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Pulling Back the PTQ Curtain

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The Week That Was
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How many of you out there have played in a PTQ? Now, out of that group how many of you have reached the Top 8 of a PTQ? One last cull. How many of you have won the whole thing?

I would imagine that not many of you stepped up after the last call. I am not asking this to belittle anyone, but instead to point out how hard it is to step up from the ranks of the Swiss rounds to the boarding gate of an airplane bound for Honolulu, Prague, Charleston, Kobe, or Paris. Patrick Sullivan, Bill Stead, and Justin Gary are just a few of name players who reached the Top 8 in the opening weeks of the [current PTQ season](#) but were not issued an airline ticket bound for Prague.



So what does it take to win a PTQ in this Limited format? And what will change over the coming weeks as Guildpact is introduced into the mix? Last week, I highlighted the [Sealed Deck builds from a handful of events](#). This week I caught up with the winners from three of those tournaments for a roundtable discussion about their Top 8 draft decks and winning the whole shebang.

Stuart Kovinsky won in [Toronto](#), David Feinstein won [Standish, Maine](#), and Nathan Waxer won the [Los Angeles](#) PTQ with Pro Tour-Houston Champion Justin Gary seated to his left in the draft.



Here's a quick introduction to our panel:

Stuart is a 38-year-old Toronto native. He has been on the Pro Tour twice before, both of which were Limited. He made Day Two each time.

Nathan is a 23 year-old Californian who started playing during Legends but took seven years off, missing everything between *Mirage* and *Odyssey* block, until the *Legions* Prerelease. He has played on two Pro Tours and at U.S. Nationals in 2003.

"About two years ago a friend of mine and I started getting together weekly to playtest and the like," Waxer said. "Well, two years later we now have at least eight people coming over regularly every Wednesday night for drafts which we call Wednesday Night **Magic** and have formed Team Big Decks.

"The fact that we draft as much as we do and are able to learn from each other and to constantly play against people of a high skill level is a key reason for our improvement, and I credit the formation of the team as one of the reasons for my success."

David is an international man of mystery who covers up his cat burglary by being a regular attendee of North American GPs. Or that might all be made up, and he just hadn't replied by my deadline.

BDM: Can you tell me what you drafted in the Top 8 and what the key picks were for your deck?

Stuart: I actually still have the deck together, so here's way more info than you wanted (draft picks only, land ratio not provided):

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RULES

Stuart Kovinsky		PTQ Prague: Toronto Winning Draft deck	
Main Deck		Sideboard	
40 cards			
17 Unknown Land	1 Clinging Darkness	2 Barbarian Riftcutter	
17 lands	1 Consult the Necrosages	1 Boros Signet	
	1 Dimir Signet	1 Carrion Howler	
	1 Flow of Ideas	1 Consult the Necrosages	
1 Circu, Dimir Lobotomist	1 Induce Paranoia	1 Cyclopean Snare	
1 Drift of Phantasms	1 Last Gasp	1 Dizzy Spell	
1 Keening Banshee	1 Muddle the Mixture	1 Drake Familiar	
1 Lurking Informant	1 Spectral Searchlight	1 Festival of the Guildpact	
1 Sewerdreg	1 Stasis Cell	1 Gate Hound	
1 Stinkweed Imp	9 other spells	1 Mnemonic Nexus	
1 Surveilling Sprite		1 Overgrown Tomb	
2 Tidewater Minion		1 Quickchange	
1 Vedalken Dismissor		1 Sewerdreg	
		2 Smash	

3 Vedalken Entrancer	1 Strands of Undeath
1 Wizened Snitches	1 Terraformer
14 creatures	1 Three Dreams
	1 Vigor Mortis
	1 Voyager Staff
	1 Zephyr Spirit
	22 sideboard cards

The key picks were the Entrancers. I didn't get any in the first pack, but got two in the second pack (I think first and second) and one in the third pack (I think second). I took two of them over kill (one over **Last Gasp**, one over **Brainspoil**). The Searchlight was also really good – I got it mid-second pack and by that point realized that getting to five mana was going to be key. The only real mill-type cards that I got in the first pack were a pair of **Tidewater Minions**.

The card that I boarded in a lot was **Voyager Staff** – good synergy with the **Keening Banshee** and **Vedalken Dismissal**.

