

The First Head: Double the Fun

Laura Mills

Monday, August 15, 2005

- 
- 



- [Laura Mills Archive](#)

There are enough dysfunctional families on television that it might be hard to believe that there is anything but bickering and mishaps whenever two people try to work together to accomplish something. In fact, reality is much different. People fall in love, have children and stay married. A community will unselfishly work together for the common good when disaster strikes. Even big companies rely on a group of employees to produce technical advances that benefit society, like the artificial heart and TiVo. Cooperation shouldn't be looked on as an exercise in the art of trying to get your own way, but a chance to produce bigger and better things. The Two-Headed Giant format finally gives **Magic** players an opportunity to work together and achieve something more than a single player can accomplish on her own.

I won't make any predictions for what will result from this new tournament format – I leave such speculation to experts like Anthony (maybe he could predict a job for me writing regularly at this site). I will, however, run through what advantages this format will bring to the tournament scene.

Advantage #1 – An Entirely New Concept

It was announced earlier this year that the Legacy format would now be a part of the regular Grand Prix rotation, and there was much rejoicing. Being able to use all those cards you've had to stash in a shoebox for the last several years because they were no longer legal is always cause for celebration. Still, all one-on-one decks, regardless of the format, fall into one of three archetypes: Aggro, Control or Combo, with the occasional half-breed making an appearance.

With two decks needing to operate simultaneously, Two-Headed Giant isn't merely about taking two good decks and playing them side-by-side. If you're going to win in this format, each deck now needs to exploit each other's strengths and cards as if it were an added bonus. In short, synergy is going to play a big role in this format. We should be used to paying attention to synergy now, considering how much the Kamigawa block pushed finding ways to abuse mediocre cards to take advantage of synergies with other cards. Could it be that development was merely preparing us for this new format? Hmm... that might explain why so many old favorites have been rotated back in with *Eighth and Ninth Edition*, just in time for sanctioned Legacy tournaments. If you start seeing sets devoted to multiplayer, I'd become suspicious.

Two-Headed Giant isn't merely about taking two good decks and playing them side-by-side. If you're going to win in this format, each deck now

needs to exploit each other's strengths and cards as if it were an added bonus.

But I digress. This is about synergy, is it not?

With the addition of synergy, there is now an additional layer to every deck – one that both tournament-seasoned players and new players are not yet used to. Though it won't level the playing field enough such that casual players will dominate every Two-Headed tournament, it will provide a new aspect that everyone will be exploring at the same time.

Some of you may think you already have the answer to this synergy twist. I heard those similar claims before this format started, that identical control decks will dominate. Anthony says he's heard more, but he's always had better hearing than me – or so he claims.

In just the few short weeks that Anthony and I have had to explore this new format, we've found several strategies that are viable that revolve around how to use this new concept of synergy, independent of whether you are playing aggressive, control, or combination decks:

- **The Wave:** Most decks usually either play the long game or the short game. The long game players hope to quell the opponent long enough to take control. The short gamers hope to finish the opponent before their own deck runs out of steam. In each case, a single player is sacrificing one aspect of timing in order to build a stronger deck. The concept of the wave strategy is to plug the holes by having one person concentrate on an aggressive short game while the other person concentrates on big late game effects.

For example, Anthony wants to play a fast green deck with Birds of Paradise, Troll Ascetics, Umezawa's Jitte and Beacon of Creation. My deck is a slower, red/green burn deck packed with Fireballs, Rude Awakening, and Mindslaver. While Anthony tries to smash as much damage through in the early game, I can spend time using Kodama's Reach and Solemn Simulacrum to build up my mana. By the time Anthony begins to lose steam, I should have enough land and cards available to repeatedly bludgeon our opponents with large X spells.

- **The Backup:** Similar to the Wave, each deck plays a different role such that together, both decks fill any missing holes. In this case, though, one deck serves as the primary win condition while the other deck packs in all the support spells needed to win. This strategy works well with easy-to-disrupt combo decks. Instead of the combo player having to add disruption and countermagic in order to punch the combination through, she can spend all her efforts on getting the combo out. Her teammate will be there to provide the necessary counter backup.

