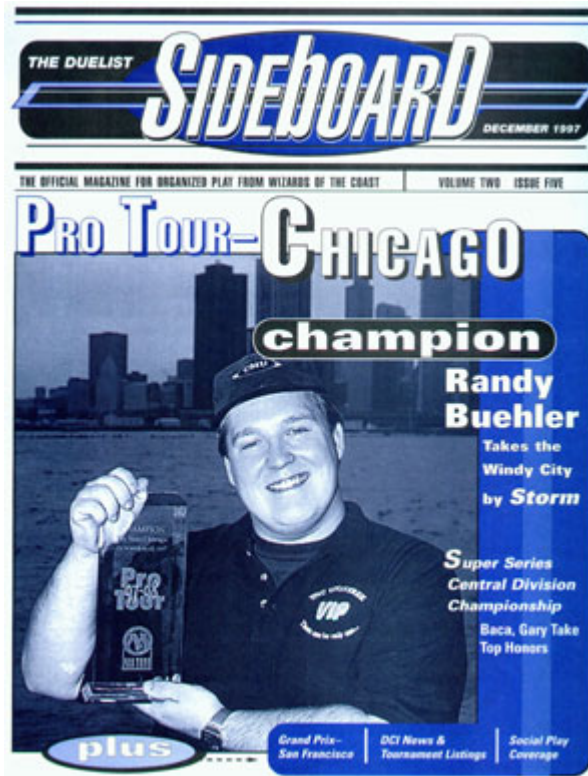


Mike Flores

Thursday, May 05, 2005

Randy Buehler, grand poobah of things Magical, once told me that, all things considered, the better player -- the better prepared, with the better deck, making fewer mistakes -- has about a 9-to-1 advantage over all games of tournament **Magic**. **Magic** is a game of both skill *and* luck; the better player might win the majority of the time, but the fact that the less impressive player, with the underwhelming deck, throwing away cards or turns, can win is one of the things that actually makes the game interesting: It's one of the reasons we slavishly follow **Magic** websites, devote hours to tuning decks, and travel long distances for small chances at the Pro Tour instead of just playing chess. After all, would any new player, fresh faced and inexperienced, even *want* to show up to a big tournament if he didn't have any chance at all to take that game or match off the local pro?

From the standpoint of that better player, the luck elements of **Magic** can sometimes seem annoying. No one likes to lose because the opponent -- who has been throwing cards into his graveyard the whole game -- had the good fortune of opening Visara the Dreadful, Arc-Slogger, or Final Judgment. Players often decry that random factor, cursing topdecks, calling each other lucksacks, and complaining about bad beats. Luck is part of **Magic**. The secret to advancing in **Magic**, despite a luck factor that you can't control, especially against "luckier" players, is to build on the advantages that you can. Here are four and a half tips to help you do just that in constructed deck.



4. Minimize Mana Requirements

The number one place players complain about getting unlucky is in the mana department. "I was manascrewed," can be heard somewhere in the room after every round in every tournament. While players often lose because they were, indeed, manascrewed, some decks are more prone to mana problems than others. When we talk about minimizing mana requirements, there are two important things to keep in mind:

First of all, there is a difference between being able to play your basic game and getting actively lucky. Some years ago I wrote an article called This Deck is Insane, which chronicled a deck built by Brian Kibler, tuned by myself and John Shuler, and ultimately played at Northeast Regionals by me and the Apprentices, Josh Ravitz and Paul Jordan.

Kibler's Rug

Joshua Ravitz

I got unlucky and faced Josh in the 75 card mirror match first round; despite drawing three copies of Flametongue Kavu in Game Two, Josh put me away... and then he himself took a manascrew loss in Round Two. I was quickly out, but Paul went very deep in the Swiss before being eliminated; Josh eventually acquitted himself by sloughing off that round two loss and surviving the nigh infinite rounds of the Regional Championship to take his spot at US Nationals 2002.