David: I drafted Boros in the Top 8.

Nathan: Overall, throughout the draft most of the packs that were sent around the table were very shallow, the first pick from the first pack I opened I feel really set the tone for the draft. Knowing I had Justin Gary sitting directly to my left, I felt I might be able to dictate what colors he went into. The pack had **Last Gasp**, **Moroi**, **Drooling Grootion**, **Scatter the Seeds**, **Fists of Ironwood**, **Galvanic Arc** and I think **Psychic Drain**, but the other six for sure.

This pick was soooo difficult. Clearly the best card in this pack is **Moroi**. However, I feel that Dimir is often overdrafted and I didn't want to take it and send bad signals to my left. My other option was to take a green card as I feel both **Scatter the Seeds** and **Fists of Ironwood** to be key cards in a classic convoke Selesnya deck. However, both of those cards are a little underpowered compared to **Galvanic Arc** and I have often been able to splash the arc even if I don't end up drafting Boros. So I took the Arc knowing that Justin would take either the **Moroi** or the **Last Gasp**.

In the very next pack I got passed I received a **Selesnya Evangel** as the only clear choice in the pack so I took it hoping that it was a signal green-white was open. Also I got passed another Evangel a few picks later which really made me excited about going into green-white. I got passed a third-pick **Oathsworn Giant**, and then **Tolsimir Wolfblood** as a fourth pick in pack two. I nearly jumped out of my chair having received these two back to back, as they are both ridiculous, and Tolsimir being a certifiable bomb. I also had a tough decision between **Bathe in Light** over a few other good cards that could have made it into my Selesnya deck, but the **Bathe** I felt could just sometimes win me games as my deck was lacking a lot of evasion.



Nathan Waxer		
PTQ Prague: Los Angeles Winning Draft Deck		
Main Deck 40 cards		
1 Boros Garrison	1 Bramble Elemental	1 Bathe in Light
7 Forest	1 Civic Wayfinder	1 Boros Fury-Shield
1 Island	1 Conclave Equenaut	1 Farseek
1 Mountain	1 Courier Hawk	1 Flight of Fancy
6 Plains	2 Golgari Brownscale	1 Galvanic Arc
16 lands	3 Nightguard Patrol	2 Gather Courage
	1 Oathsworn Giant	7 other spells
	2 Selesnya Evangel	
	1 Siege Wurm	
	1 Tolsimir Wolfblood	
	1 Transluminant	
	1 Veteran Armorer	
	1 Watchwolf	
	17 creatures	

BDM: Did you go into the draft with a set plan? If so, how did that work?

Nathan: Going in to the Top 8, I had a feeling that people were going to be eager to jump into black right away if given the chance. Having drafted **Magic Online** a fair amount, I have noticed both Dimir and Golgari decks often overdrafted. In addition I know that some people swear by blue-red so right away I decided that if given the option I would love to jump into Selesnya or Boros if I thought either would be underdrafted. Well, actually I was hoping to open a **Selesnya Guildmage** because I feel that is the best non-rare card in the set, but that didn't happen :).

Stuart: I had no real plan, although there were a lot of less-experienced drafters at the table, so I expected a lot of white-green-black opponents. My first pack was pretty horrible – the only Dimir card was a **Tidewater Minion** and, although my brain kept telling me to pick it, my hands stuck to the **Overgrown Tomb**. The only other card worth playing was a **Conclave Equenaut** and I didn't want to commit to white so early. I'm a big fan of Dimir (I've always been a control style of player), so when the opportunity presented itself, I jumped.

David: I was actively looking to draft this (Boros) guild because people go out of their way to avoid it. The guild is not deep and doesn't have a good late-game presence. However, if you are the only Boros drafter at the table, your deck is almost always the most powerful. It's not hard to be the only Boros drafter at the table so I went for it. I would say the only truly key pick was the first pick of the draft. I had to choose between **Dimir Guildmage**, **Snapping Drake**, or **Viashino Fangtail**. The popular pick is undoubtedly the guildmage, but I picked the Fangtail to try and force Boros. This ended up working well, as every other pick was clear and I would get great Boros cards later than normal, such as **Lightning Helix**. One thing I would like to emphasize about Boros is the curve. You must have a higher number of two- and three-drops than other decks. This meant I was aggressively picking **Nightguard Patrols** and **Sell-Sword Brutes** higher than anyone else.

