause of losses in tournaments was lack of speed. Speed became one of four principles that I would build my GenCon deck around.

There are essentially two ways to achieve speed: increasing your own speed and decreasing your opponent's. An example of the first method would be using [Wild Growth](#) to speed up your mana, [Jayemdae Tome](#) to speed up your cards, and [Time Walk](#) to take extra turns. Examples of the second method would be using [Stone Rain](#) to slow down your opponent's mana, [Icy Manipulating](#) a [Howling Mine](#) to slow down your opponent's cards, and using [Mana Short](#) to virtually eliminate one of your opponent's turns.

When I help people develop winning decks, I review the strategies of speed with them. How many cards are there in the game that let a player draw more cards? How much more mana can a player get on the first turn? (Or, what cards should you have in your deck to get mana quickly?) How many turns can a player take in a row with a tournament-legal deck? How many ways can a player kill someone on the first turn?

Most people can only come up with one or two ways to kill their opponent on the first turn. They also tend to forget several things that let a player draw more cards, get more mana, or take extra turns. Often they exclude cards because of apparent drawbacks. When considering the drawbacks, I find that speed is sometimes worth the sacrifice.



The second principle I used in deck design was killer combinations. [Royal Assassin](#) with [Icy Manipulator](#) is one example. I didn't want to depend too heavily on any one killer combination, so I tried to put several different ones in each deck. That way, if my opponent had a way around one of my killer combos, another one would get him. I also tried to use combinations in which any of the cards in the combo could stand on their own as a good card; [Royal Assassin](#) and [Icy Manipulator](#) both do well by themselves.

The third principle I used in deck construction was flexibility. If the only cards in your deck are [Plague Rats](#), [Swamps](#), and [Dark Rituals](#), it's easy to find a way to beat it. If you have mostly unique cards, however, it can be a lot harder. How many cards of each kind is the right number? I prefer to minimize the number of useless cards in my hand at any one time. This means I want only cards I can cast, cards that will work no matter what deck my opponent has, and cards that aren't redundant. For example, a second [Sengir Vampire](#) is usually every bit as useful as the first, but a second [Titania's Song](#) is relatively pointless once there is already one in play. On the other hand, if it's critical for your deck design to find [Titania's Song](#) in a hurry, you might want to put in a second one, or better yet, put in a [Demonic Tutor](#). In addition, relying on cards with narrow applications can be dangerous. [Flashfires](#), for example, will have no effect if your opponent has no plains. I also find that the most frequent mistake in building decks is using more than the minimum number of cards. This dilutes your powerful cards so that you draw them less frequently. Which cards are the most powerful? The easiest way to determine which cards are powerful is to look at the Duelists' Convocation restricted list. You can construct a killer deck by using multiples of these cards. If they are that powerful, it only makes sense to consider putting one of them in your deck.

The fourth principle of deck construction I used was something I call a "lock." When you have achieved a lock, you are in complete control of the game: no matter what card your opponent draws, no matter what deck she is playing, she can't do anything. This position is even stronger when it doesn't matter how many people are in the game. An example of a lock would be when you have [Living Plane](#), [Kismet](#), [Energy Flux](#), [Tabernacle at Pendrell Vale](#) with [Consecrate Land](#) on it, and [Underworld Dreams](#) in play.

If you can achieve a position like this, you can pretty much guarantee a win no matter how many people are playing. It's not easy to do, but it's fun if you get it. I achieved a lock in the third game of the World Championship. Even though Bertrand had 10 life left, no matter what card he drew, he was going to die slowly from [Karma](#). He realized this and conceded the game.

There are also partial locks, like a "creature lock" that allows you to kill whatever creature your opponent brings out. The [Preacher](#) and [Diamond Valley](#), or the [Royal Assassin](#) and [Icy Manipulator](#), are good examples of card combinations that can paralyze your opponent's creature development. Another type of partial lock is a "life lock," where you virtually can't be killed no matter what your opponent does. [Ali From Cairo](#) with a [Spectral Cloak](#) is one example.

At the Rider's Tournament, I began to realize that when you are competing with top level decks, if one person gets a strong first-turn advantage it is almost impossible for his opponent to make a comeback. Cards like [Balance](#), [Nevinyrral's Disk](#), and [Wrath of God](#) are powerful because they let you neutralize your opponent's advantage. Similarly, if you are ahead, cards that ensure you stay ahead or that hurt both players work to your advantage. An example would be casting an [Armageddon](#) when you have a couple of big creatures out and your opponent doesn't, or playing an [Armageddon Clock](#) when you have 30 life left and your opponent has only 5.

