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Every single **Magic** player fell in love with the game the exact same way, including you. Don't bother shaking your head. Don't think to yourself "Every single one? That's not possible," because it is. Every single player -- even Limited specialists who love to draft almost to the exclusion of all other formats -- fell in love with the game the same way as every Timmy who loves giant monsters, even if they express their love in different ways today.

Once upon a time, you, and every player in your circle, saw a card and added it up with another card, and a light bulb went on somewhere upstairs. Then, the words "wouldn't this be good with..." formed in your head, and it was all over. You were hooked, you went down to the local wand store,



purchased an ID card, registered yourself in the Fraternal Order of Spellcasters, and stuffed packs and packs of boosters into the pockets of your brand new robe on the way out. Even if you today prefer to draft, once upon a time, you were dreaming of decks that weren't directly contingent on what you opened. The reason you were so inclined is that you saw a natural synergy in the cards that made you want to explore this fascinating game.

For me it was a simple combination: Kird Ape and Forest. Kird Ape was such a beating! White Weenie players ran around the room snapping scissors when Savannah Lions returned to the Core Set and they just now got around to picking their jaws up off of their tables since the appearance of a certain Hound of Konda in *Champions of Kamigawa*. 2/1s and 2/2s for one mana have nothing on Kird Ape. I loved Kird Ape so much that I played it even in non-green decks all through the summer of 1994 before I realized that it wasn't quite as good without the boost. Once I realized this thing with the Forests, I went on to notice the whole mana acceleration theme in green beyond just the basic lands, and how I could use a ton of Llanowar Elves and Wild Growths to make my Craw Wurms jump out of my hand a turn or two earlier than expected; as I increased in sophistication, I proceeded to try to win one of my first tournaments by dropping Magical Hack on Karma (I said I increased in sophistication, not consistency).

In a sense, every one of those examples is a combination. The Kird Ape and Forest may have been the two-card combo that opened up this shark's eyes, but it nevertheless has the least of a combination feel of the three. Kird Ape might not be great without Forest, but he's still about as big as every other one drop, and Forest works equally well at its task with or without Kird Ape. Mana acceleration into giant threats is a technique that has put sharks into victory positions for many years, but for our purposes, is only mid-way in the combo spectrum. As you never really get to Force of Nature mana the honest way unless somebody lets you, the expensive guys in my mid-90s pre-Pro Tour, pre-Internet mono-green deck were pretty much uncastable without the quick drop mana accelerants, and a critical mass of mana is never exciting without something to do with it. Great together, not very good apart, mechanically synergistic for sure, the green engine is still not quite the combo. The most extreme, Karma + Magical Hack might not




have been a great way to try to win a real tournament because, well, I played against a lot of other U/W decks and they were able to bust up my combination pretty easily. Moreover, as bad as Karma is for a mono-black opponent, it doesn't really do so much without Magical Hack, and neither does Magical Hack do much failing the presence of Karma. This last example is a true combination... the cards, even if they have some text, don't do very much without one another, yet the deck can't win without the combination.

In honor of Combo Week, I thought that we'd go over some of history's most iconic combinations, and then see where they leave us with a brand new set, rife for the picking by every Angry Johnny.

Now many legends of the game have been successful with decks that at least LOOK like combo decks and kind of function that way. Marc Hernandez nearly won the World Championships with an Icy Manipulator + Winter Orb lock and the 1996 US National Championships was dominated by a number of familiar names all piloting a deck that fed its Stasis with multiple Howling Mine draws per turn; but to my mind, these decks were control decks that could lock the board. That they did it in a certain way doesn't distinguish that plan from Brian Weissman's locking an opponent down with Moat and Disrupting Scepter in my mind. To me, the first great combination deck is this one:



*One of the originals!*

<b>ProsBloom</b>		
<b>Main Deck</b>	<b>Sideboard</b>	
<i>60 cards</i>		
3 Bad River 7 Forest 5 Island 6 Swamp 4 Undiscovered Paradise <hr/> 25 lands <hr/> 0 creatures	4 Cadaverous Bloom 1 Drain Life 1 Elven Cache 1 Emerald Charm 4 Impulse 4 Infernal Contract 2 Memory Lapse 4 Natural Balance 1 Power Sink 4 Prosperity 4 Squandered Resources 1 Three Wishes 4 Vampiric Tutor <hr/> 35 other spells	3 City of Solitude 4 Elephant Grass 1 Elven Cache 3 Emerald Charm 1 Memory Lapse 1 Power Sink 2 Wall of Roots <hr/> 15 sideboard cards