BDM: How did your Top 8 matches play out in terms of matchups? Were there any unusual decks in the Top 8?

David: My quarterfinals match was a struggle. I was up against a great Selesnya deck, which is hands down the toughest matchup for Boros. Selesnya can pump out tokens at will and while it is doing this, Boros is usually running out of gas. I was fortunate to win this match, and attribute it to multiple **Galvanic Arcs** and my one late-game creature, **Greater Forgeling**. This card is very underrated. It is near unstoppable when it has **Galvanic Arc** on it.

My semifinals and finals matches were both good matchups and were done in short order. The reason why these matches were easier than my quarterfinals match is because both of my later-round Top 8 opponents were fighting with the majority of the table, and because of that their decks were spread across three colors with no clear splash. My quarterfinals opponent was the only one going Selesnya and we both felt that the winner of that match would go on to win the slot. Cornering the market on a guild is very key and we had both done that for our respective guilds.

Nathan: I think Patrick Sullivan was trying to draft the red-blue deck but the cards just weren't there and he had an early exit in the Top 8. My quarterfinals opponent played a deck that was filled with good cards from four different colors. He, like Patrick, was trying to go red-blue but our packs were rather shallow so he started taking good cards in four different colors. In terms of power level his deck was one of the best at the table, but in terms of consistency I feel that his deck was lacking. This was clearly evident when I played out a turn-three **Watchwolf** against him and his first play wasn't until turn five when he played a **Diving Griffin**. By that time it was much too late as I had about four creatures on the table to one for him.

In the semifinals against a Boros deck, an average card (**Golgari Brownscale**) was excellent, it held off my opponent's team for many turns allowing me to dredge back for more life as needed until I drew land which basically put the game away.



Justin (Gary's finals) deck was a heavy removal and counter deck with few threats. He was unable to put any serious pressure on me early and I was able to play creatures turn after turn, eventually he ran out of removal and I overwhelmed him.

Really my deck was able to lay too many threats too quickly and it didn't matter how much removal a deck had, they couldn't keep up in tempo. I felt I had favorable matchups in every round, although I knew my opponent in the semifinals had two Fangtails and a **Glare of Subdual** which could give my deck headaches, but he never found the Glare, and Tolsmir made his Fangtails obsolete.

Stuart: My only real fear was a good Boros deck. Fortunately, no one in the draft went Boros (and only one other person went Dimir, at least that I saw). My first round opponent was white-green-black and wisely tried to change his deck to white-green-red for Game 2 – the only game I lost in the draft, after a double mulligan. Game 3 was a normal draw and not really close.

My second opponent was also playing Dimir, although without the power mill cards. The triple Entrancer/double Minion really works in the mirror match. Lobotomist also did a lot of damage to him. Game 2 in that round was the only game I won by doing fatal damage (double swampwalkers) – in my other five wins; I think my opponents' life totals at the end of the game averaged around 21!

My third opponent was green-black-white. He had some good cards, but the 1/4s, 4/4s, 0/5 and Stinkweed really stopped any serious threats. Neither game was particularly close (especially in Game 2 when, while we were at

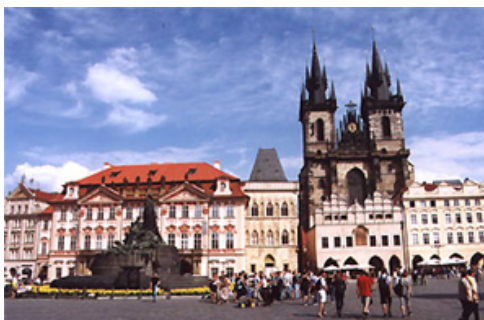
parity, I cast **Flow of Ideas** for six).

BDM: Will you be going to Prague? How do you feel about winning airfare to the Pro Tour?

Stuart: Definitely going to Prague. Without the free airfare, I'm not sure I would have even played in a qualifier for a European Pro Tour event, so I love it.

