

# Naming the Red Metagame

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Thursday, April 28, 2005

"All Paul Sligh did was to qualify for the Pro Tour with the deck and post it on the 'Net. It bothers me, it boggles my mind why this guy is so famous... I think people having their names on the deck is a bit silly. It isn't a big deal that I don't get any credit for the deck, as long as Sligh doesn't either."

-Dave Price

One of the most influential decks of all time also carries with it one of the most controversial names: Sligh. It has become synonymous with any sort of Red Deck. Red beatdown? Sligh. Red mid-range? Sligh. As we will see below, even big fatty Bogardan Phoenix decks that blow up every permanent in play are also Sligh (well, sort of).

The Deck that Started it All:

## Sligh/Geeba, Atlanta PTQ



### Main Deck

60 cards

2 Dwarven Ruins  
4 Mishra's Factory  
13 Mountain  
4 Strip Mine  

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23 lands  
  
4 Brass Man  
2 Brothers of Fire  
2 Dragon Whelp  
3 Dwarven Lieutenant  
2 Dwarven Trader  
2 Goblins of the Flarg  
4 Ironclaw Orcs  
2 Orcish Artillery  
2 Orcish Cannoneers  
2 Orcish Librarian  

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25 creatures

1 Black Vise  
1 Detonate  
1 Fireball  
4 Incinerate  
4 Lightning Bolt  
1 Shatter  

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12 other spells

### Sideboard




3 Active Volcano  
1 An-Zerrin Ruins  
1 Detonate  
1 Fireball  
4 Manabarbs  
1 Meekstone  
2 Serrated Arrows  
1 Shatter  
1 Zuran Orb  

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15 sideboard cards

"Sligh" gets its name from Paul Sligh, a player who won a Pro Tour Qualifier with the above Monored deck close to 10 years ago. Though it bears his name, Sligh himself didn't design the deck, which is

generally attributed to Jay Schneider.

The Sligh deck was very special for exactly one reason. Sure, it added flava to competitive **Magic** by breaking down the formerly newspaper-like metagame of black and white decks, but that isn't the reason Sligh became so memorable. Basically, the game of tournament **Magic** as defined by the first Pro Tour started on turn four. The defining threat was a 4/5 for 3, hopefully followed up by a good old 3 (Erhnam Djinn and Armageddon), and the defensive card of choice was, and still is, a 2 Sorcery. Sure, there were some cards that saw pre-four mana play, primarily out of the Necropotence deck, but even the Knights of Stromgald-packing black mage defined his game with a four-mana artifact in those days.



Sligh, on the other hand, started playing **Magic** on turn one. It had essentially the same game plan as a modern Red Deck... only instead of Jackal Pup it had Goblins of the Flarg (yes, yes, on the same team as half-dozen Dwarves, I know). Starting the game so early allowed Ironclaw Orcs and company to start chipping away at the opponent's life total to set up a lead, even if the opponent had a better mid-game. This meant that once the opponent's slow four-mana game came online, Incinerate and company could end it all while the other guy was still tapping for cards such as Serra Angel or Ihsan's Shade to lock out the Dwarven Trader beatdown.

The Sligh deck in essentially the above form was adopted by Pro Tour greats Pat Chapin and Dave Price. Pat added a lone Ball Lightning and made third place at the 1996 PT Dallas Juniors (this was before the advent of the modern JSS). Dave began his transformation of the deck from its Orcish Cannoneers board-control focus to beatdown by going all out with the damage sources. Price's version had four Ball Lightnings and ignored any kind of mid-game card advantage plan. Dave started off his Red Deck legend by winning a Paris PTQ and then followed up with a perfect 7-0 at U.S. Nationals 1997:

## Deadguy Red, U.S. Nationals 1997



### Main Deck

60 cards

4 Dwarven Ruins  
18 Mountain  

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22 lands

4 Fireblast  
4 Hammer of Bogardan  
4 Incinerate  
3 Kaervek's Torch  

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15 other spells

4 Ball Lightning  
2 Dwarven Soldier  
3 Goblin Digging Team  
4 Goblin Vandal  
4 Ironclaw Orcs  
4 Lava Hounds  
2 Viashino Sandstalker  

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23 creatures

### Sideboard

4 Anarchy  
4 Detonate  
3 Pyrokinesis  
4 Straw Golem  

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15 sideboard cards

This deck was perfectly suited to fighting the U.S. Nationals 1997 metagame. Price accurately predicted that the pros of U.S. Nationals would avoid cards such as Freewind Falcon and instead go for power cards such as Necropotence and the returning Swords to Plowshares. Necropotence decks had a general disadvantage against Red Decks, and Lava Hounds lost its disadvantage (but none of its virtues) against slow Thawing Glaciers decks with Swords to Plowshares. Though originally conceived of as a pure metagame choice, the 1997 version of Deadguy Red was appropriated en masse, and inspired young designers around the world.

Now about a year later, legendary Internet writer Jamie Wakefield unleashed his own brand of Sligh on the realms of Dominia. While Price's innovations led to a Pro Tour win in L.A. and a follow-up Top 8 at U.S. Nationals 1998, there is actually a pretty good reason to look at Jamie's Regionals deck.

