

Forgotten Lore: The Art of Beatdown

David Price

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- [David Price Archive](#)

Introduction from the Editor

One of the most popular players from the Pro Tour as evidenced by his repeated invitations to the **Magic** Invitational, David Price will always be known as the King of Beatdown. His most important performance came at Pro Tour Los Angeles 1997, piloting his signature Deadguy Red aggro deck. In a field that was likely the most red-saturated Day Two in Pro Tour history, it's no surprise that David Price was the one to emerge on top.

But Price wasn't popular just for his success. Though he didn't write often, his articles were always among the most read on the Internet. Through those articles the **Magic** community came to know a great guy who cared about honesty, friendship, competing on the Tour no matter how many qualifiers he had to join, and swinging in with the beaters. More than perhaps any other competitor in the Pro Tour's history, Price was associated with exactly one kind of deck: beatdown. In this often cited 1998 article from *The Duelist*, Price put the beatdown basics to paper and sought to destroy the myth that only playing Islands was for smart guys, that somehow playing beatdown meant your deck was simple.



As with the other articles I've featured in this occasional Forgotten Lore series, "Art of Beatdown" is a mix of great general principles that hold to this day, as well as a few elements which may feel somewhat dated. But, I hope that's part of the fun with this kind of article. For some of you, this will be a great chance for nostalgia, and for some others perhaps a chance to see some of the game's first theoretical steps for the first time, ideas often taken for granted today. For whatever reasons, I hope you enjoy this trip to **Magic's** past, from the game's first magazine, *The Duelist*.

- Scott Johns, [magicthegathering.com](#) Content Manager

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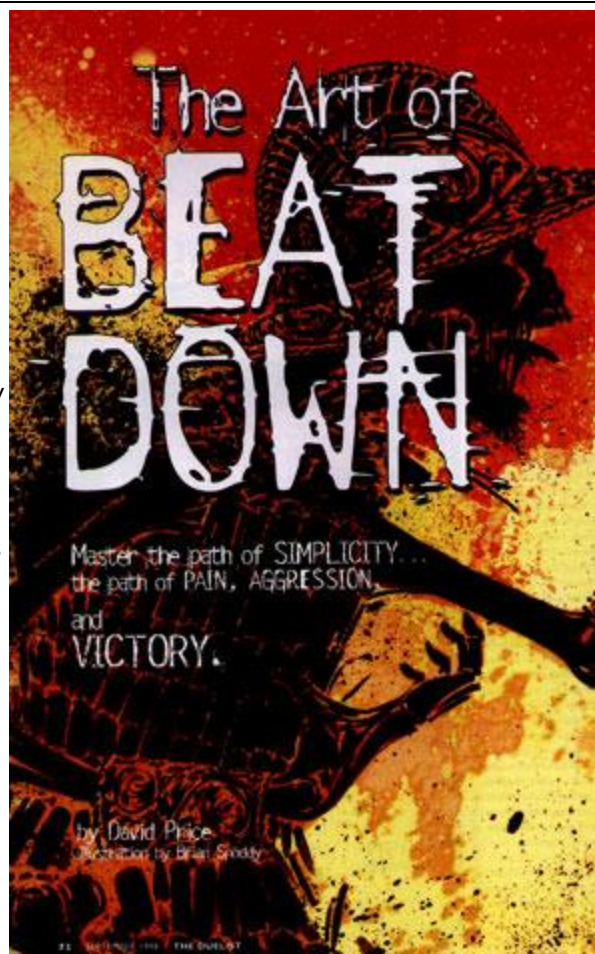
Over the past year aggressive decks have begun to dominate the tournament scene. At the last Constructed Pro Tour event in Los Angeles, six of the Top 8 *Tempest* Constructed decks were extremely aggressive: four were red beatdown decks, one was a mono-black speed deck, and one was a white-weenie deck. Similarly, in the United States Regionals, aggressive decks were a significant force. The three decks that were most highly represented in the Top 8 of U.S. Regionals were mono-red, Suicide Black, and white weenie, in that order. Together, they won roughly half of the qualifying spots for U.S. Nationals.

Why are aggressive decks so successful? What makes them work? There are three important and distinct aspects to consider when you are planning to take an aggressive deck to a tournament: deck construction, sideboarding, and play style.

Deck Construction

There is one word that best describes the main principle of aggressive deck construction: simplicity. Aggressive decks are extremely focused. Their goal is to kill opponents as quickly as possible, usually by summoning fast, efficient creatures early in the game and overwhelming all opposition. Focus on this one goal when building an aggressive deck.