These strategies are even better when you can minimize the damage to yourself. For example, you can use the [Birds of Paradise](#) to provide mana after an [Armageddon](#), or use the [Martyrs of Korlis](#) to keep from taking damage from the [Armageddon Clock](#).

Decks that kill your opponent so fast she can't do anything (i.e. in three turns or less) and combos with an almost guaranteed kill ([Lich](#) with [Mirror Universe](#)) can also work well. Other decks that prevent an opponent from doing anything are permission decks (almost any all-blue deck), card denial decks ([Hypnotic Specters](#), [Disrupting Scepters](#), [Mind Twist](#), etc.), and mana denial decks ([Stone Rain](#), [Ice Storm](#), [Sinkhole](#), [Strip Mine](#), [Shatter](#), and so on).

Testing And Sideboards

Another thing that helped me prepare for GenCon was playing against Leon's version of my white/blue/green/artifact deck. He had played against my deck in a four-player free-for-all that I won easily, and he decided to build a deck like it for himself. The first two games I played against him, he won. I quickly figured out that his deck was better than mine because of two cards: [Kismet](#) and [Mana Drain](#). I added a [Kismet](#) and a [Mana Drain](#), and Leon helped me trim my deck from sixty-nine cards down to sixty cards. After that, I won the rest of the games we played. I should have known by then that a smaller deck is more concentrated, which means you'll draw the cards you need more frequently.

Once you've constructed a deck, test it to see how good it is. Use it against the [Plague Rat](#) deck mentioned earlier, or try it against the red/green deck: five [Stone Rains](#), five [Fireballs](#), a [Disintegrate](#), a [Lightning Bolt](#), two [Kird Apes](#), a [Tranquility](#), a [Stream of Life](#), two [Wild Growths](#), five [Llanowar Elves](#), two [Giant Spiders](#), two [Craw Wurms](#), a [Black Vise](#), seven mountains, and seven forests (all of which are common cards, except for [Black Vise](#)). A blue/white deck could have six [Prodigal Sorcerers](#), six [Psychic Venoms](#), four [Power Sinks](#), six [Mesa Pegasus](#), a [Samite Healer](#), two [Holy Armors](#), two [Holy Strengths](#), a [Black Vise](#), seven islands, and seven plains. By switching between the three test decks, you should be able to pinpoint the problems in your own deck and determine if it's weak against large creatures, big [Fireballs](#), land destruction, enchantments, flying creatures, or a certain color.



One of the most important but frequently overlooked parts of deck construction is the sideboard. Tournament games are won and lost with sideboards. Try to keep in mind that the purpose of a sideboard is to defend against your opponent's deck but couldn't fit. Most people will put the anti-color cards in their sideboard for the colors they play against, like [Gloom](#), [Tsunami](#), or [Circles of Protection](#). A few people will figure out that almost everyone is doing this and add a [Sleight of Mind](#) and a [Magical Hack](#) to their sideboards.

The best sideboards protect not just against a particular color, but against a particular style of deck. To oppose blue counterspell decks, you can use [In the Eye of Chaos](#). Against card denial decks, you can use [Winter Blasts](#) or [Psychic Purges](#). To stop land destruction you can use [Consecrate Land](#) or [Birds of Paradise](#). To kill red blast decks, you can use [Circle of Protection: Red](#). To beat artifact decks, you

can use [Energy Flux](#) or [Floral Spuzzem](#). Against quick kill decks, you can use a [Dark Sphere](#). To slow down decks with a ton of little creatures, you can use a [Drop of Honey](#).

In short, my best deck construction advice is: be observant. Think about the decks you see winning tournaments. If you were playing against them, what one or two cards would you use to cause them the most problems? If you keep in mind the principles of speed, killer combinations, flexibility, and locks, you should do well. The best decks will operate predictably for you, while thwarting your opponent's deck and keeping the competition guessing.

To find out more about Zak and the competition in the World Championship, read Mark Rosewater's article on GenCon '94 and see the Convocation News section in this issue of the Duelist. Zak's next article will discuss trading techniques. He'll show how to take a single starter deck of revised cards and transform it, through trading and playing, into an awe-inspiring deck.