

Pro Tour Atlanta 1996 Report. No, R Search.

Matthew Vienneau
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"Ahh...Atlanta..."

*The old graybeard smacks his gums together and beckons you closer. "The end of the Golden Age of **Magic** it was. Old legends fading away and young pups striving to take their place. Some succeeded. Many failed. And a few of us refuse to give up the dream, telling stories to young jackanapes like yourselves in an attempt to re-live past glories. It was heady times - the rules were loose, and the women...uh, still not around so much. The world was full of potential and I was on top - nothing could stop me. You won't find any digital records of that time - this was before the wonder (and crutch) you call an 'Internet'. Only those that were there could tell you what I'm about to reveal, and most of them are no longer talking..."*



It's been nine long years since the Absolute Best Pro Tour Ever. Sure, others may claim a different favourite, but I didn't make the top 8 in any of those Pro Tours, now did I? And did *those* Pro Tours also have a \$25,000 Team Event? I don't think so. But that wasn't all that made Pro Tour Atlanta (1996) spectacular. What really made it stand out was *Mirage*. Never before, and never again, would competitors at a professional event (of more than 16 people) be using cards they had never seen before. Imagine the biggest pre-release you've ever been to. Now add in all the best players in the world. Now add a \$26,000 first prize. You've still only begun to capture the feel of Pro Tour Atlanta.

And when I say pre-release, this was no "I've read the spoiler on the Internet and studied the **magicthegathering.com** previews and OMG Terminate is so cool" kind of pre-release. There were no spoilers. No leaks. No previews. This was only the second stand-alone expansion - we didn't have a clue what would be thrown at us. Would fliers be good? Would there be lots of removal? How good was Disenchant? Was there even a Disenchant? Will there be giant legendary dragons or are we going to be seeing a lot of 2/2 creatures for four? Poison? They brought back poison? No one had a clue, and it made everything incredibly exciting.

Back in 1996, tournament reports weren't quite the art form that they would become a few years later when The Dojo emerged and people could bitch about opening bad cards to a much wider audience. While I would later gain some notoriety for my writing, my first tournament report wasn't until Pro Tour Paris and that was sent directly to Wizards. I'm not sure I would have kept on writing if they hadn't called me back a few days later to discuss my concerns, something that was to happen repeatedly throughout those early years whenever I wrote something particularly vicious. Luckily they did and I kept writing. But I never had a chance to write about Pro Tour Atlanta, despite it being the (first) peak of my career. Fast forward to 2005 and *Mirage* is back in the news due to its upcoming release on **Magic Online** and they've announced that the final expansion of the *Ice Age* block has been found. There will never be a better time to finally share my experiences with the new breed of **Magic** player, many of whom were all of 8 years old at the time.

Here now, after a nine-year wait, is my official Pro Tour Atlanta 1996 Tournament Report, "Hindsight Edition". Well, part one of the report at least - if you've ever read any of my writing you know I have trouble with brevity. But don't worry, I'm here for a month!

Pro Tour Atlanta 1996

Pro Tour Atlanta was the first Pro Tour I had ever flown to. The previous year I had scoffed at the notion of paying the \$25 entry fee for the worldwide *Ice Age* Pre-Release Event being held in my home city of Toronto, as I couldn't imagine anyone would ever pay that much to play **Magic**. A mere twelve months (and one Nationals top 8 and Pro Tour top 32) later, I was spending hundreds just to get to the site and would eventually spend over \$20,000 on **Magic** travel. I have now flown to Europe nine times and never won a single dollar there, indicating a painful stubbornness that persists to this day – I'm sure trip #10 will be my big coming out party!



When it comes to tournament sites, the Atlanta Market Center was pretty good. The competitors played under 15 stories of open air in front of a raised stage that was used for fashion shows when not covered in **Magic** players (or so rumour had it, we may just have been hoping models would wander through the venue). But that was nothing compared to the player hotel. I have subsequently been to over thirty Pro Tours and dozens of Grand Prix and I have never, EVER been in a hotel as nice as the Marriot Marquis in downtown Atlanta (you can see pictures here). Featuring a 50-story open atrium in the centre of the hotel with walkways to the edges from a central elevator column, it was a spectacular sight. And surprisingly, all of us somehow resisted throwing cards off the edges of the balconies to see who could go the farthest – it was a more mature time back then.