First, build for speed. The focus on killing an opponent means that the first three or four turns are the most important. Therefore, it's extremely important that the opening draw be as consistent as possible. You can maximize offensive consistency by including as many of the most efficient creatures and spells as possible. That way you'll have a good idea of what to expect when you see your first nine or ten cards. In addition, you want to keep the deck mono-colored if at all possible. While rainbow lands like [City of Brass](#), [Gemstone Mine](#), and [Undiscovered Paradise](#) can give you access to a wide array of options, they generally slow down the deck. Either you draw an off-color spell without drawing a rainbow land, or you draw too many rainbow lands and their drawbacks being to hurt your mana development. Special lands also make you vulnerable to [Wasteland](#), thereby giving other aggressive decks a clear advantage. For these reasons, if your primary color offers cheap, efficient creatures and decent creature removal, keep the deck mono-colored. If staying mono-color isn't possible—for example, if you want to build a white weenie deck, since white has little efficient creature removal—then splash another color, keeping to spells that require only one off-colored mana. In other words, splashing red for [Fireball](#) is okay, but not for [Rolling Thunder](#).



Second, build for damage. Focus on killing your opponent when selecting creatures. Creature selection for an aggressive deck is probably the most important element of deck construction. In general, you want to have enough low-casting-cost creatures that you're playing one or more threats on each of your first three or four turns. Include a good number of one-casting-cost creatures in the deck, usually between eight and twelve. Fill the rest of the deck with two-casting-cost creatures and possibly a few more expensive creatures for later in the game.

It's not always easy to decide which creatures are right for a deck. You want to find creatures with the most power for their casting costs, as well as creatures that can be used to remove blockers, such as [Mogg Fanatic](#) or [Fireslinger](#). You should also include a decent number of creatures with shadow or flying if the color you're using gives you the option.

The best way to illustrate these principles is to look at a version of the two most successful aggressive decks: Deadguy Red and Suicide Black.

Deadguy Red - Dave Price



Main Deck

60 cards

17 Mountain	4 Cursed Scroll
4 Wasteland	4 Fireblast
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21 lands	4 Incinerate
	4 Shock
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4 Ball Lightning	16 other spells
4 Fireslinger	
4 Ironclaw Orcs	
4 Jackal Pup	
3 Mogg Conscripts	
4 Mogg Fanatic	
<hr/>	
23 creatures	



While many different versions of mono-red can be successful, I made this deck for an environment in which I expect to see a number of other aggressive decks. As you can see, I decided to include 11 one-casting-cost creatures. With four [Jackal Pups](#), four [Mogg Fanatics](#), and three [Mogg Conscripts](#), there's a good chance I'll have a creature to cast on the first turn. The [Jackal Pups](#) and [Mogg Conscripts](#) were selected for their high power-to-casting-cost ratio. The [Mogg Fanatics](#) are also excellent one-casting-cost creatures, being 1/1 for one red mana, with the ability to remove blockers or do an extra point of damage.

I also included eight two-casting-cost creatures in the deck. Generally I'll be able to play a two-casting-cost creature on the second turn, or perhaps one or more one-casting-cost creatures. Although [Mogg Flunkies](#) appears at first to be an efficient creature at 3/3 for 1R , I've chosen not to include it because it's rarely effective against other red decks. Instead, there are four [Ironclaw Orcs](#), which have a fair power-to-casting-cost ratio, and four [Fireslingers](#), which are extremely good creatures for removing annoying blockers and doing damage later in the game if a creature stalemate develops. Finally, there are four three-casting-cost: all [Ball Lightnings](#)—6/1 trampers for 3R ; these creatures can do a lot of damage. All of these creatures are supplemented by [Shock](#) and [Incinerate](#), two of red's most efficient removal spells. I also included [Fireblast](#) for a finishing blow, and [Cursed Scroll](#) to help out in the late game (if it gets that far).

