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Once upon a time, when **Magic** was new, the bar for efficient creatures was set high by a card whose cost was enticingly low. If you read my preview article for the return of White Knight when *Legions* was the upcoming set, you know how excited I was when first encountering that creature a decade or so back. White Knight was the ideal of weenie perfection given cardboard form: a 2/2 for two, he outstripped everything from the common Grizzly Bears to the rare Elvish Archers... and had two special abilities to boot. What I didn't emphasize in that article was that White Knight wasn't even as good as his eternal enemy.



Now in the early years of the **Magic** Internet, before even the opening of [rec.games.trading-cards.magic.strategy](http://rec.games.trading-cards.magic.strategy), debates raged as to which of these two paragons of aggressive cost was better. "They're equal," said most of the unlettered masses, and taken at cardboard and carefully placed Carta Mundi ink only, that was true. The problem, of course, was the same as it is today: it never ends at the cardboard. The default creature elimination in those early days fell between two cards, Lightning Bolt and Swords to Plowshares. Now neither White Knight nor his evil Bizarro world twin could live through a Lightning Bolt, so they were deuce on that count; what mattered more was Black Knight's ability to weave and dodge past the hated turn Turn TURN that beat heartless warriors (or alternately Vampires, wild animals, or dragons) into life-affirming proponents of agriculture for a single ✱. "But White Knight can't be hit by Terror," claimed the pundits. True to be sure, it hardly mattered for two reasons:

1. No one played Terror
2. Even if they did, that wouldn't mean that you could suddenly kill a Black Knight with it

Realizing that they had hit something special with this class of creatures, **Magic** R&D created a variation on Black Knight in *Fallen Empires*. Order of the Ebon Hand lacked one of Black Knight's crucial points of toughness and didn't naturally strike first, but it ended up such a dangerous variation on the original that the Order could not be contained in a single piece of artwork.



The +1/+0 power increase available to this card, coupled with its natural two power at its  $\{2\}$  cost made Order of the Ebon Hand a dangerous compliment to its ruthless grandfather. In the early days of redundancy, it was not so much a question as to which creature to play, and the cards fought together...

But by the time Dominaria froze over for the *Ice Age*, R&D realized they had a hit on their hands. Knight of Stromgald was an almost exact duplicate of Order of the Ebon Hand... the only difference was in creature type. These popular forces (and their White twins) became collectively known as the "pump Knights" for their aforementioned ability to increase power (I actually never got why they adopted Knight of Stromgald's name when three of the four pump Knights were actually Orders (of the Ebon Hand, of Leitbur, of the White Shield)).

When the first Pro Tour rolled along, deck space was suddenly at a premium. Leon Lindback had to spend all of his deck slots on Necropotence, cards to find Necropotence, and ultimately cards that made Necropotence go, and did not have enough room for all the vicious creatures he could attack with at the  $\{2\}$  slot. With a scant seven slots, Lindback's Top 8 deck -- the unveiling of the scariest deck, if not the scariest version, until Trix at Grand Prix Seattle several years later, came at us with pump Orders as the primary beatdown.

## PT 1 - Leon Lindback



### Main Deck

60 cards

2 Ebon Stronghold  
 4 Strip Mine  
 17 Swamp  
 -----  
 23 lands  
  
 4 Hypnotic Specter  
 3 Knight of Stromgald  
 4 Order of the Ebon Hand  
 -----  
 11 creatures

1 Dance of the Dead  
 1 Dark Banishing  
 4 Dark Ritual  
 4 Drain Life  
 4 Hymn to Tourach  
 1 Ivory Tower  
 1 Jalum Tome  
 4 Necropotence  
 2 Nevinyrral's Disk  
 2 Serrated Arrows  
 1 Soul Burn  
 1 Zuran Orb  
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### Sideboard

1 Apocalypse Chime  
 1 Ashes to Ashes  
 1 City of Brass  
 1 Feldon's Cane  
 1 Jalum Tome  
 1 Meekstone  
 2 Nevinyrral's Disk  
 1 Safe Haven  
 1 Serrated Arrows  
 1 Stromgald Cabal  
 3 The Rack  
 1 Torture  
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 15 sideboard cards

26 other spells

Essentially a control deck with creatures, Lindback's Necropotence needed the pump Knights because each one could conceivably win the game all by itself. He had a lot of card drawing but not that many creatures, so Lindback was looking for efficient warriors in small enough packages that he could break Necropotence... Even if they lacked First Strike to begin with, Order of the Ebon Hand and Knight of Stromgald could conceivably take down Erhnam Djinn unaided, whereas Black Knight -- superb in its own way -- might just be waiting around for Forestwalk in a race it was uncertain to win.