Personally, I would never play a deck like Kibler's RUG ever again. Don't get me wrong, the deck was very *powerful*. It was maybe the most powerful deck available at the time. Josh sure didn't complain: he got what he wanted with a US Nationals invitation. The problem is that even though the deck was powerful, we could have picked other decks that didn't *require* getting lucky on the mana. Every round with this deck, we were thanking the mana gods if we didn't draw the City of Brass or get locked under too many Yavimaya Coasts. Look at that curve:

- Birds of Paradise
- Wild Mongrel
- Merfolk Looter
- VIOLENT ERUPTION!?!

This deck somehow required having G on turn 1, U1 on turn 2, and RRR1 (or at least RR1 and a Wild Mongrel, i.e. 2GRR) somewhere before losing. Decks with crazy color requirements, even when they are as strong as the RUG Madness deck, give the *opponent* the opportunity to get lucky against *you* when your mana doesn't come out just right. Why give him that opportunity?

In sharp contrast, here is the deck that I played at Regionals 1999, designed by future R&D bigwigs Brian Schneider and Worth Wollpert (who were back then just my friends):

Mike Flores

1999 US Regionals

Check out *that* deck's curve:

Mana:	1	2	3	4	5
# of Cards:	24	11	0	0	3

That's right, kids... *no crazy costs* (and by "crazy" I mean "anything that costs more than two"). The only exception is namesake Hatred, a card that wins the game all by itself, and can be boosted by Dark Ritual or City of Traitors.

This deck was far less likely to lose to manascrew than the above RUG deck. If it drew just one land, it had more than 20 spells to play, and could quite possibly go beatdown while destroying the opponent with Duress. More than that, the unique feature of this version of Hatred was mana control of its own. Able to run on just one or two lands, this deck could punish the kind of people adventuresome enough to play less mana consistent decks via Wasteland or Winter Orb.

And what was my reward for playing *one* color and a low curve? A US Nationals invitation of my own.

Secondly, I know that it is currently popular to play nine mana sorceries in Standard. While I dutifully test against versions of decks playing this sort of card, I cannot in good conscience recommend doing so myself. Even if said deck is one color, a lot of its viability rests on the ability to draw not just three or four, but at least *five* lands, three of which must appear in specific configuration. And while I'm certainly not saying that you can't have success with such a powerhouse deck, that plan smells awfully G, 1U, 1RRR (2GRR) to me.

Zvi Mowshowitz once said that there is no reason to play cards that cost four or more mana that don't win the game all by themselves. While said nine mana sorcery is quite capable of doing so, as is a certain, popular, eight mana card of the same color, roll back and ask yourself about some of the costs you play. Hatred in the above black deck, at five mana, is a great example of this principle. Wrath of God functionally does the same against creature decks... But does Rewind? Just something to think about.

3. Generate Velocity in the Early Game

Velocity in **Magic** is a complicated new branch of theory that is just now being explored by popular thinkers like Brian David- *Get your cards when you need them.* Marshall and Zvi Mowshowitz. In the context of this article, I am characterizing early game Velocity as playing cards like Serum Visions or Sylvan Scrying. These cards don't draw *extra* cards in the same sense as Inspiration or Opportunity, but they get your deck's mana, threats, and answers flowing by moving cards in your deck, as soon as turn one.

Whether the opponent played Reach Through Mists at the end of your first turn or not cannot be easily described via the current language of card advantage, and outside *Odyssey* Block, we might not even care that there is now an Arcane Instant in the graveyard. But as someone who has read UB Trippin, you know that Reach Through Mists makes your deck that much smaller, makes it more likely for you to not only hit your next land drop, but to keep your spells coming in the right order, too. While these cards don't generate card advantage per se, playing them in the first several turns of the game will smooth your draws and make you less reliant on a purely good draw.

Particularly in the early game, players are prone to wasting mana. We talked last week about the game sitting quietly until turn four without any action, at least until the Sligh deck made everyone sit up and take notice. With Jay, Dave, Dan, and their descendents working so hard to change the nature of the universe, do you really want to play like it's 1995?

In today's relevant formats, from *Kamigawa* Block to Extended, the card that best exemplifies seizing early game mana to yield velocity is Sakura-Tribe Elder. The old Snake Shaman gives players with generally more ponderous curves the opportunity to tap their mana on turn two, helps them hit their land drops, and strips mana out of their decks so that later in the game, they will draw a higher concentration of those powerful, game-winning spells.