Suicide Black - Dave Price



Main Deck

60 cards

16 Swamp	4 Cursed Scroll
4 Wasteland	4 Dark Ritual
_____	4 Paralyze
20 lands	

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 4 Black Knight | 4 Sarcomancy |
| 4 Carnophage | 4 Unholy Strength |
| 4 Dauthi Horror | <hr/> |
| 4 Dauthi Slayer | 20 other spells |
| 4 Erg Raiders | |
| <hr/> | |
| 20 creatures | |



I included only eight one-casting-cost creatures in this Suicide Black deck because [Dark Ritual](#) allows me to cast more expensive creatures on the first turn. Both [Sarcomancy](#) and [Carnophage](#) have a high power-to-casting-cost ratio, being 2/2 creatures for $\{1\}$. While they both have significant drawbacks, [Carnophage](#) reduces [Sarcomancy](#)'s drawback because it's also a zombie. In addition to eight one-casting-cost creatures, all of which are two-power creatures for two mana (which is reasonably efficient). The [Dauthi Slayer](#) and [Dauthi Horror](#) have shadow, which allows them to cruise through blockers, while [Black Knight](#) and [Erg Raiders](#) are top-of-the-line creatures that have appeared in aggressive black decks for ages.

In addition to creatures, there is [Paralyze](#) for quick removal of blockers, [Unholy Strength](#) to increase the speed of the deck, and [Cursed Scroll](#) for the late game (again, if it gets that far). I decided not to use [Bad Moon](#) in this deck because I expect to face a good number of other aggressive black decks. If I play without [Bad Moon](#) while my opponent plays with it, I gain an advantage in the first game because my adversary has three or four wasted cards in his or her deck.

Sideboarding

Sideboarding is one of the most difficult aspects of **Magic**. To construct a good sideboard, you have to have a good idea of what to expect from your local tournament environment. In order to sideboard well, you also need to know the strengths and weaknesses of your own deck and your opponent's deck.

Sideboarding for aggressive decks is tricky. One common mistake is to sideboard too much. I often see players with aggressive decks bring in so many cards from the sideboard that the aggressive nature of the deck is diluted. They bring in too many cards that are not efficient removal spells, or cards that don't damage or threaten opponents. It's very important to make sure that your deck maintains its aggressiveness after sideboarding. As a general rule, if I'm uncertain about whether a sideboard card would be good against a particular opponent or not, I don't bring it in. One of the advantages of playing an aggressive deck is that sometimes it just wins; if your opponents get a slightly bad draw or you get an amazing draw, you can win before they have a chance to set up. When sideboarding, make sure you don't lose this advantage.

To help illustrate these ideas, I developed sample sideboards for the mono-red and mono-black beatdown decks listed above.

Sideboard for Deadguy Red

- 2 [Dwarven Miner](#)
- 1 [Dwarven Thaumaturgist](#)
- 1 [Orgg](#)
- 4 [Pyroblast](#)
- 4 [Ankh of Mishra](#)
- 2 [Phyrexian Furnace](#)
- 1 [Torture Chamber](#)

This sideboard is geared towards beating blue/green Tradewind decks and [Cadaverous Bloom](#) decks, with a few cards to deal with [Living Death](#) ([Phyrexian Furnace](#)) and Fire-Color Blue ([Ankh of Mishra](#) and [Dwarven Miner](#)). As I mentioned before, the main deck is geared toward beating other aggressive decks, so little of the sideboard is devoted to dealing with them. Against other red decks, there is a single [Orgg](#) to bring in, and against white-weenie decks with their pro-red creatures, there is one [Torture Chamber](#). For the most part, each card in the sideboard is either an efficient removal spell against the right deck (e.g., [Pyroblast](#) against Tradewind decks) or a card that deals damage. The only exception to this is the [Phyrexian Furnace](#); while it's neither creature elimination nor a direct threat, it can make the main strategy of [Living Death](#) decks useless. In addition, it's a cantrip, so if I draw it when it isn't useful, I can sacrifice it to draw something better.

Let's assume you're playing Deadguy Red against an almost creatureless base-blue control deck like Donais Five-Color Blue. That deck uses [Gaea's Blessing](#) to recurse cards like [Wrath of God](#) and [Gerrard's Wisdom](#) early in the game, and to recurse its kill card—[Fireball](#)—late in the game. Aside from these cards, it has some enchantment and artifact removal, lots of card drawing, and tons of counterspells. What do you sideboard in? At first glance, you might be tempted to sideboard in four [Pyroblasts](#), four [Ankh of Mishras](#), two [Phyrexian Furnaces](#), and two [Dwarven Miners](#). But notice that you would be bringing in six cards—four [Pyroblasts](#) and two [Phyrexian Furnaces](#)—that can't stop the major problems ([Gerrard's Wisdom](#) and [Wrath of God](#)), and are not directly threatening the opponent. You would be replacing six cards from the main deck that deal damage and apply pressure with six that don't. It's preferable simply to bring in four Ankhs and two [Dwarven Miners](#)—effective threats against Five-Color Blue, which uses a large number of special lands—and take out four [Shocks](#) and two [Fireslingers](#).