As an example, I've decided to play a five-color Bringer deck that uses Door To Nothingness as a backup win condition if the Bringers can't break through. To support my deck, Anthony has built a blue/red control deck with Earthquakes, countermagic and Turnabout. While I spend the first few turns casting Black, Red and Green Bringers, Anthony clears my way of blockers using the Earthquakes. Anthony's counters help make sure the Door To Nothingness remains on the table until I untap, then casts Turnabout targeting me so I can have the required ten mana to activate

the Door with only one land of each color on the table. Since a single Door To Nothingness will take out an entire team (more on using such tactics later), this little combination just won the game.

- **The Twin:** Both the Backup and the Wave use synergy by filling in weaknesses of the other decks, but the Twin does the opposite, focusing purely on one aspect and making it twice as powerful. There are so many similar cards in the Magicverse that it's relatively easy for both players to play all burn, all discard, or all white weenie. However, since only life points are shared between heads, a team can lose by a single person losing through some other means. You'll see many Twin strategies where both teammates will focus on taking one person down, making it seem like a 2-on-1 battle.



Anthony's been itching to try out the Twin idea by using every form of milling and decking available. Both his and my deck would consist of spells that would cause a player to lose cards from her library, and we'd both be targeting those milling spells at the same person. For example, Anthony might build a monoblue deck that uses Cloudhoof Kirin, Dampen Thought, Patron of the Moon and Soratami Mindsweeper along with several Arcane spells to mill as many cards in the graveyard as possible. I may decide to take a blue/artifact route, using Vedalken Engineers and the Urza lands to power out a Tower of Murmurs, with Grinding Station and Millstones pecking away the first few turns.

- **The Ubersynergy:** All of the above team styles focus mostly on the decks as a whole. There will be occasional cards that interact synergistically with both decks – what White Weenie Twin wouldn't be playing with Crusade? The Ubersynergy deck, though, is designed for the two decks to take full advantage of each other's spells. Each teammate plays three casting-cost spells such that they can both take advantage of an Aluren. Both players are using decks that send creatures to the graveyard quickly such that a single Patriarch's Bidding will allow both teammates to restock. The decks don't have to be similar in any fashion, they just have to focus on taking advantage of each other's spells.



For example, I have a penchant for an Aether Burst/Eternal Witness/Orim's Chant deck that uses Intuition to get the Aether Bursts and Orim's Chants in the graveyard. Anthony is playing his

favorite Aluren/Genesis Chamber/Fleetfoot Panther/Soul Warden deck (ignore those cries of protestation – he truly is enamored with Aluren). While my deck can combo out on its own, the Alurens prevent me from having to pay for the Eternal Witnesses each time I want to cast one. This effectively gives me extra mana each turn to play a single Eternal Witness multiple times. We all know how annoying one Eternal Witness a turn can be – multiples is just insane. Likewise, my Aether Bursts keep Anthony's own combination going if he needs to use his Fleetfoot to rescue a Soul Warden. I can also save a Fleetfoot Panther from certain doom if someone tries to destroy it, at the same time returning one of my own Eternal Witnesses. Throughout all this bouncing, both Anthony and I are building up a small army of creatures from the Genesis Chamber. To double the creature production, I also include Nantuko Shrine in my deck. If Anthony is having trouble finding his Genesis Chamber and has one Fleetfoot Panther in the graveyard with an Aluren on the table, my Nantuko Shrine will still allow him to produce infinite 1/1 creatures, though much more cute and fuzzy.

I said I wasn't into predictions, but I can still make my own logical deductions. Since cards from Ubersynergy decks benefit both players instead of a single teammate, it is akin to having a 2-for-1 spell at the cost of a normal one. I'm sure you've heard a tournament player recite this lovely 2-for-1 mantra when you've had to block one of their creatures and also use a burn spell to finish it off. Since everyone's trying to get the most out of their spells, it could be logically concluded that ultra-synergistic decks might become dominant. However, these are going to be a challenge to build. Some of the more basic team styles will probably hold their own until all the kinks get worked out of Ubersynergy decks. If you're ready to take on this new challenge: On your mark, get set, GO!

Advantage #2 – Two Heads Really are Better than One

We've all experienced that ominous tap on the shoulder after just losing a grueling match. Your friend leans over and comments, "Why didn't you do insert correct play here?" This is usually followed by a slap to the head as you realize that move would've won the game. Wouldn't it be nice if that spectator could have commented on the winning move *during* the game?

The open communication in Two-Headed Giant allows for that specific possibility. Since we all see things differently and from unique perspectives, having two sets of eyes look at the board and two sets of minds to decide on the correct play will help minimize those costly mistakes. This is a boon for players struggling to get over that performance hurdle who are always one play mistake short of getting into the top eight. Pairing up with a person just a little bit better than you means that there is someone there actively helping you see what you're missing, providing that small piece of insight needed to break through those skill barriers.