Mike Long won PT Paris in 1997 with one of the most innovative decks in the history of **Magic**. This deck taught us much about how to correctly build decks of a particular plan, and its principles

continue to guide design today. If you don't know how Mike's deck works, its goal is to power out a lethal Drain Life as the last spell. Typically this is done by having a Cadaverous Bloom in play and enough cards in hand to make sufficient black mana to kill the opponent. Cards in hand are fueled by Prosperity and Infernal Contract. Cadaverous Bloom, for its part, gets in play as early as turn three with the help of Squandered Resources and Natural Balance. One of the pureset combinations in the deck, Squandered Resources on turn two would imply the four mana necessary to cast Natural Balance... as well as a full ten mana from the (first) Natural Balance. This would be followed up by another Natural Balance (if available), or just a move into the Cadaverous Bloom portion of the play sequence.



Mike's deck differed from many later combo decks by its "engine" nature. It started off with a Squandered Resources and moved on, sequence by sequence, building mana, building card advantage and cards in hand, until it reached a critical mass, often drawing through the entire library with mana to spare. Because it didn't always have a perfect draw, the Cadaverous Bloom deck had help moving from play to play. It had Impulse and Vampiric Tutor to search up every necessary combination piece along the way, and card drawing to ensure that the next component would be available, all the way to the Drain Life at the end.

Cadaverous Bloom wasn't a particularly difficult deck to play, but it rewarded many skills. Capable of "going off" as early as turn three under pressure, the deck became more consistent as turns went by. The best Bloom players could milk Natural Balance against control, resolving it like a string of Thermokarsts on the opponent's developed mana base. They knew what cards to fight over with their permission spells, and when they had to push for a win against beatdown players.

Now Mike's deck was notorious because it required so many parts to function. Most combinations work with just three components. For some reason, three is a magic number in **Magic**, from Icy Manipulator + Icy Manipulator + Winter Orb to Kismet + Stasis + Time Elemental to this deck:

**Dred Panda Roberts**

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**Main Deck**  
60 cards

4 Badlands	4 Phyrexian Dreadnought	4 Dark Ritual
3 City of Brass	_____	4 Demonic Consultation
4 Gemstone Mine	4 creatures	3 Duress
4 Sulfurous Springs		3 Final Fortune
5 Swamp		4 Lotus Petal
_____		4 Mana Vault
20 lands		4 Necropotence
		4 Pandemonium
		4 Reanimate
		2 Vampiric Tutor
		_____
		36 other spells

Easily the best deck ever built by my Wednesday co-columnist Adrian Sullivan, "Dred Panda Roberts" was at once a repeat of a (then) well known combination and a totally new way to build decks. The combination in question was Phyrexian Dreadnought + Pandemonium, with an extra copy of either thrown in. The reason that this was a strong combination was that Phyrexian Dreadnought was so cheap. The hard part was ramping up to Pandemonium mana, which Adrian accomplished with Lotus Petal and Dark Ritual. Assuming that he was always under pressure, the Dred Panda Roberts player could follow up with a lethal play, with turn three kills routine. Sometimes he would have to use Final Fortune to win the next turn, but oftentimes, he would just have two mana left and play either two Phyrexian Dreadnoughts for 24 damage or a Phyrexian Dreadnought (which would die) and a Reanimate with his spare mana. A second Pandemonium would do the trick, but came up far less often due to its comparatively prohibitive mana cost of four over one.



Now what makes this deck really innovative is the use of Necropotence. Mike's deck may have taught sharks that they had another real option besides U/W control decks and single-minded aggression, but Adrian's deck took combination theory to a new place. Necropotence is widely considered the most powerful card-drawing engine of all time, and it is near its best in this deck. Adrian would often burn resources, from Demonic Consultation to Dark Ritual, just to get Necropotence into play. He would then calculate how much damage his opponent could do the next turn, and then Necropotence for just enough to leave himself at one life, factoring in that potential damage. He would invariably have a huge hand and have to discard down to seven... but those seven cards would almost always have some way to win. Those cards would be heavy with combination pieces, or ways to find them the next turn. They would, for example, incorporate a Mana Vault to play the expensive Pandemonium and a Demonic Consultation to find the missing Reanimate. Adrian finished only Top 32 at PT