## Wakefield Sligh, New England Regionals 1998



### Main Deck

62 cards

18 Mountain	4 Bogardan Phoenix	4 Incinerate
4 Quicksand	3 Jackal Pup	3 Jokulhaups
4 Wasteland	4 Mogg Fanatic	4 Kaervek's Torch
-----	2 Orgg	4 Lightning Blast
26 lands	3 Suq'Ata Lancer	3 Shock
	2 Wildfire Emissary	-----
	-----	18 other spells
	18 creatures	

There are two kooky and influential things about this deck. First of all, it is 62 cards with 26 lands. Second of all, it only has three Jackal Pups . . . but makes room for a dedicated late game with Bogardan Phoenix and Jokulhaups (super combo). The highly influential aspect of Jamie's deck was that it inspired Wisconsin cheesehead Brian Kowal to make a Rath Cycle PTQ deck that would ruin Red Deck naming forever.

Kowal's Ponza Rotta Red, or simply "Ponza" as it would later be called, was born on the Wakefield principles of 26/62. Probably you are wondering what a Ponza is, and why someone would want to name a deck after it. The answer to the first question is that it's kind of like a calzone, but deep fried; the answer to the second is that it is split up into different classes of cards -- crust (land), meat (creatures), and of course cheese -- i.e. "no one will ever know and we have to live with it."



## Ponza Red, Wisconsin States 1998



**Main Deck**

62 cards

18 Mountain  
 4 Stalking Stones  
 4 Wasteland

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26 lands

4 Fireslinger  
 4 Lightning Dragon  
 4 Mogg Fanatic  
 2 Orgg

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14 creatures

1 Aftershock  
 3 Apocalypse  
 4 Cursed Scroll  
 4 Incinerate  
 4 Shock  
 4 Stone Rain  
 2 Wildfire

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22 other spells

**Sideboard**

1 Aftershock  
 1 Grizzly Bears  
 4 Meltdown  
 3 Nevinyrral's Disk  
 4 Pyroblast  
 2 Wildfire

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15 sideboard cards



Jake Welch won Wisconsin States with this descendent of Wakefield Sligh. Notice how he plays clunky giants and big sweepers just like Jamie, never forgetting for a moment to run that 26/62 mana configuration. Despite selecting cards such as Aftershock in a format where he was perfectly allowed to cast Intuition, Welch was very confident and only needed 14 sideboard cards to take the Wisconsin title (hence the Grizzly Bears).

Welch's win occurred when Tolarian Academy was the best deck in the **Magic** universe. His victory came over the powerhouse squad of Stroke of Genius, Windfall, and Time Spiral . . . piloted by none other than Bob Maher. Really, what is Voltaic Key going to do against the echoing strength of Lightning Dragon?

I suppose the Stone Rain element of the deck caught on with whoever is in charge of calling decks what, because subsequent to this period of time in Wisconsin, every red deck with any kind of land destruction, dedicated or light, has acquired the same moniker. As such, either of the following decks can be, or more properly, have been, called Ponza.

**Chris Benafel – U.S. National Finalist 2000****Main Deck**

60 cards

3 Dust Bowl  
 4 Ghitu Encampment  
 14 Mountain  
 4 Rishadan Port

3 Cave-In  
 3 Earthquake  
 3 Fire Diamond  
 3 Hammer of Bogardan

**Sideboard**

4 Boil  
 4 Cursed Totem  
 1 Earthquake  
 2 Tectonic Break  
 4 Thran Foundry

25 lands

4 Avalanche Riders

3 Masticore

7 creatures

4 Pillage

4 Seal of Fire

2 Shock

4 Stone Rain

2 Tectonic Break

28 other spells

15 sideboard cards

## Adrian Sullivan – Wisconsin State Champion 2003



### Main Deck

60 cards

3 Barbarian Ring

4 Forgotten Cave

16 Mountain

4 Petrified Field

27 lands

4 Blistering Firecat

2 Dwarven Blastminer

3 Fledgling Dragon

1 Jeska, Warrior Adept

10 creatures

3 Burning Wish

4 Firebolt

3 Pillage

4 Starstorm

3 Violent Eruption

4 Volcanic Hammer

2 Wildfire

23 other spells

### Sideboard

2 Boil

2 Flaming Gambit

2 Flaring Pain

1 Lightning Surge

1 Overmaster

1 Pillage

1 Price of Glory

1 Slice and Dice

3 Spitting Earth

1 Wildfire

15 sideboard cards

Now the purpose of names is to help us differentiate which deck is which, but as you can see, red decks are sometimes as confused as someone trying to figure out Furnace of Rath damage with a couple of tramlers in play. Case in point, a different Sullivan deck:

## Veggie Ponza, Midwest Regionals 1999



### Main Deck

60 cards

4 Ghitu Encampment

16 Mountain

1 Shivan Gorge

3 Stalking Stones

4 Wasteland

1 Apocalypse

3 Arc Lightning

4 Incinerate

3 Nevinyrral's Disk

4 Shock

### Sideboard

1 Apocalypse

1 Arc Lightning

1 Jokulhaups

1 Nevinyrral's Disk

4 Pyroblast

3 Shattering Pulse

4 Ticking Gnomes


28 lands	4 Stone Rain	15 sideboard cards
	4 Wildfire	
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4 Avalanche Riders	23 other spells	
4 Mogg Fanatic		
1 Shard Phoenix		
<hr/>		
9 creatures		

Veggie Ponza is a funny deck because, as the name indicates, it really cuts out the meat. Instead of busy creatures such as Masticore or Fledgling Dragon, this deck gives you . . . more land destruction?