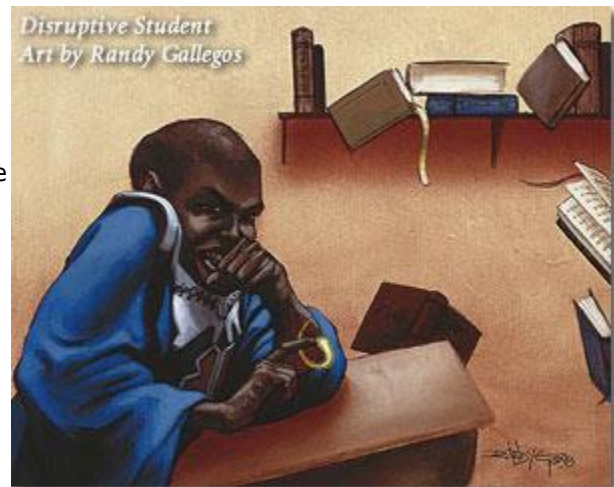
Some of the better players might not like the idea of being paired down with a newer player, but Two-Headed Giant can serve as a scouting grounds for those trying to create their own pro-aspiring teams.



By pairing up a veteran with a new prospect, you have the chance to not only assess a person's play skills, but see their thought processes and ability to assimilate information. This will give the veteran an opportunity to find someone who catches those mistakes the veteran is prone to making.

Advantage #3 – A Better Start for the Beginner Tournament Player

Speaking of getting better, I think Two-Headed Giant will be a much better format for those first getting their feet wet with competitive tournaments. I've spent a lot of time teaching my friends how to play **Magic** competitively, and there are certain nuances to tournament play that many don't necessarily get or understand why I choose to make plays in a specific order. The two biggest of these is trying to get first-time players to recognize the need to cast creatures after attacking (unless they have haste) and to play instants at the end of an opponent's turn.



It is difficult to instruct new players on tournament situations after they've happened without re-creating the entire turn. Even if you do manage to set up the situation with a bunch of cards to illustrate, a beginner may still have the result of the play fresh in their mind. For instance, Anthony used a Rend Flesh to remove his opponent's Arc-Slogger at the beginning of his turn. The Rend Flesh was countered, and Anthony didn't have enough mana to do anything else. I might try to explain afterwards that it would have been better for Anthony to wait until the end of his opponent's turn to use the Rend Flesh. This way, his opponent wouldn't have mana available to counter the next spell Anthony might be able to cast during the next turn. No matter how I might word or explain the situation, what Anthony still sees is the end result – that regardless of when he played Rend Flesh, it was countered. To Anthony, that translates to there being no difference on when his Rend Flesh should have been played.

In Two-Headed Giant, it's much easier to take a newer player and discuss possibilities while there **are** still possibilities. I can tell Anthony to hang onto his Rend Flesh, and he'll ask why. Before anything happens, I'll be able to explain the situation and thought processes of what to watch out for while the probability still exists. Anthony will have a chance to absorb my reasoning and start to use it when he plays on his own.

It's much easier to take a newer player and discuss possibilities while there **are** still possibilities. Aside from the learning curve for first-time players, there's also the collection curve. Though the designers usually do a good job of spreading the quality of cards such that you don't need a deck chock-full of rares to play competitively, there are always one or two rares that slip through the cracks. These are the twenty-dollar cards that seem to be the mainstay of almost everyone's deck. For the *Mirrodin* block, Solemn Simulacrum and Blinkmoth Nexus were the expensive cards everyone had to have. For Kamigawa block, Umezawa's Jitte is taking that honor. If you have a friend that wants to play as well, both of you have to spend time trying to get *eight* copies of an expensive and hard-to-get rare. With the restrictions on only four of a card between the two decks (and one for restricted

cards), the Two-Headed Giant format alleviates some of the strain on collecting cards. Instead of needing copies for each person, now two people can pool their supplies together for a single deck. With less cards to obtain, that money can be spent playing more tournaments. Who wouldn't want to get more play time for their investment?

Advantage #4 – It's Couple's Time!

Did you know that there are actually quite a few women and girls who attend **Magic** tournaments? The problem is almost none of them actually play in the tournament. Rather, girlfriends and wives come along to watch their significant others play and lend moral support.

