

The More Things Change...

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Preston Poulter at PT Atlanta way back in 1996, with fellow Pacific Coast Legends teammates Mark Justice and Scott Johns

Back in 1996, Preston Poulter, one of **Magic's** first stars, ended his semi-frequent newsgroup posts with a chilling signature*:

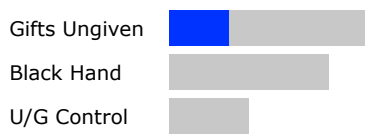
"Abandon all hope all ye who play without Land Tax or Necropotence."

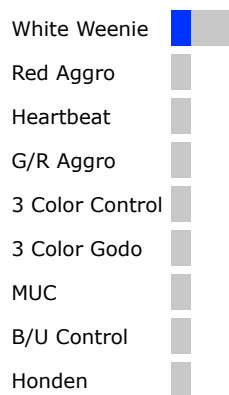
Preston's quote was one of the most important things I ever absorbed as a neophyte **Magic** reader. It's not, I think, that he had an overly myopic view of deck design; here Preston was in a sense a realist. Necropotence and Land Tax were at the time (between PT1 and PT2, tournaments wherein Mr. Poulter finished Top 4 and Top 8, respectively) both unrestricted card drawing engines without peer -- or mana activation costs. At least until the development of the Sligh deck, and even then only arguably, Necropotence and Land Tax-driven decks (typically G/W Armageddon or U/W Control) were just better [at winning] [tournament matches] than decks without.

What Preston taught me, personally, was not necessarily to conform. I didn't (and incidentally didn't win my first PTQ until I dug up *three* copies of the Skull myself for PT Dallas in the second season). He created a framework in my mind, a way of looking at constructed, and all constructed formats forever. Necropotence and Land Tax win. They are in winning decks. If you want to win, you have to play with these cards...

Or – and this was the part that Preston didn't say, at least explicitly – you have to figure out how to beat them.

With that, the week's PTQ results:





■ PTQ winner ■ PTQ Top 8

Two things are remarkable about this week's unofficial tally:

1) All the Black Hand decks in this week's tally but one were from the New Jersey PTQ; that's right: six Black Hand, two Gifts Ungiven, no Black Hand almost anywhere else... and the slot went to Gifts.

2) Even though White Weenie took a Blue Envelope, with four PTQs in the unofficial tally, the onetime best deck in the format not only didn't post one copy per Top 8... *All three White Weenie decks were from the same PTQ!* For an archetype of such previous renown, all I can say is, "How embarrassing."

What's not embarrassing is Shane Houston's winning list. Apparently this is what a White Weenie deck capable of competing in a Gifts field looks like:

Shane Houston - White Weenie

1st Place - Kansas - Witchita - 7/30

This deck has some odd choices. For example, even in a Gifts field, Houston's only Charge Across the Araba is in his sideboard. Given the need to race a deck with at least Game One inevitability, playing only two Celestial Kirins makes a lot of sense (no time for board control against the best deck)... but then why the big Fox Patrons?

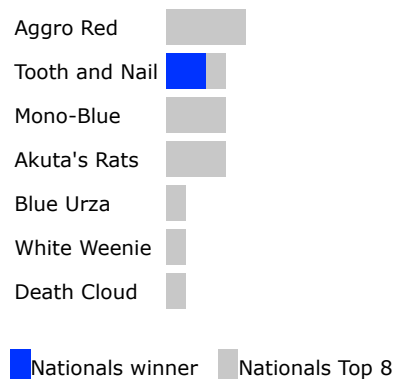
What makes a ton of sense is four Dust Drinkers out of the side. These can be a big help against a long game deck like *The winning formula for White Weenie?* Gifts Ungiven and they really take the starch out of the comes-into-play-tapped mana acceleration and card advantage of Sakura-Tribe Elder and Kodama's Reach. If there's one thing I would really applaud Shane for choosing, though, it's his four Samurai of the Pale Curtain. A lot of players have been skimping on the Samurai this season, giving their love to Hand of Honor, spreading to three drops, and diversifying into board control... but among the potential anti-Gifts Ungiven weapons, Samurai of the Pale Curtain remains White Weenie's best. At the very least, this little Fox is an efficient attacker... But going long? There is nothing better against Hana Kami or Kagemaro recursion, especially with four copies of Otherworldly Journey for protection.

In sum, if anyone out there still doubts the power of Gifts Ungiven in the metagame, stop now. You aren't doing yourself any favors. This is where Poulter's sig comes into play: If you want even a ghost of a chance to qualify, you have to either play this great deck or be prepared, round after round, to slug through it. Every Top 8 has got Gifts aplenty, and chances are, if you want to win, you're going to have to stare down a three- or four-color combo-control deck in the finals.

Since its re-emergence, no deck has really come out of the field to legitimately challenge for Gifts Ungiven's crown. White Weenie is still licking its wounds, bitter at the loss of its onetime crown but firmly cemented in the #2 spot and not going anywhere (up). Even the decks that are supposed to

beat Gifts keep finishing second. I'm not sure if Gifts is the Vial Affinity of this format, but right now, I'd put my money on the "join 'ems" more than the "beat 'ems."