*"Probably the easiest place to make things really difficult in terms of misunderstanding a deck name is the Red [D]eck. Sligh, Deadguy Red, Burn, Long Red, Lackey, Ponza, MonoBrown. They all mean something totally different. It's quite easy to lose a game because you misidentify your opponent until a bit too late. Many might say that these terms are meaningless, but I don't think so."*

-Adrian Sullivan

For most modern players, the most recognizable red deck is this one:

<b>Shuhei Nakamura – Pro Tour Columbus Finalist</b>		
<b>Main Deck</b>		<b>Sideboard</b>
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Bloodstained Mire	4 Cursed Scroll	4 Blood Oath
8 Mountain	4 Firebolt	4 Ensnaring Bridge
4 Rishadan Port	4 Magma Jet	3 Flametongue Kavu
4 Wasteland	4 Pillage	3 Fledgling Dragon
4 Wooded Foothills	4 Seal of Fire	1 Gamble
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24 lands	20 other spells	15 sideboard cards
4 Blistering Firecat		
4 Grim Lavamancer		
4 Jackal Pup		
4 Mogg Fanatic		
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16 creatures		

When we think of "Red Deck Wins," this is the deck that, due to the recent Extended format, appears in our collective mind's eye. But before this deck, Red Deck Wins looked very different:



**Main Deck**

60 cards

2 Ghitu Encampment  
 17 Mountain  
 4 Wasteland  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 23 lands

4 Ball Lightning  
 3 Fireslinger  
 3 Ironclaw Orcs  
 4 Jackal Pup  
 4 Mogg Fanatic  
 3 Viashino Cutthroat  
 \_\_\_\_\_

21 creatures

4 Cursed Scroll  
 4 Incinerate  
 4 Kindle  
 4 Shock  
 \_\_\_\_\_

16 other spells

**Sideboard**

4 Ankh of Mishra  
 4 Bottle Gnomes  
 2 Lightning Dragon  
 3 Portcullis  
 2 Shattering Pulse  
 \_\_\_\_\_

15 sideboard cards

Mark beat Dan Paskins in the red-on-red mirror to win the title. Even after all these years, I still remember what Paskins wrote was the defining characteristic of Red Deck Wins over other decks: *"It has more land than any other Red deck because in the mirror matchup you need to lay land and Scrolls..."*

Anyone who reads my work knows I am a big Paskins fan, but I don't know how accurate the assessment was. Certainly it didn't really differentiate Red Deck Wins as a deck of a particular name, versus Deadguy Red or one of its other contemporaries.

Today's Magicians seem to throw the name "Red Deck Wins" the same way players from the previous generation said "Sligh." Any deck with Genju of the Spires, for example, seems to be Red Deck Wins. Standard red decks since the *Mirrodin* Block differ on many counts. Some have tons of creatures and some have just Solemn Simulacrum and Arc-Slogger. Some have Pulse of the Forge *and* Shrapnel Blast whereas others get by on just a few Magma Jets. No matter how different they are, the fact that most of these decks run Molten Rain to fight Tooth and Nail makes them – you guessed it – Ponza. The problem with all this, in case you missed it, is that a lot of these names end up losing the differentiation that made them useful to begin with. Rather than thinking about red decks in terms of names, I find it more useful to think about them in terms of capabilities.

*Sligh*

The first of the great names, the deck that gave us the mana curve is almost synonymous with "red."



### *Deadguy Red or Deadguy Sligh*

Greater emphasis on beatdown and damage, less emphasis on selective card advantage or specific mana curve.

### *Ponza*

Deviating from its origins as a deck laden with crust (lots of lands, like 26), meat (Lightning Dragons or even Flowstone Giants), and cheese (Lightning Blast and the like), Ponza today is indicative of mana control. Sometimes the mana control is overwhelming and sometimes it is mildly disruptive, but with Ponza . . . it's always there.

### *Red Deck Wins versus Goblins*

The most important differentiation of the recent Extended format, I think that these decks split down a line where one is a little slower and the other is bad against Engineered Plague. It is greater folly to confuse these decks than almost any others, because, as contemporaries, it's often safe to go to three against Goblins, whereas the other will almost always run eight mana-control lands.

The most important elements to track are haste (Slith Firewalker, Goblin Warchief, or even Lava Hounds), mana denial, and reach. Goblins might have the most card advantage, but you would be shocked at how many games Chrome Mox into Slith Firewalker followed by a Molten Rain – with nary another spell cast – wins. In a strange way, it's like Paul Sligh's deck getting the jump on everyone all over again.