There's nothing wrong with offering support, but I've had enough of being the only female in the entire room actually playing in the tournament. I've heard all the excuses from the males and females – I have a husband I try to drag to **Magic** tournaments constantly.

The excuses fall under two categories:

1. *He doesn't have time to teach me*

When some of the more competitive players practice for tournaments, they don't want to get distracted from their practice time to teach someone to play. Although a practical but not very generous attitude, the Two-Headed Giant format doesn't allow that excuse any more. For starters, this format is so new that everyone will be learning how to play it at the same time. There won't be a bunch of net decks that everyone is trying to practice against. For the next few months or even year, most decks will be new to everyone, so you have a singular chance to sneak in and learn at the same time everyone else is.

Secondly, your lack of play skill isn't necessarily going to be a detraction for your fiercely competitive significant other. Since both of you can communicate and look at each others' hands, your partner can tell you how to play correctly without fear of him losing the game. It may be a little slow at first, but with a little patience and concentration, you'll eventually be able to catch on and learn to make the correct plays on your own.

2. *I don't want to play these people*

Tournaments aren't as much fun when you are playing a bunch of strangers and rarely get to see those friends you came with. This is just a downside of the tournament structure in general, and I can sympathize with all those spouses and girlfriends who don't feel like they're spending any quality time at tournaments. If you were given the opportunity to play



next to the current love of your life, wouldn't that be much more equivalent to a date (just a warning to you guys, *don't even think about* suggesting a **Magic** tournament for a date)? The Two-Headed Giant format is definitely more suited to those who would rather spend time with their friends while winning, than just merely winning.

Though I've been talking about couples, you don't need to be romantically involved to enjoy this aspect of Two-Headed Giant. Friends who are going to a tournament for the first time will probably enjoy Two-Headed Giant more than a typical one-on-one sanctioned tournament. Two beginners can go to the same tournament as a team, and even if they perform poorly, at least they'll have more fun playing together than facing all those tough opponents alone.

With both of these excuses out of the way, there's no reason we shouldn't start bringing more women into the game of **Magic**. Besides, experts agree that women are much better team players than men.

Advantage #5 – It is Surprisingly Fun!

I'm going to let you in on a secret that I've saved until last, just so I wouldn't frighten anyone away before they see all the advantages to the new Two-Headed Giant format. When Anthony first proposed the idea of playtesting Two-Headed Giant, I was definitely aligned with the ranks of the uninterested. With all the open communication, I figured turns would take forever, one of my biggest turn-offs. People playing simultaneously? How is that any different from a single person playing a forty-card deck?

I didn't even bother to build a special deck for our little foray into Two-Headed Giant. I just made sure that my husband (Mike) and I brought decks we had already built that could capitalize on a small amount of synergy.

The synergy was simple – my husband had a Zuberia deck that sacrificed creatures to Goblin Bombardment. This deck could do quite a bit of damage in one turn if he could muster at least three Dripping-Tongue Zuberias. My deck had Patriarch's Bidding and many of the larger Spirits, which I could pitch to the graveyard using Vengeful Dreams and Read the Runes.

Simple, yes?

Powerful? Absolutely.

Many of the game we played that first evening would start out with each of us playing out our decks as we would normally – Mike casting his little creatures, me chucking my big bodies. We would be able to gain a little bit of control over the board, then...WHAM! Patriarch's Bidding would arrive, and it was an all-out slaughterhouse. My deck would explode with ten 5/5 spirits on the table. Those Zuberias would get sacrificed through the chain AGAIN, making just one Emberfist Zuberia punching out nine damage that turn. It was fun to see the carnage of both decks cashing in on a powerful spell simultaneously.

Patriarch's Bidding wasn't solely responsible for such amazing effects, since I tried the same synergy experiment with Nantuko Shrine and Aether Burst a week later (re-read the Uber-Synergy section for the decks). The two decks taking advantage of each other was like playing monkey in the middle with your little sister – cruel and unfair, but entirely too much fun. And that was just my first experience with this format!

Closing Thoughts

All you Johnnies out there searching for new and more powerful combinations – this is your format. Spikes (tournament and non-tournament players alike) looking for an additional twist to strategy – synergy is the curveball. Timmies – having a bit of backup from a friend will help you get those titanic creatures out that you've so desired to play. Whatever comes of this format, it will be a new and exciting world to explore, especially with the help of another head.

Head off to the other half of this article