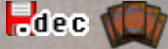
The night before the tournament started there was a free dinner for the players, a practice they skipped at my first Pro Tour but was (and still is?) done for every World Championships. Unfortunately this stopped for the regular Pro Tours a few events later when they merged the Junior Pro Tour into the main event and no longer had worried moms concerned that their kids would starve. It would be eight long and hungry years before the Pro Tour Players Club would once again provide free food to famished players, though I can't say many of them have suffered for the lack.

Before dinner everyone was required to attend a player meeting. Unlike today's meetings that are held early in the morning when the tournament starts and don't take more than a few minutes, this one took an hour at least. Mostly because people (my memory says Hammer and Darwin) kept asking increasingly obscure questions about the new intentional draw and deck randomization rules. You see, at US Nationals a few months earlier, Mike Long and Mark Justice wanted to draw, but that wasn't allowed at the time and they were ordered to play. They correctly realized that this was ridiculous and proceeded to take the maximum time possible for every move. At one minute of "thinking" for each phase or decision, they had no problem running out of time and getting the draw they wanted. Wizards realized there was a problem and changed the rules for Pro Tour Atlanta. Try imagining a world with no intentional draws and you start to get an idea of how primitive the tournament environment was back then, and how spoiled you are now!

In addition to new floor rules, we also got to learn about the two new keywords, "flanking" and "phasing", as well as the new type of card called "mana sources" that replaced certain interrupts. But we still weren't allowed to see any of the actual cards! This meant that anything was possible and the entire crowd would groan as someone asked about the interaction of Nether Void and mana sources, just in case Nether Void had been re-printed. Needless to say, within a few events the player meetings were made much shorter and eventually modified to what they are today.

They also announced that the tournament was nine rounds on Day 1, cut to Top 8. If you think a 4-3 record to make Day 2 is difficult, try 7-1-1! Strangely, this didn't faze me, as Canadian Nationals earlier that summer had featured *12 rounds* on Day 1 – eight rounds of constructed and a massive four-round 32-person draft to finish the day. Nine rounds would be easy!

Finally the morning of the tournament arrived and opened up *Mirage* cards for the first time. Luckily I still have the paper version of the December 1996 Sideboard magazine that lists my entire deck. Unfortunately (fortunately?), it didn't include sideboards so I can't ridicule my past self for horrible deck-building errors.

Matthew Vienneau, Canada 

Main Deck
40 cards

5 Forest	1 Crash of Rhinos	1 Armor of Thorns
6 Island	1 Dream Fighter	1 Barbed Foliage
6 Mountain	1 Giant Mantis	1 Boomerang
-----	1 Gibbering Hyenas	1 Chaos Charm
17 lands	1 Jungle Troll	1 Cinder Cloud
	1 Jungle Wurm	1 Dissipate
	1 Searing Spear Askari	1 Flare
	1 Talruum Minotaur	1 Fog
	1 Wall of Roots	1 Goblin Scouts
	-----	1 Grinning Totem
	9 creatures	1 Moss Diamond
		1 Power Sink
		1 Ray of Command
		1 Thirst

		14 other spells

Over the past nine years I've taken a lot of flack for making top 8 at a sealed deck Pro Tour. Everyone scoffs that I was lucky, and knowing the burn-heavy *Mirage* environment, they sarcastically ask, "so how many X spells did you open?"

The answer: ONE. And it was frickin' *Power Sink*.

Now I will not deny that Aaron Muranaka's two Kaervek's Torch and a Volcanic Geyser likely propelled him where mere talent may not have gone. And Chris Pikula's Kaervek's Torch and Hammer of Bogardan were probably pretty helpful at clearing a path to the Top 8 if his Unyaro Bee Sting wasn't proving sufficient.

But me? I had Flare. And Thirst. And Cinder Cloud.