The last time I was in Prague was the summer of '94 (when most of my current **Magic** opponents were probably in Junior Kindergarten), while backpacking through Europe. I was there for the first free elections since the Russian tanks rolled in and got to see a free Paul Simon concert in the Central Square. Also, I had to get a root canal done!

I'm hoping that this trip is just as much fun but a lot less painful!



David: I will definitely be going to Prague. I have been trying to get on the Pro Tour for a decade and this is honestly a dream come true for me. I am more than satisfied with the round trip airfare that is offered by Wizards.

Nathan: I'm definitely going to Prague. I'm really excited. For PTQs outside of the U.S., having airfare paid for is definitely a plus from the travel award they used to give – way to go Wizards.

BDM: With the three new guild colors coming into the mix for PTQs starting February 4th, what do you think will change when approaching the first two packs of *Ravnica*? Are there any cards you think will go up in draft value?

David: With the new guilds coming out, I feel that the approach to drafting the guilds will be the same in that you will usually want to draft one of the already established archetypes in *Ravnica*, as opposed to forcing a *Guildpact* guild. This is mainly because *Guildpact* offers one pack rotation, while *Ravnica* still offers drafters two pack rotations. With that said, you certainly could still force a guild from *Guildpact*. All three guilds look extremely strong. I feel *Convolvute* and *Remand* will be drafted more aggressively due to *Izzet*. I expect cheap, efficient attackers to also be drafted higher because of *Gruul*. **Sell-Sword Brute** is a good example of this.

Nathan: I think the new guilds will definitely add a lot, but not as much as people might think. We still have two packs of *Ravnica* compared to one pack of *Guildpact* to fill our decks with. So I still see all four *Ravnica* guilds still being very viable. Although I have seen some very good cards in *Guildpact*, in particular the blue-red guild, I feel that people will initially overdraft blue-red, which are already the thinnest two colors in *Ravnica*. Also, if you look closely, most of the outstanding blue-red cards in *Guildpact* are uncommon, meaning that we won't see them as much as we would expect. Personally I feel that the black-white decks and green-red decks are not as exciting to most players, and if I were to do a *Ravnica-Ravnica-Guildpact* draft today I would look toward drafting either of those archetypes because I wouldn't want to fight for blue-red.



Stuart: I think that we'll see a lot of three/four-colour madness when the next set comes out –and I have very mixed feelings. Generally, players who are more disciplined will stick to two colours (with maybe a gold splash) and do better; on the other hand, I expect a lot of random drafting as people change colours in the third pack. So, I think I'll do well (since I won't get seduced into bad splashes), but I'll also get frustrated by random drafting.

I think that *Signets* and the **Spectral Searchlight** will get drafted a lot higher than they currently do – especially off-colour (or one-colour) signets that will let you make that extra splash for your pack-three picks. I also think you'll see people (perhaps foolishly) draft mismatched colours from *Ravnica* in anticipation of the third pack. I think that better players will, for the most part, pretend that the new guilds don't exist until they see the third pack and then maybe splash one or two power cards that don't throw off their coloured mana too much.

BDM: Backtracking to the Swiss rounds . . . Do you have any post-tournament thoughts about how you built your *Sealed Deck*? Were there any cards that turned out to be better than expected? Worse than expected? Did you do any radical sideboarding?

David: I was content with my sealed build as it was very straightforward. **Voyager Staff** proved to be much better than I thought it would be. The card offers several options to players as it can get you out of sticky situations. For example, in round four I was staring down a **Gleancrawler** and was being attacked by all of my opponent's other creatures. I set up as many one-for-one blocks as I could. The majority of the creatures traded with each other and my opponent had just the **Gleancrawler** left over. I used the staff in his second main phase to phase it out, which enabled me to stabilize since he could now not bring anything back from his graveyard through **Gleancrawler's** ability.