2. Draw More Cards Than Your Opponent

My friend Bill Macey used to say that if he and his opponent drew the same number of cards he would never win. The opponent, you see, would invariably pluck a superior balance of mana and spells, dooming and damning the fair-minded and unlucky Bill to the inevitable loss. A strict adherent of techniques like those found in his article, attempts to minimize the opponent's ability to win by just having better luck, Bill theorized that if he drew twice as many cards as his opponent -- even if every card of his were trumped by the fortunate opponent on a one-to-one basis -- the fact that he had so many left over would allow him to keep up or -- *gasp* -- even take the lead. Though a beatdown player at heart (he not only put Rancor into the B/G deck, but qualified via meatgrinder four years apart with different builds of White Weenie), Bill would on occasion sublimate his default play style to choose Necropotence or Survival of the Fittest, decks that allowed him to draw more cards than his opponent.

This element of deck design and choice is sometimes very closely aligned with number three. Accumulated Knowledge is a card that helps get a deck moving at two mana all by itself, but once it starts filling up a player's hand, especially with the help of Intuition, that card starts to fall squarely in the realm of bulk card drawing. This flexibility of serving both as a cantrip and as a proxy to cards like

Fact or Fiction or Inspiration (but at half the cost) has made Accumulated Knowledge a default in Extended and Standard, a card whose virtues were discovered only after the end of its own block.

The current Standard offers similar weapons in Solemn Simulacrum and especially Kodama's Reach. Jens Thoren's once ubiquitous **Magic** Invitational card is probably under-played at present. Serving as mana acceleration, card drawing, defense, and as a potential beater, Solemn Simulacrum is deceptively efficient, and in match-ups where resource management is paramount, *can actually win the game* by shattering the opponent's symmetries... Just ask any Death Cloud or Ponza player how they feel about this guy hitting the board.

Kodama's Reach, a card that will see a lot of action in this upcoming weekend's Block Pro Tour, was played only narrowly in the 2004 Champs decks. Thought of primarily as a mana acceleration card in the same vein as Explosive Vegetation or Skyshroud Claim, Kodama's Reach helps players to avoid the dreaded screw in games where they may not have actually drawn four lands BEFORE going the mana acceleration route while helping to hoard the kind of card advantage that can be important over a long game as early as turn two.

1. Ignore Large Parts of the Game

Once upon a time, players like Adam Maysonet helped to popularize decks that played -- get this -- *no creatures at all!* Maysonet's deck sought to neuter the opponent with Jester's Cap, and had the long game outlook of victory via exhaustion. Type I players a decade ago sharply debated the merits of the Maysonet deck v. Brian Weissman's better known two Serra Angel Fortress... But which was better?

In the first days of **Magic** strategy, players further down on the food chain were missing the point entirely. I remember attending a tournament where a player said that the Maysonet deck was better because it was more *pure*... as if the inclusion of creatures somehow sullied the integrity of its strategy, was a stain on the player himself. Purity, though, was never the issue.

Both the Maysonet and Weissman decks benefited from the opponent's drawing creature sanction -- The Abyss, Moat, Swords to Plowshares, and so on -- and the inclusion of those two Serras in the Weissman deck actually helped to keep the opponent "honest" (and his deck inefficient) because he might (should?) keep his creature kill in for games two and three. Weissman would ideally not play the Serra until he had control of the game, but actually retained the flexibility of playing her if he needed a blocker or wanted to race.

Decks since these seminal U/W/x/y/z control decks have looked to ignore large parts of the game in various ways. The early days of the Pro Tour showed U/W decks that went for Millstone kills, enjoying the same "I've got no guys" advantage as their predecessors. That strategy turned out to be not so great because the inability to deal damage ended up a liability where the best deck was based on Necropotence, but the sentiment was nice. In a time where every white player (more than 50% of every Standard tournament) was packing at least three Disenchants and Divine Offerings main deck -- with more coming out of the board -- Jon Finkel innovated the idea of playing *only* Zuran Orb, eschewing every other available artifact and enchantment, even the equally restricted Ivory Tower. This helped Jon generate dead cards and lessened the impact of the black opponent's Nevinyrral's Disks. An under-examined branch of the same technique ignores creature combat.

