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"Eh? Wha?"

The drooling graybeard lifts his head from the table at your approach and his face widens into a knowing grin. "Couldn't resist hearing how it turned out, could ya? Figured to come back and let an old man reminisce one last time? A wise choice that you won't regret. You can't master where you're going until you understand where you've been..."

Pro Tour Atlanta Team Event

Having made top 8, my quest for Pro Tour victory would be immediately delayed by a day for the first ever professional team event, also the first time there was a secondary money event at a Pro Tour. Wizards continued this trend with a \$25,000 Type 1 challenge at the next Pro Tour (Dallas) and even added a 5th Pro Tour that season.

Your team of five players was given five *Ice Age* starters and five *Alliances* boosters. I was able to team up with the best that eastern Canada had to offer at the time – Paul McCabe (PT Player of the Year 1997, won a Pro Tour Dallas 1996), Terry Borer (runner-up PT Player of the Year 1997, won Pro Tour New York 1997, Junior Pro Tour Columbus 1996), Eric Tam (Canadian National Champion 1995, top 8 Pro Tour New York 1995 and Worlds 1996) and Shawn Davies (won many PTQs, all around great guy!). Strangely, all of them had left the game by 1998 – hopefully it wasn't something I said.

For those who weren't lucky enough to find teammates, there were many side tournaments and events to attend, just like there is today. The difference being that you had to pay \$5 before you could even enter the site, a practice that was fortunately retired a few years later. Side events at Pro Tours were extra special back then as there were so few sanctioned tournaments that people would drive for hours just to play in one. At Pro Tour Paris later that season, they weren't allowed to give prizes because of French gambling laws but everyone was so desperate for sanctioned tournaments that they still paid to play! Each paper Sideboard magazine would list all the sanctioned tournaments in North America for the next three months and it would fit on four pages, a far cry from the tens of thousands we have today.

In addition to sanctioned tournaments, the pros themselves were there to play. These days you can see and hear the pros on the Internet whenever you want (and sometimes when you don't), but back then they were like figures from legend. People would cluster around Brian Weissman in hopes of challenging him to a type 1 match against "The Deck" and Mark Justice would play sealed deck against all comers for \$100 a match, an offer I was too intimidated (and poor) to accept. I even ran into Richard Garfield as he wandered through the venue watching people play his games and to this day I use the deck box that he signed for me back then.

As for the team event itself, I don't expect too many people are playing this format anymore, so I won't bore you with the intricate details of deck-building and playing the rounds. I was playing a black-blue deck and recall greatly enjoying Keeper of Tresserhorn – how can you not love a 6/6 for six mana that ignores a Circle of Protection?



We ended up making it to the final four with a 5-1 record, but weren't given new decks for the playoffs and would be forced to play the exact same match-ups as in the Swiss rounds if we faced the same opponents. This was very upsetting to us as the team that ended up getting first in the Swiss was the team that had kicked our butts earlier on with their fantastic decks. But Wizards refused to budge on the matter, as even though they acknowledged it was unfair, they didn't want to set a precedent where tournament formats would change at the request of players in the tournament. This practice of playing the same decks in the Top 8 was never repeated until team PTQs many years later where it still rankles for those involved.

Poulter, Justice, and Johns mugging in Atlanta

In the end, it didn't matter as we got to face the infamous Pacific Coast Legends (PCL) who were the best known (if not the first) of the formal early **Magic** teams. For years rumours would fly about Justice finding newer and more expensive sponsorships (up to \$100,000!) for the team so they could fly to all the events free and so on, but it never seemed to quite pan out that way.

Mario Robaina, who we heard from two weeks ago, was also my opponent during the quarters of the team event and he detailed the match here. Despite his claims, any deck with Tactics, Pyrokinesis, Meteor Shower, Dwarven Armory and Jokulhaups is not weak, even if he did play Carrier Pigeons. It was indeed a very close set of matches with the judges rushing around trying to figure out what would happen if we didn't finish in time. Not quite the cool, calm organized play of today's tournaments where they've worked out the rules ahead of time. I don't recall attempting to stall Mario out as that has never been my style, though I do remember him getting upset with my very deliberate shuffling routine (that I have been using for ten years now) when we had very little time left. In the end, it didn't matter as they beat us soundly and went on to win the event. Losing was disappointing but the \$4,000 prize cheque (split 5-ways) made it a lot easier to handle.