David Feinstein - Sealed Deck Build	
1st Place - Maine - Standish - 1/7	
Main Deck 40 cards	Sideboard
7 Forest	1 Disembowel
	1 Barbarian Riftcutter

7 Plains	1 Farseek	1 Benevolent Ancestor
1 Swamp	1 Gaze of the Gorgon	1 Boros Garrison
2 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree	2 Selesnya Signet	2 Boros Signet
17 lands	1 Terrarion	1 Caregiver
	1 Voyager Staff	1 Carrion Howler
	7 other spells	1 Clinging Darkness
1 Boros Guildmage		1 Coalhauler Swine
1 Bramble Elemental		1 Consult the Necrosages
1 Courier Hawk		1 Dimir Signet
1 Elves of Deep Shadow		2 Dizzy Spell
1 Elvish Skysweeper		1 Doubling Season
1 Greater Mossdog		1 Drift of Phantasms
1 Guardian of Vitu-Ghazi		1 Drooling Grootion
1 Nightguard Patrol		1 Fiery Conclusion
1 Oathsworn Giant		1 Flight of Fancy
1 Siege Wurm		1 Galvanic Arc
1 Stinkweed Imp		1 Gate Hound
2 Tolsimir Wolfblood		1 Golgari Germination
1 Transluminant		1 Greater Forgeling
1 Trophy Hunter		1 Halcyon Glaze
1 Ursapine		1 Hunted Troll
16 creatures		1 Indentured Oaf
		1 Induce Paranoia
		1 Infectious Host
		1 Instill Fury
		1 Leashling
		1 Lurking Informant
		1 Mortipede
		1 Muddle the Mixture
		1 Ordrun Commando
		1 Rally the Righteous
		1 Seismic Spike
		1 Snapping Drake
		1 Stasis Cell
		1 Sunhome, Fortress of the Legion
		1 Surge of Zeal
		1 Surveilling Sprite
		1 Terraformer
		2 Thoughtpicker Witch
		1 Torpid Moloch
		1 Undercity Shade
		1 Viashino Slasher
		1 Votary of the Conclave
		1 Zephyr Spirit
		48 sideboard cards

Stuart: I was pretty happy with my sealed deck – tight two colours with some good defense and good offense. Since I was two colours, I already had almost all the good cards in there and did almost no sideboarding at all. I had elite sideboard tech all ready to go if I ran into a Glare (Faith's Fetters and Seed Spark), but it never came up. The only card that got boarded in a lot was Dizzy Spell (mostly to be able to transmute into Darkblast) – I'd remove Twisted Justice, which is pretty worthless against tokens.

Stuart Kovinsky - Sealed Deck Build		
1st Place - Ontario - Toronto - 1/7		
Main Deck		Sideboard
40 cards		
9 Island	1 Compulsive Research	1 Auratouched Mage
8 Swamp	1 Consult the Necrosages	1 Barbarian Riftcutter
17 lands	1 Darkblast	1 Blockbuster
	1 Dimir Signet	1 Blood Funnel
	1 Disembowel	1 Boros Fury-Shield
2 Belltower Sphinx	1 Gaze of the Gorgon	2 Boros Signet
1 Cerulean Sphinx	1 Last Gasp	1 Civic Wayfinder
1 Circu, Dimir Lobotomist	1 Remand	1 Coalhauler Swine
2 Dimir House Guard	1 Stasis Cell	1 Cyclopean Snare
1 Drift of Phantasms	9 other spells	1 Dizzy Spell
1 Golgari Thug		1 Doubling Season
1 Lurking Informant		1 Dromad Purebred
1 Roofstalker Wight		1 Elvish Skysweeper
1 Sewerdreg		1 Faith's Fetters
1 Snapping Drake		1 Fiery Conclusion
2 Vedalken Dismissal		2 Fists of Ironwood
14 creatures		1 Flight of Fancy
		1 Gate Hound
		1 Golgari Brownscale

- 2 Golgari Rot Farm
- 1 Golgari Signet
- 2 Infectious Host
- 1 Ivy Dancer
- 1 Lightning Helix
- 1 Nightmare Void
- 3 Rally the Righteous
- 1 Razia, Boros Archangel
- 1 Reroute
- 2 Screeching Griffin
- 1 Seed Spark
- 1 Selesnya Sanctuary
- 1 Sell-Sword Brute
- 1 Shred Memory
- 1 Siege Wurm
- 1 Smash
- 1 Sunhome, Fortress of the Legion
- 1 Surge of Zeal
- 1 Terrarion
- 1 Trophy Hunter
- 1 Twisted Justice
- 1 Viashino Slasher
- 1 Votary of the Conclave
- 2 War-Torch Goblin
- 1 Wojek Siren

52 sideboard cards

Nathan: Going back to the sealed deck the only changes I would have made would be cutting the **Duskmantle**, **House of Shadow** for another Swamp or maybe altogether for a **Voyager Staff**. At times I felt my deck was a little land heavy, although my reasoning for it was that all of my good cards were four- and five-casting cost so I played two **Dimir Signets** and a **Spectral Searchlight** as a means to accelerate into my creatures early. My plan worked.