John Yoo? He had 20 creatures in his deck. I had 10, and one of them was Wall of Roots. Mike Long? Two Pacifism, Dark Banishing and Torrent of Lava. Terry Borer two Spitting Earth, Drain Life, Kaervek's Purge as well as the extremely out-of-flavour Sting.

Heck, I was playing blue **but I didn't have any fliers in my deck!**

That's right, 10 creatures, little evasion, small amounts of (inefficient) kill, and I still managed a 7-1-1 record. To my detractors I say thee thus:

"Bite Me".

Those of you taking a closer look at my deck likely have some immediate questions such as, "why did I play such a horrid 3-colour mana base"? Earlier this year I specifically advised everyone to not do what I did in Pro Tour Atlanta. Was I only able to win because everyone else sucked at building sealed decks?

Not quite. The important thing to realize is that back in 1996, you could only use the lands that came with the sealed deck! None of this "play any lands you want", or even the "you can have 5 extra lands of your choice" rule that was in vogue for a while. You would open five or six of each land and just pray it roughly matched your good spells, because the lands you did get weren't necessarily equally distributed between the different types. It wasn't a choice of two or three colours, it was a choice of three or four or more! The December 1996 Sideboard has an article on building sealed decks where it quotes various people from Pro Tour Atlanta. To give you an idea of what building sealed decks was like, here are the thoughts of some notable pros of the period:

"I like three colors, sometimes four, I think three is optimal...That gets you a good mana ratio and you won't be struggling to cast the spells in your hand" – Bryce Currence

"Usually three, but sometimes four – the fourth color being very light like...Fireball or...Swords... usually two mana to splash the fourth. Generally there's not enough creature removal in just two colors." – John Yoo

"I will probably play four or five colors. I like to take the best cards available and work the mana around them rather than to take the best color theme available and make everything else fit in." – Brian Hacker

But the best was discovering this gem from a little-known Junior Pro Tour player from New Jersey:

"I always play at least three, usually four or five [colors]. However, pay close attention to the colored casting costs." – Jon Finkel

As you can see, limited deck construction (and the cards you have to work with!) has come a long way since then.

I do know that back in the day, I disagreed with all of them and stuck to three colours religiously except for just one time. Unfortunately that one time happened to be the Top 8 of this very tournament (and I agonized over the decision), but I do know that I generally had an advantage over other players in that I wasn't colour-screwed quite as often. Of course, sealed deck wasn't really a format anyone played if they could help it. (Note that before *Mirage*, sets weren't even designed specifically with Sealed Deck issues in mind.) Even Chris Pikula notes that it was only his second sealed deck tournament ever. And with the various mana issues, it was a much slower format – in my discussion of my top 8 deck I'm quoted as saying how good my deck is because it can get four creatures out by the 8th turn! Not something one brags about in today's faster and sleeker environment.

Before I get too cocky about my own skills, I will admit that my deck was not without options. Ray of Command often gave me two-for-one advantage. Grinning Totem allowed me to steal my opponent's best spell and Jungle Troll allowed me to hold off their biggest creature. Goblin Scouts was incredibly

good as 60 of the top 64 decks had mountains in them so they hit pretty hard. Boomerang and Fog were easily my two worst cards as with six islands and a Thirst I never had the blue available, and Fog just isn't good in general – there aren't a lot of "creatures can't block"-type finishers or high-powered combat tricks in *Mirage*. Barbed Foliage was my next dubious card. Back in *Ice Age Sealed* deck you would often be pecked to death by Mountain Goats and other small evasion creatures so I figured it might be helpful and against Goblin Scouts it was the perfect answer, but it didn't do much against all the 3/3 hill giants. I remember berating myself for including the Moss Diamond when a Forest would be faster if I immediately needed the mana (tempo wasn't a big thing in limited back then) but it turned out pretty good as artifact destruction would be aimed at the Diamond leaving me free to play the Totem as necessary.