Rome with this work of genius, but his innovation contributed to perhaps the most hated deck in recent memory:

## Trix



### Main Deck

60 cards

4 Gemstone Mine  
 3 Island  
 6 Swamp  
 4 Underground River  
 4 Underground Sea

21 lands

0 creatures

2 Brainstorm  
 1 Contagion  
 4 Dark Ritual  
 4 Demonic Consultation  
 4 Donate  
 4 Duress  
 4 Force of Will  
 1 Hoodwink  
 4 Illusions of Grandeur  
 4 Mana Vault  
 4 Necropotence  
 3 Vampiric Tutor

The funny thing about combination decks is that everyone, from Timmy to Johnny to Spike, any and all kinds of casual players and sharks, agrees on them... except when they don't. Almost everyone loves a great combination, and appreciates the wonder of seeing a cool and especially effective sequence play out... at least the first time around. Timmy may love huge effects, Johnny may love figuring out how to make the smartest version, and Spike may just love winning, but when anyone has to go up against a deck like Trix, that is faster than the fastest beatdown deck and draws more cards and is more consistent than any control deck, "uphill battle" becomes an understatement.

Trix was essentially the same deck that Adrian piloted in Rome, but with two important differences. The first was that its combination, Illusions of Grandeur + Donate, was only a TWO card combination, not a three card combination, and significantly easier to assemble. The second part was that Illusions of Grandeur -- half of the combo -- would automatically reset life that had been callously spent on Necropotence or absorbing attacks. A nightmare for beatdown, Trix would randomly gain 20 life in the middle of a game, and force the opponent to pay the cumulative upkeep of an Illusions of Grandeur from which he got no benefit... or die. Because it only had to devote 2/3 of the space on trying to win, Trix had room for cards like Force of Will in addition to Duress, making it possibly a bigger headache for control than it was for beatdown!

Even without Necropotence, Trix was among the best decks in Extended, and Kai Budde won a Pro Tour with a U/r version based on Accumulated Knowledge/Intuition. Nevertheless, I believe the Necropotence version remains the real icon.

Since Trix, there have been many other successful combination decks, but none as educational, interesting, or purely infamous. There have been Mind's Desire decks that won with both Brain Freeze and Tendrils of Agony. There have been Goblin Charbelcher decks that always hit for the maximum because of their synergy with Mana Severance. Most recently, a Krak-Clan Ironworks deck with several different kills was piloted to the Top 8 of this year's World Championships, completing the cycle of powerful *Mirrodin* Block combination pieces.

Though *Champions of Kamigawa* presents many new combination possibilities, the most easily broken may be



Former Swimming with Sharks columnist Brian David-Marshall introduced this combination to me. With almost any other creature in play, Intruder Alarm + Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker represents infinite damage. Say for example you had a Thought Courier out and followed up with an Intruder Alarm and Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker. Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker could double the Thought Courier, which would put a new creature in play, untapping Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker via Intruder Alarm. He could then repeat the process until you had enough Thought Couriers to attack for your opponent's life total. Luckily they all have haste. Shake and serve (the beatdown). I picked Thought Courier in my example because it is an in-color creature with positive power and a reasonable mana cost that also helps search up your other combination pieces (don't forget the lessons learned from Impulse, Vampiric Tutor, Demonic Consultation, and Necropotence... what good is your combination if you never draw it?).



I must admit, ten years after discovering my first combination, I am still trying to cram them even into decks where they make no sense. The number of times I have had to scratch Conjurer's Bauble out of deck lists where it didn't quite belong (or where it belonged but not well enough) would alarm you. I think the thing that I like best about combinations is the ideas they represent and the ideas that they smash to pieces. Phyrexian Dreadnought and Donate both looked unplayable when they first appeared, yet they ended up *hugely* influential. Somebody had to be really creative in order to make chaff work, and a lot of people found new ways to see their life totals lowered below one. On the other side of the spectrum, combination decks force ideas right back. Players end up valuing new cards, from Elvish Lyrist to Sphere of Resistance, because of their effectiveness in fighting off particular combinations. Just as combination decks destroy the opponent's expectations about how to approach a matchup, invalidate hands full of Wrath of God as if they had been Mind Warped, often interacting only with their own cards, the injection of answers by the rest of the decks represents a give and take that challenges the combination players right back.