## PT Dallas - Brian Hacker



### Main Deck

60 cards

4 Mishra's Factory

1 Strip Mine

16 Swamp

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21 lands

4 Black Knight

3 Erg Raiders

4 Hypnotic Specter

4 Knight of Stromgald

4 Order of the Ebon Hand

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19 creatures

4 Bad Moon

4 Choking Sands

2 Contagion

3 Dark Ritual

1 Drain Life

1 Hymn to Tourach

2 Necropotence

1 Nevinyrral's Disk

2 Terror

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20 other spells


By the fifth Pro Tour, Brian Hacker had devised a new strategy... Why not just play ALL the great ☠☠ threats? Hacker's deck was so strongly suited to this plan, increasing his drops' potency with Bad Moon and keeping the opponent at a level of mana development where it really was a fight between two mana creatures, that he went as far as to include Erg Raiders at 1☠ when he was finished with all the mighty ☠☠ Knights. As his reward, Hacker stomped through to the top of the Swiss at PT Dallas, earning the first Top 8 of his impressive career.

The three Knights were joined in subsequent sets by cards like Dauthi Slayer and Skittering Skirge; the ☠☠ spot in the Black curve continued to be synonymous with efficient cards and fast beats.

But over the years, something happened. The ☠☠ spot, at one time so thick with candidates the first Necropotence player could not fit TWO full slots of Knights, let alone all three, began to thin. Sure, Black eventually received Nantuko Shade -- probably the best ☠☠ drop ever -- but that undead insect showed up in a Black-themed set, was an anomaly. Conversely, White, Black's eternal enemy, saw its ✨ slot get richer and richer set after set, block after block. In the original sets, Black had Black Knight and White had White Knight. To Order of the Ebon Hand, White had Order of Leitbur. Knight of Stromgald stared across the Icy Red Zone at his enemy, Order of the White Shield, and in Soltari Monk and Soltari Priest, White at least arguably had better Shadow creatures than Black's Dauthi family. *Visions* through *Mirrodin* Block stuffed more and more quality ✨ two-drops into the arsenal... Longbow Archer, Warrior en-Kor, Whipcorder, Stoic Champion, and ultimately Leonin

Skyhunter all fattened the already crowded mana cost with 2/2 candidates. Sure, the originals, Black Knight and White Knight, vanished from Standard play at the same time, but when *Onslaught* Block returned White Knight -- and even added Silver Knight -- there was not so much as a peep from Black for an analogue.

To be sure, the most recent sets have given Black cards like Withered Wretch and Wicked Akuba, but Withered Wretch has seen more play in Green Extended decks than Black beatdown, and Wicked Akuba has made almost no impact in 60 card deck formats at all. While these creatures are certainly serviceable, the classic Black ☠☠-drops all had powerful combat abilities, or evasion, or both. Few two drops -- or even three drops -- would reasonably get in a fight with Black Knight, certainly not Order of the Ebon Hand, while Knight of Stromgald and Skittering Skirge were the kinds of creatures that would never have teammates beside them. In its day, Knight of Stromgald's Protection from White was such a potent deterrent to Swords to Plowshares (the default removal card), a Black mage would never play a second creature until after his opponent had spent a sweeper defending himself. Why give him another creature? If the opponent didn't have a Wrath, he was dead to the Knight, and if he did, he was dead to the next one. Skittering Skirge was so good and won the game so quickly that Black players weren't even ALLOWED to play another creature with it in play. Often representing the evasive top of the curve in decks populated by 8-12 one-drops, Skittering Skirge was equally at home in Black control decks, the lone creature keeping a control opponent honest or giving the slow Black mage the option to go beatdown.