Through the wonders of the DCI Personal Information Center, we can look back in time at exactly what happened to me at Pro Tour Atlanta:

96-9-7206, PT-Atlanta (Masters): 09/13/1996

1 Yori Rubinson	Win	1719
2 Michael J Loconto	Win	1735
3 Michael O Long	Win	1751
4 Mario Robaina II	Win	1768
5 Heath M. Kennel	Win	1784
6 Darwin Kastle	Mess Loss	1770
7 Yan Zhang	Win	1788
8 Aaron Terry	Win	1805
9 Aaron M Muranaka	Draw	1805

For those that didn't know, back then round 1 was seated so that the top rated players were matched against the lowest rated players. I know, I know, you're thinking, "wow Matt, you had a really awful ranking". But remember that they reset all the rankings in early 1996 so I was actually one of the highest ranked Limited players in the world! The September 1996 Sideboard released at this very Pro Tour listed me as second only to Mark Justice in the world of sanctioned Limited **Magic**. My ranking in 1996? 1765 to Justice's 1788 – a far cry from the 2205 I needed to claim first place several years later after a run of Grand Prix victories.

I was so confident in my abilities that I wore my name tag backwards so people wouldn't realize who I was and thus underestimate my play skills. Of course, despite everyone knowing Justice, who had actually accomplished some high-place finishes in previous years, no one had any clue about me.

Unfortunately for Mr. Rubinson, Mr. Kennel, Mr. Zhang and Mr. Terry, after nine years I have no memories at all of the matches. I could make something up, but I have a sense that this article is going to be too long as it is. But I do have some comments on the other matches.

In round two I was not happy to face off against Michael Loconto, the first Pro Tour Champion. I was immediately intimidated and he did nothing to put me at ease. Loconto was never known for having a particularly sweet demeanor or, as it happens, for playing too quickly. I'm up a game but he's winning game two when all of a sudden time gets called and I win! Now, this may sound a bit weird to those of you used to the giant digital countdown clocks and five extra turns of today's events, but none of that existed back then. In those days, whenever a WotC employee happened to remember, they would yell out how much time was remaining. But in a cavernous hall with hundreds of players, it was easy to not notice if you were concentrating on the game, and that's what happened to us. Loconto was **not** happy about this turn of events and had a bit of a potty mouth to go along with his sportsmanship issues. Needless to say, we haven't kept in touch.

Mike Long in round three was an absolute blast to play against – always chatting and making me laugh. As he intended, I was distracted enough to forget to upkeep my Thirst in one game and he held me to the error. Again, this wasn't the standard back in the early days and many players would have been extremely angry if you were so niggardly as to not let them take something small back. I'm proud to say that I bore it like a man and proceeded to use my Grinning Totem to steal removal from his deck and take down that same creature. Back then Mike wasn't the "Evil Emperor" that everyone uses to scare children into going to bed at night, he was just a guy who had twice made the US National team – Atlanta would be his first Pro Tour top 8 as well.

To be fair, I don't remember anything from playing against Mario Robaina other than he was a nice guy that I would later enjoy chatting with at other events. Mario, however, wrote a quick report about the event and mentions that Ray of Command was a deciding factor. I'm not surprised. He would have his chance for revenge the next day in the team competition with Pacific Coast Legends teammates Mark Justice, Mark Chalice, and **magicthegathering.com's** very own Scott Johns.

My sixth round match against Darwin Kastle would be the most memorable of the tournament as it forever set how Darwin views me as a player. In one of our games I foolishly blocked a flanking creature with Jungle Troll even though I knew it would instantly die and had played around flanking correctly for the entire tournament. My regenerating Troll heads to the graveyard and I'm suddenly flustered and begin playing absolutely horrible **Magic** (some would say I still haven't stopped). Ever since then Darwin has had a low opinion of my play skills – for nine years I've been paying the price of that mistake!

As the final round approached it was strange how little it was hitting me that I was doing so well. These days I'm calculating how many matches I need to win after the second round, but back then I *always* made Top 8 at Qualifiers and Pre-Releases (which were run like PTQs) so it wasn't unusual to have only a single loss after eight rounds. It wasn't until Pro Tour Paris that I would discover what a losing record felt like and needless to say, I took it pretty hard by that point.

