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One of the elements of deck design that is talked about almost not at all, despite being a key element of multiple tournament winning designs, is the idea of choosing your creatures based on the format's *high-water mark*. Typically we focus on only two elements of creature efficiency: power-to-mana cost ratio and the arbitrary notion of whether or not a creature has a ridiculous ability (or just a pretty good ability for its mana cost)... but creature valuation does not end with these two values. In many constructed formats, we can point to a particular number, say two or three, with the knowledge that *that* number represents the amount of damage done by the default (generally Red) removal spell of a particular class.

It's easy to point out the creatures with the great power-to-mana cost ratios. **Magic's** all star list includes several creatures counterbalancing disadvantages with unusual power: Jackal Pup, Phyrexian Negator, and Blastoderm were all defining creatures in their respective eras. Jackal Pup won its block Pro Tour and has been a staple for Red Decks across Rath Cycle, Standard, and Extended since. Phyrexian Negator became highly, even universally, played in beatdown, control, and even combination decks for its entire tenure in Standard and Extended, winning tournament after tournament in builds as varied as Napster and Trix, not to mention the more expected archetypes of Suicide Black and Hatred. Blastoderm was a constant fixture in National Championship and Pro Tour Top 8s in decks from G/W Rebels at its Masques Block debut to Son of Hermit by the following summer; given haste, the card escaped the 15 point limitation of its fading power in Fires of Yavimaya, the most lasting archetype of Blastoderm's tenure in Standard.



Power-to-mana cost ratio is so integral in how tournament players select creatures they often ignore toughness altogether when making selections. Every tournament player recognizes that, excepting the truly spectacular creatures that actually exceed the accepted 1:1 power-to-mana cost ratio, Grizzly Bears is the basic standard for an "efficient" two drop; by corollary, Squire is an under achiever, Yavimaya Barbarian is better than we might expect, and Wild Mongrel is about as good as two drops get... but even in knowing all this, we really don't make any distinctions between 2/1 and 2/2 creatures for two mana. All we really care about is that second point of power, and we worry about trading with Llanowar Elves or some such down the line.

From the other end of the spectrum, we have creatures like Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker. Who would have thought this Legendary Goblin would be a tournament caliber card? It's easy to see why Llanowar Elves and Birds of Paradise are considered two of the defining creatures of their color: They have significant, even rule breaking, abilities and cost a single mana... but as good as Kiki-Jiki's ability is, he costs **2**, as much as five times what we would pay for tournament caliber Legendary creatures or even 2/2 Goblins from the same block. Creatures with purposes other than just beating the hell out of the enemy have much more varied combat statistics than their fighting contemporaries. We run 1/2 or even 1/1 creatures for two mana, 1/4 creatures for four mana, or 3/2 finishers for five mana because they can sift through cards or force our opponents to pick them up. For these creatures, combat statistics are less important because we don't plan on putting our Birds of Paradise or Dust Drinking Legendary Spirits in harm's way anyway; though we sometimes have to, they aren't in our decks to brawl.

But everyone knows the basics. In this day and age of **magicthegathering.com** weekly Extended lists or **Magic Online**, a single Champs or Regionals down, and even the most roguish concoctions become commonplace. What differentiates the innovator from everyone else copying the same creatures? One unspoken mark of the savvy designer is that silent creature choice based at least partially on *toughness*. Consider this deck:

Olle Rade		
Main Deck		Sideboard
61 cards		
7 Forest	2 Giant Growth	1 Anarchy
4 Karplusan Forest	4 Incinerate	2 Essence Filter
7 Mountain	1 Jokulhaups	1 Icy Manipulator
-----	2 Lava Burst	1 Jester's Cap
18 lands	2 Lodestone Bauble	1 Jokulhaups
	3 Pillage	1 Monsoon
4 Deadly Insect	1 Pyroclasm	1 Primitive Justice
4 Fyndhorn Elves	3 Stormbind	2 Pyroblast
4 Giant Trap Door Spider	4 Urza's Bauble	2 Pyroclasm
1 Gorilla Shaman	-----	2 Vexing Arcanix
2 Orcish Cannoneers	22 other spells	1 Zuran Orb
2 Storm Shaman		-----
4 Woolly Spider		15 sideboard cards

21 creatures		

What jumps out at you about this deck? It's 61 cards and plays only 18 lands. Couldn't it maybe have cut one of those Lodestone Baubles? It's got a lot of twos and threes for a serious deck, especially one with no real search. It's clunky, a little confusing to look at. And in a format that included Necropotence, Zuran Orb, and Thawing Glaciers... *this deck won the Pro Tour.*



The defining characteristic of Rade's deck, I think, was the toughness of its creatures. In its day, Rade's was called The Spider Deck for its maximum number of Giant Trap Door Spiders and Woolly Spiders. More than these 2/3 creatures, The Spider Deck played Storm Shaman (a 0/4) and Orcish Cannoneers (a 1/3). But why?


Ice Age/Alliances was one of the few Block formats without a real (read: *White*) Wrath of God. It had no Rout, no Kirtar's Wrath, no Akroma's Vengeance or Final Judgment. The strictly anti-creature sweeper in *Ice Age/Alliances* was, appropriately enough for Red Week, Pyroclasm. One of the few non-creature effects in the format capable of dealing with a Deadly Insect, Pyroclasm was also a useful tool against Kjeldoran

Outpost, one of the most popular finishers in the format.