Pro Tour Atlanta Top 8

This is it. My chance to win \$26,000 and forever place myself on the lists of **Magic** legends. I wake up in my room of six people where I'm sharing a bed with future **Magic** star Elijah Pollock and head out to breakfast and the top 8. As an aside, when forced to share a bed, it's always helpful to have at least one small person on your team. I knock at Terry Borer's door to make sure he's awake and wander down the tournament site. As the start time arrives Terry still hasn't shown up and for a while there's a panic that he'll miss the top 8. Luckily Wizards was able to call the hotel and wake him (he apparently fell back asleep after I knocked) and he didn't miss anything. Dave Price was known for bringing two or more alarm devices to make sure he never slept in, advice that I think all Top 8 hopefuls should keep in mind when packing for the next big event.

Unlike my first deck, my Top 8 deck is filled with good creatures (including some fliers!) and another Ray of Command. The problem was that I also had Phyrexian Purge, which I was certain was a bomb, but my black wasn't good enough to play. I never played more than three colours, but with the Top 8 on the line I wanted to maximize the power of my deck. This is a common mistake when the stakes get high – people start playing differently instead of trusting to the skills that got them there in the first place.

My quarterfinal opponent is Frank Adler and the first game starts out really well as I toss down some creatures and hit hard. Frank is playing some very dubious phasing creatures such as Merfolk Raiders and Teferi's Drake. As they both phased out during his upkeep leaving him with no creatures to my 8 points of on-board offence, I was getting very excited about my first game win.

And then he played *Savage Twister*.

See, while phasing normally hurts you, if you have a massive board-clearing effect, it can apparently be quite helpful. I had only heard rumours of *Savage Twister's* existence (Weissman was apparently

uncertain whether it was any good when it would later turn out to be a top-level bomb) so there was no way for me to play around it as I'm not even sure I had seen Torrent of Lava yet (the other *Mirage* mass kill). It devastated me and I quickly lost to the massive card disadvantage.

Game two would prove to be even more disappointing as I couldn't draw the lands I needed. I was holding the Purge that would bring me back into the game, and I had the black mana available to me, but I couldn't find a red source. With only five mountains in the deck due to the wacky deck construction rules, the odds were not in my favour and I took it to the chest and went down hard. Many people complain about bad draws, but until you've experienced years of playing with 6/6/5 mana splits, you have no idea how bad it could get. Sealed deck is much more skill-based now if only for the ability to play whatever lands you want not to mention best three out of five games in the quarterfinals!



Adler, PT Chicago '00

My feelings at that point were very gloomy. It's tough to go so far, start dreaming about winning,

listen to your roommates spending your money, and then after a night of nervousness you play two games and you've finished exactly where you started. Not only had I lost, I hadn't even made it in front of the cameras because I lost so quickly. Because it was so early in the morning, none of my friends were up yet. There was no pack of buddies to console me when I re-emerged into the tournament area, and the people who were there didn't even realize I had been in the Top 8 because they were busy watching the infamous Borer/Kastle match. I went from being centre-stage with instructions and lights and attention, to a random guy wandering the event. I was even forced to miss the awards ceremony, as we had to rush off to our flights early in the afternoon! Eric Tam, a fierce rival at the time, picked them up in our place, denying me even that moment of glory.

It was very upsetting. And to taunt me just that little bit more, this was the first Pro Tour where Wizards deducted taxes from the prize cheques. At Pro Tour Columbus they just wrote out cheques to everyone (I think it was by hand) but apparently those pesky IRS folks caught wind of this and insisted that they withhold 30% of the winnings for foreign players like myself. Having my biggest win so far (and since) arrive simultaneously with the introduction of a 30% prize cut certainly didn't make losing and fading away any easier.

Pro Tour Atlanta 1996 Conclusion

In the end it was a fairly strong Top 8 with several players who went on to great things. Chris Pikula would make Top 8 at the very next Pro Tour (not to mention his recent second-place finish). Terry Borer would win a Pro Tour later that season. Mike Long would go on to many more Top 8s and his own particular brand of infamy while Darwin Kastle would eventually enter the Pro Tour Hall of Fame on the first ballot. Atlanta was not a "luck" Pro Tour.

Adler wouldn't end up doing quite as well but he was a bit older than the rest of us and had a family (or at least a wife). He wrote a short tournament report here that I wish to quote (keep in mind that English is not Frank's first language and it was a message board so grammar wasn't as critical):

"In the first game i played one of the two canadians in the final 8. First game my savage twister removed 4 of his creature and he was not able to recover from this blow. in the second duell he was mana screwed. 2:0 for me."