As we prepared to play the ninth round a judge approached Aaron and I and said we could draw into the Top 8! This may not sound weird to anyone familiar with how tournaments work today, but intentional draws never existed before so we didn't have a clue that we could pass on playing the final round. You just played to win as many matches as you could and hoped the tie-breakers cut your way. It was an amazing switch in mood from "I better win this last match" to "I'm in!" It's the only time in my entire career that I've had a judge come by to tell me I didn't have to play the round, but they knew no one would know about draws and made sure everyone was treated fairly. Except Chris Pikula, who was paired down for the final round and had to play. I remember Chris protesting that it wasn't right that he not be allowed to draw into the Top 8 like the rest of the 7-1 players. As I went over to listen in on the conversation, a tall awkward kid with curly hair turned me away saying Chris wanted to deal with it privately. That was my introduction to Jon Finkel from the junior circuit, the nemesis of my friends Paul McCabe and Terry Borer.

Speaking of Terry and Paul, they had finished first and second in the Pro Tour Columbus Junior Division a few months before with Finkel in fourth. I remember taunting the two of them in Atlanta that since I did as well as Terry I was obviously as good as or better than the entire Junior Tour (which at the time also included Bob Maher and Trevor Blackwell, all five of whom have won at least one Pro Tour). Needless to say, my hubris may have gotten the better of me on that one.

In the end Chris lost the final round but still made it on tie-breakers and we finished the Swiss rounds as follows:

1. John Yoo
2. Aaron Muranaka
3. Darwin Kastle

4. Matthew Vienneau
5. Frank Adler
6. Terry Borer
7. Chris Pikula
8. Mike Long

I've won at least \$5,500! I'm vindicated! My limited skills could not be denied and my dad's claims that I'm just wasting my time could now be laughed at! Everything was good. On Sunday I would play Frank Adler for additional glory and prizes. But first we have Saturday and the \$25,000 Team Event!

Unfortunately that will have to wait until next week because I'm already 2,000 words over spec. Come on, if you managed to go nine years without hearing what happens, another week won't kill you!

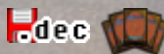
To keep your mind occupied while you wait to hear what happens (hint: I don't beat Frank), I've written up some homework questions. These are essay format questions so you're going to have to post your answers in the forums, or if you're scared of getting bashed by people of inferior intellect and writing skills, feel free to email me your answer using the link at the bottom of this article, and including your thoughts on the boards is a good way to get some practice.

Homework Assignment

I have often argued that people get unlucky because of inferior deck construction. In particular, they play the wrong number and types of mana sources. Let's see if you're constructing your decks properly...

You are deck-building at a *Ravnica*-only Limited Event. You have decided to play the following cards:

Homework Assignment



Main Deck

21 cards

0 lands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Dimir House Guard 1 Drooling Grootion 1 Elvish Skysweeper 1 Golgari Rotworm 1 Hunted Troll 1 Moroi 1 Mortipede 1 Primordial Sage 1 Root-Kin Ally 1 Selesnya Evangel 1 Shambling Shell 2 Stinkweed Imp 1 Thoughtpicker Witch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 Brainspoil 1 Clinging Darkness 1 Disembowel 1 Fists of Ironwood 1 Gather Courage 1 Last Gasp <hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0;"/> <p>7 other spells</p>
	14 creatures	

All that is left is figuring out your mana base. Here are your options:

- 8 Forest
- 4 Island
- 4 Plains
- 8 Swamp
- 1 Birds of Paradise
- 1 Elves of Deep Shadow
- 1 Dimir Signet
- 2 Selesnya Sanctuary
- 1 Svogthos, the Restless Tomb
- 1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree

You know for certain you're going to play the Birds, and you'll likely squeeze in the Signet.

1. What else do you put into the deck? Explain your choices. If you wish to replace a non-mana spell, feel free to do so as long as you explain why you removed that particular spell. If you wish to add a spell, presume the next best card you have is another Mortipede.
2. How does your answer to the first question change if it is a Draft tournament?
3. How does your answer to the first question change if it is a Sealed Deck tournament?
4. (Bonus Question) How does your answer to the first question change if it is a Two-Headed Giant tournament?

I look forward to reading your answers and may quote or reference you if your points are particularly good (or bad). You have been warned!

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