I splashed blue for both **Snapping Drake** and **Vedalken Entrancer** which I felt would offer me evasion and an alternate win condition if the ground never got stalled, which I actually feared gravely because I had very few flyers. In actuality I think I never sideboarded once throughout all 10 rounds of the tournament. And this was not because I didn't want to, but rather I was playing all my best cards already and I really didn't have much else I could add. Changing my deck radically would only alter its consistency and I felt that would be a bad thing. Maybe once I could have added a **Vedalken Dismissal** over the Entrancer, but other than that I was happy with my deck.

The key for my deck was having the answers I needed available in the form of Dredge. I can't tell you how many times I dredged back **Darkblast**, **Stinkweed Imp** and **Grave-Shell Scarab** for answers. I think it is almost always the right thing to dredge for an answer than hope to draw one off the top. The biggest factor for how I ended up in first place at the end of Swiss was my ability to play well and not make mistakes and the fact that I had a very consistent deck, and I rarely had to mulligan.

Nathan Waxer - Sealed Deck Build

1st Place - California - Los Angeles - 1/7



Main Deck 40 cards

- 1 Duskmantle, House of Shadow
- 7 Forest
- 1 Golgari Rot Farm
- 1 Island
- 1 Svogthos, the Restless Tomb
- 6 Swamp
- 17 lands
- 1 Bramble Elemental
- 1 Civic Wayfinder
- 1 Golgari Brownscale
- 1 Golgari Rotwurm
- 1 Grave-Shell Scarab
- 1 Keening Banshee
- 1 Roofstalker Wight

- 1 Brainspoil
- 1 Clinging Darkness
- 1 Darkblast
- 2 Dimir Signet
- 1 Gather Courage
- 1 Putrefy
- 1 Spectral Searchlight
- 1 Strands of Undeath
- 1 Vigor Mortis

10 other spells

Sideboard

- 1 Barbarian Riftcutter
- 1 Boros Signet
- 1 Breath of Fury
- 1 Consult the Necrosages
- 1 Dark Heart of the Wood
- 1 Dimir Cutpurse
- 1 Dimir Doppelganger
- 2 Drake Familiar
- 1 Fiery Conclusion
- 1 Gate Hound
- 1 Glass Golem
- 1 Grayscaled Gharial
- 1 Indentured Oaf
- 1 Infectious Host
- 1 Instill Furor
- 3 Leave No Trace
- 1 Lore Broker

1 Sadistic Augermage	1 Master Warcraft
1 Siege Wurm	2 Muddle the Mixture
1 Snapping Drake	2 Nightguard Patrol
1 Stinkweed Imp	2 Ordrun Commando
1 Vedalken Entrancer	2 Rain of Embers
1 Vinelasher Kudzu	1 Root-Kin Ally
	1 Screeching Griffin
	1 Selesnya Sagittars
	1 Selesnya Signet
	1 Sell-Sword Brute
	3 Shred Memory
	2 Sparkmage Apprentice
	1 Stone-Seeder Hierophant
	1 Surge of Zeal
	1 Tattered Drake
	1 Terrarion
	2 Thundersong Trumpeter
	1 Vedalken Dismissor
	1 Viashino Slasher
	1 Vindictive Mob
	1 Votary of the Conclave
	1 Voyager Staff
13 creatures	
	50 sideboard cards

Firestarter: Guildpact's Draft Impact

Even though we won't really know much about the new draft format until Grand Prix-Richmond, I will ask you the same question I asked Stuart, David, and Nathan. What do you think will change in how you approach the first two Ravnica packs in anticipation of that third pack of *Guildpact* and its three new guilds? Click your way to the forums by hitting the "discuss" link down and to the left. Go on, tell us what you think will happen!

*Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is Top8Magic.com, the publishing house that is releasing Michael J. Flores: Deckade.*



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