That said, this week, it's much more interesting to talk about Standard. Given the foreign results out of Italy and France, here are the first Standard tallies for the 2005 Championship Season:



2005 French Nationals Top 8 Deck Lists

Julien Goron

French Nationals Top 8 Deck

Florent Lefranc

French Nationals Top 8 Deck

Raphael Levy

French Nationals Top 8 Deck

Peyronnel Christophe

French Nationals Top 8 Deck

Yannick Lacroix

French Nationals Top 8 Deck

Bastien Lodo

French Nationals Top 8 Deck

Olivier Monbailly

French Nationals Top 8 Deck

2005 Italian Nationals Top 8 Deck Lists

Alessandro Selvaggi

Rattoni golosoni

Bruno Panara

Rattoni golosoni

Andrea Peloso

White Weenie

Stefano Fiori

Joe Cassano Strikes Back

Simone Carboni

Rattoni golosoni

Andrea Cerasari

Antichi Sapori

Gennaro Mango

Deathcloud

Manuel Alvisi

Tooth and Nail

The Standard results show a lot of new deck diversification and updates from Regionals. First of all, we have no Medium Green decks at all. What was considered the best archetype to come out of LCQ Philadelphia or thereabouts, graduating to the second best deck at US Regionals, has completely vanished. In its place is a more aggressive Red Deck that apparently took all of the excess Swords of Fire and Ice that the Green players weren't using any more and adopted them main deck. These two Top 8s had four Red Decks between them, and three of the four played three or more Swords starting; perhaps the theory is that with the Swords in their own stacks, these Red Decks would be less likely to have to face a world with limited Swords of Fire and Ice.

The shifts in local tech were also pretty telling; Mono-Blue and Rats split three and three in the two Top 8s, with all the Rats in Italy and all the Blue decks in France. The cool tech to come out of Italian Nationals is Akuta, Born of Ash. All three placing Rats decks started Akuta, which makes a lot of sense and has nice synergy with the deck's core plan. It isn't difficult to get "size matters" online in a

deck with Ravenous and Chittering Rats, after all. Akuta gives Rats a lot of late-game lift, substituting for absent card drawing in a deck that might otherwise fold to mass removal when it starts plucking lands on top. Finally, most of the non-creature spells in Rats are a testament to the savvy and power of the last two blocks: a consensus 4 Aether Vials, 4 Umezawa's Jittes, and 3 Pithing Needles in all three lists.

Even if you break Blue UrzaTron out of the "Mono-Blue Control" cadre proper, the diversity in France is dizzying. For someone interested in testing decks, France's Blue situation begs a serious question: what version of Mono-Blue Control do you test? Looking at these three lists, players can't decide on which creatures will be on the other side of the table, let alone mana bases... or even counter counts. 3 Jushi Apprentice, 3 Thieving Magpie; 3 Jushi Apprentice, 3 *Spire Golem* instead; 4 Thieving Magpie, 4 Spire Golem, 4 Erayo, 3 Trinket Mage, 2 Kira... WHAT!?!

The Blue decks all do different things. I suppose in a sense they are all concerned with library manipulation and card drawing and countering spells, but the paths these three decks take differs greatly. The one thing they did change -- assure even -- is a shift in the metagame. Before this week, I would have recommended players to *NOT* run Boil in their Red Deck sideboards for lack of legitimate targets; Blue, after all, did dismally at Regionals. Now? I would not be able to, in good conscience, say such a silly and untrue thing. Between its power incarnation with Memnarch and the UrzaTron to aspirations to true control with 14 counters starting, all the way to a control-Skies hybrid with potential Erayo lock, Blue is back... and looks to be a decent competitor.

Lastly, and most importantly, I am disgusted with myself that I put the Aggro Red decks on top in that tally... *Because Red Decks aren't on top*. Sure, they got four players in two Top 8s, which is technically more than the three players posted by Blue or Rats... or Tooth and Nail. *But Tooth and Nail took both of the trophies*.

This may be the fastest Tooth and Nail we've seen yet. All the placing lists, including both National champions, ran 2 or more Chrome Moxes, which was something we actually saw in some lists at 2004 Regionals; at the same time, not one of the three decks deigned to play a single Kodama's Reach. Kodama's Reach has been a staple in the deck since Terry Soh at the Invitational, an important element that seemed to take off with almost universal popularity. Without Kodama's Reach, cards like Sowing Salt -- or even Stone Rain -- get a lot better.

You know what they say: The more things change...

footnote* Incidentally in order to quote that sig I dug up one of Preston's old reports where he dispatches the site's editor (not yet a member of the Pacific Coast Legends) in the second round and loses to future teammate Mark Justice in the Top 4. For a look at the ancient days of **Magic** tech on the Internet, venture no further. Particularly interesting are the notions of tournament format, card power, and maths.

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