Wow. I'm worth all of two sentences and he didn't even remember my name! That's how much of a stumbling block I was on his way to the top! To be fair, Frank and I would chat at later events and he in fact emailed me just last week after reading the first half of this report. **Magic** players never really disappear – they just take very long vacations (and, evidently, keep reading **magicthegathering.com**)!

On the plus side, my Top 8 caught the notice of the Wizards PR Department. At Pro Tour Los Angeles later that year there were elaborate posters made up of the game's "Rising Stars" and I was lucky enough to be so honoured beside equivalent greats as Olle Rade! I would finish 24th at that event and then never again do as well at a Pro Tour, despite playing in over two dozen more of them. The rise of younger teams and the Internet, the sundering of the local **Magic** scene and the distractions of life have all contributed to this lack of success. I can't help but understand hockey great Wayne Gretzky when says he wishes he had appreciated winning all those Stanley Cups early on his career as he was never able to win it again. I certainly didn't win the Stanley Cup back in Atlanta, but I did think I'd make it back to the winner's circle.

"But it's not over yet. I've been practicing, and keeping up on things. I've dusted off the constructed cards and started borrowing what I need to make a comeback. The Hall of Fame will be mine! MINE!" With a crazed cackle and a momentary flash of power, the old man leapt from the table and ran screaming into the night, a stark vision of madness and doom..."

And so ends our visit into the past. I appreciate having this opportunity as I've been writing this in my head for the past nine years so it's nice to finally get it on (digital) paper. But it wasn't just that – I wanted today's players to get a glimpse of what it was like when tournaments were a bit less polished and all the rules and procedures that protect them had yet to be worked out. What people take for granted now can't properly be appreciated until you see how wild and unruly it used to be. I've also noticed the occasional interest in historical **Magic** and the events and the players of the time so I thought I'd do what I could. I'm not speaking of me of course (no one ever asks about me), but people often want to know what it was like and how goofy everyone was when they were younger.

And if that isn't enough to justify it, well, you got a double-sized column last week so quit your complaining!

For those of you who were actually *at* Pro Tour Atlanta 1996, please feel free to post your own impressions. I'd be delighted to hear about them!

Limited Play of the Week

During this past weekend's "Nix Tix" events on **Magic Online** I was forcing Boros decks in anticipation of Boros Week here at **magicthegathering.com**. I opened Hunted Dragon and proceeded to draft every colour but black before I finalized a build of solid Red-White splashing Tolsimir Wolfblood. A bye in the first round got me to game one against "nomad20" who was very personable. Tolsimir won me the first game but in the process of playing Guild lands, nomad20 was forced to discard Hunted Phantasm which I didn't have an answer to and likely couldn't race as my Boros decks are always a bit controlling.

Game two has me playing a first turn Torpid Moloch (I told you I play Boros Control) and no second turn play. And as feared, nomad20 slaps down the 4/6 unblockable spirit and gives me five enraged goblins.

I have no answers so I figure I might as well race with my Skyknight Legionnaire and I'm up 20 to 14 at the end of turn 3. On his turn he plays Grifter's Blade, equips the Phantasm and attacks for five leaving an Island open. I'm now on a four turn clock and I already know he's playing Fetters and two Boros Fury-Shield so racing will be difficult and it looks like we'll be going to game three.

Or will we?

I untap, play Wojek Siren on the Legionnaire, sacrifice three of my lands to the Torpid Moloch and attack for 15! A turn four draft kill!

I still think the Hunted Phantasm is a reasonable card, but probably not so good on turn three against a Boros deck. Has anyone else been experiencing turn 4 (or earlier) limited *Ravnica* victories?

Homework Assignment

It's Boros Week here at magicthegathering.com and for the first time in six columns and five feature articles, I'm going to write something on-theme!

It's been a bit too easy winning with various Dimir decks recently so you've decided to challenge yourself by forcing Boros and see if you can't make it work somehow. Your close buddy the Internet **Magic** Columnist just happens to over eating your food and making eyes at your girlfriend when he notices you drafting and starts questioning your picks so he can generate content for his next article. With a protective arm around your significant other, you decide to show him how a *real* draft walk-through is written. Perhaps now Wizards will see your true talents and replace that no-good has-been!

Go through the following draft and indicate your picks where appropriate. Remember that you are forcing a Boros deck. Explain your picks in the forums.



START DRAFT

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