Sideboard for Suicide Black

- 1 [Bottomless Pit](#)
- 4 [Dread of Night](#)
- 2 [Forsaken Wastes](#)
- 2 [Perish](#)
- 2 [Spinning Darkness](#)
- 1 [Terror](#)
- 2 [Bottle Gnomes](#)
- 1 [Nevinyrral's Disk](#)

The sideboard for the mono-black speed weenie deck is primarily used against white-weenie decks, mono-red decks, and blue/green Tradewind decks. Since the main deck is tuned to beat other aggressive black decks, I have nothing more in the sideboard to use against them. Much like the mono-red sideboard, most of the cards are either efficient removal ([Dread of Night](#) versus white weenie, [Spinning Darkness](#) versus mono-red, and [Perish](#) and [Terror](#) versus blue/green Tradewind), or cards that cause problems ([Bottle Gnomes](#) versus red, and [Forsaken Wastes](#) versus Necro decks and Five-Color Blue). The only exceptions are the one [Bottomless Pit](#) and one [Nevinyrral's Disk](#). When sideboarding this deck, you'll only be bringing in, at most, one card that isn't efficient creature removal and doesn't directly threaten your opponent. Aggressive sideboarding leaves your deck and its strategy as aggressive as before.

Playing

Okay, so now you know how to build aggressive decks and how to sideboard them. It's time to play. When you're playing an aggressive deck, you need to keep in mind the deck's primary goal: killing your opponent as quickly as possible. In other words, you want to maximize the amount of damage you're doing to your opponent as you make play decisions.

One of the most frequent mistakes I see players make, especially when playing mono-red decks, is that they misuse their removal and direct-damage spells. It's tempting to go to extremes with removal spells, either to use all of the direct damage on the opponent or to kill every creature that hits the board. As it turns out, neither option is the best. While there are no hard and fast rules on when to kill a creature and when to damage an opponent, it's generally a good idea in the early game to use removal on creatures that will prevent your creatures from getting through, or that will speed up your opponent's development (like a first-turn [Birds of Paradise](#)). However, you should always keep your opponent's life total in mind so you know how close you can come to ending the game with direct damage.

Here's an example: I'm playing a red deck and my opponent is playing a black deck. She goes first and plays a swamp. On my first turn, I play a [Jackal Pup](#). On her next turn, she plays a [Dauthi Slayer](#). After I play my second mountain, do I play an Ironclaw Orc or [Incinerate](#) the [Dauthi Slayer](#)? While it's tempting to kill the [Dauthi Slayer](#), I've already got the advantage—I'm two points ahead in the race to kill, and her [Dauthi Slayer](#) won't be able to block any of my creatures. The best play would be to cast [Ironclaw Orcs](#) and save the [Incinerate](#) to kill a blocker, such as a [Black Knight](#). Another important decision you must make is when to cast which creatures. What is the best creature to play first? It's a good idea to run through the various scenarios in your head when deciding which creature to cast. For instance, I'm playing a red deck and my opponent is playing a mono-blue deck. We have both sideboarded already. He goes first and plays an island. Do I start off by playing a [Jackal Pup](#) or a [Mogg Conscript](#)? It might be hard to tell which is the better creature to play, but if you think ahead to the next turn, it should be clear. If my opponent plays a [Chill](#) on his next turn, then

the [Mogg Conscripts](#) will do nothing for a turn, whereas the [Jackal Pup](#) will still deal two damage. Similarly, if my opponent has a counterspell for my next creature, it will prevent the [Mogg Conscripts](#) from attacking, but not the [Jackal Pup](#). As it turns out, the best creature to play is the [Jackal Pup](#).

Now imagine I'm playing a game with a white-weenie deck, and I don't know what my opponent is playing yet. I go first and play a plains. She plays a forest. Next turn, after I play a second plains, do I play a [White Knight](#) or [Soltari Priest](#)? Both creatures do the same amount of damage, but I know my opponent is playing green. She may play another land and cast either [Wall of Blossoms](#) or [Wall of Roots](#) during her next turn. It seems best to play the [Soltari Priest](#), so that it can still come through for damage in the event that she plays a blocker.

Your decisions won't always be as clear as these three examples. However, if you keep the primary goal of an aggressive deck in mind—killing the opponent as quickly as possible—it can help guide your deckbuilding, sideboarding, and playing.