Consider decks that actually play a ton of creatures... but don't really get in fights. Why is it, you ask, that modern White Weenie decks play Leonin Skyhunter, or even the more expensive Skyhunter Skirmisher, over Eight-And-A-Half Tails or Samurai of the Pale Curtain? Why is it that everyone comes standard with eight copies of Lantern Kami and Suntail Hawk, but not the much-heralded Savannah Lions, a creature with twice the power at the same cost? Why is it that Flesh Reaver won PTQs dominated by Lightning Bolt and Fireblast, or that Soltari Monk got the nod so many times over the far more flexible White Knight? *Because fighting is for suckers.*

In Limited, I am pretty sure the worst element of my game is correctly attacking and blocking. I am terrible at ground stalls, can only ever bust through if I have some kind of trump, and invariably lose to cards like Dance of Shadows, even when it looks like I have the lead. Why in the world would any rational person translate the toughest element of Sealed Deck to constructed **Magic**? Constructed creature "combat" is all about flying over the other guy's defenders, popping a Deed and getting in on your helpless opponent with a 6/6 regenerator, or overwhelming the board with a million 1/1 or 2/2 creatures that weren't there a minute ago. Even the decks populated by actual little losers have Magma Jets or Lava Darts to knock blockers out of the way. One way to prevent yourself from even the possibility of error, while allowing yourself to focus on more pertinent elements of strategic advancement is to not fight fair, not *fight at all*.

By ignoring huge parts of the game, blocking, the opponent's creature or artifact hate, or even the other guy's life total, you can zero your deck on the rest of the elements that matter, that much more. Let's look at basically the scariest deck of all time:

Scott McCord

Grand Prix Philadelphia

This is Scott McCord's Top 8 deck from Grand Prix Philadelphia. Look at how gorgeous this deck is in terms of what we've talked about today. It is a mana consistent two color deck with a realistic curve:

Mana:	0	1	2	3	4
# of Cards:	5	21	1	8	4

It has 21 one mana spells, meaning that it has not just action, but via Brainstorm, Demonic Consultation, and Vampiric Tutor, Velocity in the early game... *and it has five cards that cost less than one!* Scott can play his more important three drop on turn one, and, taking Zvi's edict about mana costs to heart, by the time he is playing his sole four mana card, he's already gained 20 life and is about to win the game.

Bonus (i.e. the root of it all): *Add a Land*

Dan Paskins is my favorite **Magic** writer. Previously my favorite **Magic** writer was edt, but he's more of a favorite former writer at this point. Dan loves Red Decks and makes them win. This is what he has to say about Ponza:

"Ponza has a bad matchup against everything, except for other Ponza decks, and only then when going first. No, you won't go turn 1 Mox/Firewalker, turn 2, 3 and 4 Molten Rain in an actual tournament... Except for one game which you will lose anyway."

When preparing for a recent Extended tournament, I got the best **Magic** advice in four years from my friend Brian David-Marshall: *Add a Land*.

If you don't add a land, you increase the risk of losing to Ponza. Who wants to lose to a deck that is only good in the mirror, and even then, only when playing? Who wants to lose to a deck that is capable of blundering a Mox/Slith, triple Molten Rain draw? Add another land, gentle readers. Add that land.

I know that it is tempting, when you are trying to cram everything you want into your deck, to shave a land. Resist the temptation... add another one instead. If ever you find yourself wavering, ask yourself, *is my deck better than Randy's 6-1 Standard deck from Worlds 1998?*

Randy Buehler

Worlds 1998 - Type 2

This masterful and influential True Control deck had Impulse *and* Whispers of the Muse a la UB Trippin... *and still played 26 land!* And on top of that, it sided up to 30(!) in the control mirror. While not exactly a Suicide Black deck, Randy's deck had a quite a low operating curve. So what did he do with all that land? I'm pretty sure losing to land destruction was not high on Randy's list.

Last Thing:

I just want to shout out to my ancient enemy GP Champ Matt Vienneau who subbed for Scott Wills the past couple of weeks. One of Matt's fill-ins served as the catalyst for this article, one that I really enjoyed researching and writing. Thanks to Matt, and I hope this helped everyone else.

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