PT Chicago '99 - Brian Davis 		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	60 cards	
18 Swamp	4 Contagion	2 Dystopia
4 Wasteland	4 Corrupt	2 Nevinyrral's Disk
-----	4 Dark Ritual	2 Perish
22 lands	3 Demonic Consultation	3 Persecute
	4 Drain Life	3 Planar Void
	4 Duress	3 Powder Keg
2 Skittering Skirge	4 Necropotence	-----
-----	2 Nevinyrral's Disk	15 sideboard cards
2 creatures	3 Spinning Darkness	
	4 Unmask	
	-----	
	36 other spells	

In *Odyssey* Block, second turn Nantuko Shade was so powerful that as long as you kept playing Swamps, you didn't HAVE to play another creature in order to completely dominate the game. Even contemporaries like Wild Mongrel and Psychatog, considered the best two-drop and the best creature ever printed, respectively, had to tip their card discarding hats to *Torment's* contribution to the ☠☠ spot, at least when getting in a fight with him. As good as either of these creatures were, how could they compete with Nantuko Shade? To take down the little black engine, Wild Mongrel had to spend a valuable card where Nantuko Shade had merely to tap a land. The only solution for most decks was to commit more and more creatures to the board... at which point Mutilate became the trump.

## PT Osaka - Level 6 Mage Olivier Ruel



### Main Deck

60 cards

4 Cabal Coffers  
23 Swamp

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27 lands

4 Laquatus's Champion  
4 Nantuko Shade  
2 Shambling Swarm

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10 creatures

4 Chainer's Edict  
2 Diabolic Tutor  
1 Haunting Echoes  
4 Innocent Blood  
4 Mind Sludge  
1 Morbid Hunger  
3 Mutilate  
1 Rancid Earth  
3 Skeletal Scrying

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23 other spells

### Sideboard

4 Braids, Cabal Minion  
3 Mesmeric Fiend  
1 Morbid Hunger  
1 Mutilate  
3 Rancid Earth  
2 Shambling Swarm  
1 Skeletal Scrying

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15 sideboard cards

Perfectly efficient creatures like Slith Bloodletter can't really compare to the stalwarts of ☠☠ past, either 2/1s or 2/2s. These brave or craven creatures crashed into the Red Zone and either danced past blockers for tons of damage or tore them to shreds, preparing for the next attack. Powerful threats to a card, they ruled the early game tempo fights and in many cases could win the game all by themselves.

To add insult to injury, the *Kamigawa* Block has given Black's enemy Samurai of the Pale Curtain as the most recent addition to its long line of ☠☠-drops, while Black has had to console itself with cards like Nezumi Ronin. Sure, Toshiro Umezawa and Cursed Ronin are *theoretically* powerful enough to win games alone, given sufficient mana or cards in graveyard anyway, but even *red*, to date, has been able to brag about cheaper Samurai.

No more.

Behold the Hand of Cruelty!



Hand of Cruelty is likely to be a popular card in constructed. His peer the Samurai of the Pale Curtain made an immediate splash in Extended, with standout players like Jelger Wiergsma, Neil Reeves, and Gabe Walls all attacking with the veiled Fox back at last year's PT Columbus. Now Hand of Cruelty joins Samurai of the Pale Curtain, breaking that creature's monopoly as the only 2/2 Bushido creature for two mana. Legendary creatures like Kentaro, the Smiling Cat and Sensei Golden-Tail are fine, but they don't exactly live through altercations with opposing two-drops, with or without combat abilities themselves.

Hand of Cruelty is essentially Black Knight with the *Kamigawa* Block flavor. Instead of First Strike, he gets Bushido. Bushido may be a little worse than First Strike when combined with Red removal (many players in ages past, including US National Champion Dennis Bentley coupled Black Knight with Lightning Bolt to take down huge monsters), but the newer ability is often better when going toe-to-toe with creatures without any frills or add-ons. For all its ability, Black Knight could be held off by a Rogue Elephant or even Trained Armodon, but few players will want to trade two cards or their three drops in the early game with a two drop like Hand of Cruelty; look for foolish players to lose 2/4s to Lose Hope in upcoming tournaments.

Because the most recent Black decks in both Standard and Extended have been control decks, it isn't certain that Hand of Cruelty will be headlining a tier one list immediately. Even with Affinity gone now, Standard gives players a lot of incentives to play either slow Black decks with Death Cloud or beatdown in other colors. However, along with Bob Maher's new card next fall and key role players like Nezumi Graverobber on the lineup, look for Black's more aggressive creatures to make a comeback before too long. When the beatdown does return, you can bet that Hand of Cruelty will be one of the vicious threats making that happen.

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