Unlike a White Wrath of God variant, Pyroclasm did a set two damage. Armed with this knowledge, Rade was able to build a creature deck capable of committing multiple threats to the board *and of*

playing *Pyroclasm* himself. While he wouldn't have necessarily led with his own *Deadly Insect*, Olle could crash with multiple *Spiders* or the exceptionally dangerous *Storm Shaman* while the opponent fell behind with his ostensibly more efficient 2/1 creatures.

A couple of Pro Tours later, most players knew that *Necropotence* was one of the best strategies. But of all the different *Necropotence* decks that showed up in Dallas, from Black-Red hybrids splashing fire to *Bad Moon* beatdown decks running only two *Skulls* main, this one was the deck that ended up on top:

The Toronto Deck – Paul McCabe, PT Dallas 1996		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	61 cards	
2 Lake of the Dead	1 Black Vise	1 Contagion
2 Mishra's Factory	3 Contagion	4 Dystopia
1 Strip Mine	4 Dark Ritual	3 Infernal Darkness
18 Swamp	2 Demonic Consultation	1 Mind Warp
-----	4 Drain Life	1 Serrated Arrows
23 lands	1 Hymn to Tourach	1 Soul Burn
	2 Mind Warp	3 Stench of Decay
	4 Necropotence	-----
4 Hypnotic Specter	4 Nevinyrral's Disk	14 sideboard cards
1 Ihsan's Shade	1 Serrated Arrows	
2 Sengir Vampire	4 Stupor	
-----	1 Zuran Orb	
7 creatures	-----	
	31 other spells	

What was special about this deck? It didn't have as good an appreciation of the symbiosis between *Necropotence* and mana that some of the other decks in Dallas did. It wasn't as efficient as *Hacker's* deck nor as savage in its onslaught as *Pikula's*. It wasn't as efficient as some of the more typical decks, either.

What McCabe's deck did was anticipate the answers that might come after his creatures better than every other deck in the tournament. Every other *Necropotence* deck was stacked with *Knight of Stromgald*... but not McCabe's. Though he still played the requisite *Hypnotic Specters*, Paul's deck finished with big creatures. *Sengir Vampire* was not good enough to make the cut in *Odyssey Block*, so it is a little counterintuitive that it would be able to run with *Balance*, *Zuran Orb*, *Hymn to Tourach*, and *Necropotence* itself. Closer inspection of the format tells us that back in 1996, the high-water mark was set by *Lightning Bolt*. *Sengir Vampire* rose above the three points of fire that those spells represented. PT Dallas was also the coming out party for *Mirage*, and arguably the most important spell to come out of that set, *Hammer of Bogardan*. While the *Hammer* would make short work of a puny animal like *Order of the Ebon Hand*, *Sengir Vampire* would at the very least ask for an accompanying source of fire.

Paul's *Ihsan's Shade* was even more resilient. While there wasn't a big difference between three and four in a format with a high-water mark of three damage, *Ihsan's Shade's* *Protection from White* made it hard to stop for the format's non-fire removal spell, *Swords to Plowshares*.

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Though his deck was technically short on creatures, McCabe's ability to recognize the cards that players would use to come after him, from Serrated Arrows to Incinerate, helped to make him every bit the Pro Tour Champion that Rade with his Spiders.

Today, consideration of the high-water mark is perhaps at an all-time low. Up until very recently, our Standard was defined by a 1/1 two-drop that won every fight and dealt geometrically increasing amounts of damage and life loss. We defend ourselves with cards like Molder Slug and Oxidize, Vedalken Shackles and Duplicant, destructive effects that ignore how tough an opposing permanent might be almost entirely. Strange as it might seem, differentiation in a format with such powerful defensive measures may be even more important a consideration than it was in the past. Around the world, Regional Championships are lining up, or have in some cases, have already happened. Take a cue from one of my favorite writers, and his successful deck from last year's Regionals. Look at what he has to say about the selection of a particular creature, all but forgotten by the time his Regionals rolled along, and why it was so effective, even in the wake of a one mana removal spell that ranks among fire's best and quickest defenders ever.

Sitting Dead Red – Dan Paskins, Regionals 2004



Main Deck <i>60 cards</i>		Sideboard
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Chrome Mox	2 Electrostatic Bolt
4 Great Furnace	4 Shrapnel Blast	2 Furnace Dragon
12 Mountain	4 Skullclamp	4 Molten Rain
20 lands	12 other spells	4 Shatter
		3 Sparksmith
		15 sideboard cards
3 Clickslither		
4 Goblin Piledriver		
4 Goblin Sharpshooter		
4 Goblin Sledder		
4 Goblin Warchief		
4 Siege-Gang Commander		
4 Skirk Prospector		
1 Sparksmith		
28 creatures		

"At the time, our Red deck had four Slith Firewalkers instead of the Clickslithers and Sparksmith..."

"The Firewalkers were replaced by the Clickslithers and Sparksmith, once it became clear that such creature removal as everyone had was aimed at killing little creatures (such as Firewalkers). Electrostatic Bolt, Pyrite Spellbomb, and Echoing Decay are pretty pathetic against a Clickslither."

Though most players will be picking their creatures based on the amazing combat stats of Iwamori of the Open Fist or the outrageous potential of Meloku the Clouded Mirror, it just might be the case that *toughness*, that red-headed stepchild of creature qualities, makes the difference between what everyone else has got and your tournament winner. Jumping past the high-water mark was good enough for fire-resistant champs like Rade, McCabe, and basic Mountain advocate Paskins, himself.. Just something to think about as you review the *Saviors of Kamigawa* list for that new signature spell.

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