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Some years ago, Constructed **Magic** tournaments were dominated by combination decks. The Urza's Block untap mechanic made Tolarian Academy decks about twice as good as every other available option, with most games going fewer than three turns and first turn kills commonplace. A sweeping set of card bannings just shifted the best deck from Academy to a different Time Spiral deck, High Tide; what was almost *worse* about this was that Force of Will, the fastest and most consistent permission spell of all time, was best employed not in a control deck to *stop* a combo deck's setup, but in a combo deck, to force its key cards through for the win. Force of Will continued to aid "the enemy" when Trix became possibly the most feared deck in the history of **Magic**; never before had Necropotence successfully joined forces with Force of Will *and a 40 point life cushion* to utterly dominate a Constructed format. One color and one step worse than High Tide, Trix stole possibly the greatest anti-combination card of all time -- Duress -- and added that to an already overpowered team.

Many players succeeded on the amateur, Grand Prix, and even Pro Tour levels with these combo decks, but many more hated them and hated playing against them. Eventually an anti-combination backlash erupted across the **Magic** Internet, which, while perfectly reasonable on its face, snowballed past reasonable focus and any semblance of good sense. True, the best combination decks were drastically overpowered... but at least up until Trix, they were potentially beatable. Many players failed to recognize that, or that card combinations have (and *had*) some place in the competitive **Magic** landscape. The correct goal should not have been -- nor ever be -- a world *without* combination decks, but one where beatdown, combination, *and* control are all represented and viable in a format.

Beatdown, combination, and control? PT Honolulu proved the format one better.

## Mark Herberholz – Gruul Beats



### Main Deck

60 cards

6 Forest	4 Char
4 Karplusan Forest	3 Flames of the Blood Hand
7 Mountain	3 Moldervine Cloak
2 Skarrg, the Rage Pits	10 other spells
4 Stomping Ground	
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23 lands	

4 Burning-Tree Shaman
4 Dryad Sophisticate
3 Frenzied Goblin
4 Giant Solifuge
4 Kird Ape

### Sideboard

4 Blood Moon	
1 Flames of the Blood Hand	
2 Naturalize	
2 Rumbling Slum	
2 Tin Street Hooligan	
4 Umezawa's Jitte	
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15 sideboard cards	

- 4 Scab-Clan Mauler
- 4 Scorched Rusalka

27 creatures

## Craig Jones - Zoo



### Main Deck

60 cards

- 4 Battlefield Forge
  - 1 Brushland
  - 1 Eiganjo Castle
  - 2 Forest
  - 1 Karplusan Forest
  - 1 Plains
  - 4 Sacred Foundry
  - 4 Stomping Ground
  - 4 Temple Garden
- 
- 2 Bathe in Light
  - 4 Char
  - 3 Flames of the Blood Hand
  - 4 Lightning Helix
  - 3 Shock

16 other spells

22 lands

- 3 Burning-Tree Shaman
- 4 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
- 3 Kami of Ancient Law
- 4 Kird Ape
- 4 Savannah Lions
- 4 Watchwolf

22 creatures

### Sideboard

- 1 Flames of the Blood Hand
- 2 Giant Solifuge
- 3 Guerrilla Tactics
- 3 Hunted Wumpus
- 2 Tin Street Hooligan
- 4 Umezawa's Jitte

15 sideboard cards

## Tiago Chan - Owling Mine



### Main Deck

60 cards

- 10 Island
  - 2 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea
  - 2 Mountain
  - 4 Shivan Reef
  - 4 Steam Vents
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- 4 Boomerang
  - 4 Ebony Owl Netsuke
  - 2 Evacuation
  - 4 Exhaustion
  - 4 Eye of Nowhere

### Sideboard

- 3 Blood Moon
- 3 Mana Leak
- 2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
- 3 Pyroclasm
- 4 Threads of Disloyalty

22 lands

4 Kami of the Crescent Moon

4 creatures

4 Howling Mine

4 Remand

4 Sleight of Hand

4 Sudden Impact

34 other spells

15 sideboard cards

## Olivier Ruel – Hand in Hand



### Main Deck

60 cards

4 Caves of Koilos

1 Eiganjo Castle

4 Godless Shrine

4 Orzhov Basilica

2 Plains

1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse

6 Swamp

22 lands

4 Dark Confidant

4 Ghost Council of Orzhova

3 Hand of Cruelty

2 Okiba-Gang Shinobi

2 Paladin en-Vec

4 Plagued Rusalka

4 Ravenous Rats

2 Shrieking Grottesque

3 Teysa, Orzhov Scion

28 creatures

4 Castigate

3 Mortify

3 Umezawa's Jitte

10 other spells

### Sideboard

2 Cranial Extraction

1 Descendant of Kiyomaro

2 Distress

2 Orzhov Pontiff

2 Phyrexian Arena

2 Seize the Soul

2 Slay

2 Terashi's Grasp

15 sideboard cards

## Osyp Lebedowicz – Izzetron



### Main Deck

60 cards

1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge

4 Shivan Reef

1 Blaze

4 Compulsive Research

### Sideboard

4 Annex

4 Giant Solifuge

2 Pyroclasm

4 Steam Vents  
2 Tendo Ice Bridge  
4 Urza's Mine  
4 Urza's Power Plant  
4 Urza's Tower

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23 lands

4 Keiga, the Tide Star  
4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror

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8 creatures

2 Confiscate  
4 Electrolyze  
1 Invoke the Firemind  
4 Izzet Signet  
4 Mana Leak  
2 Pyroclasm  
4 Remand  
2 Telling Time  
1 Tidings

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29 other spells

2 Repeal  
1 Ryusei, the Falling Star  
2 Smash

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15 sideboard cards

## Maximilian Bracht - Heartbeat



### Main Deck

60 cards

10 Forest  
10 Island  
1 Mountain  
1 Swamp

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22 lands

4 Drift of Phantasms  
1 Maga, Traitor to Mortals  
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

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9 creatures

1 Boomerang  
1 Compulsive Research  
4 Early Harvest  
4 Heartbeat of Spring  
1 Invoke the Firemind  
4 Kodama's Reach  
4 Muddle the Mixture  
1 Recollect  
4 Remand  
4 Sensei's Divining Top  
1 Weird Harvest

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29 other spells

### Sideboard

3 Iwamori of the Open Fist  
1 Keiga, the Tide Star  
2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror  
1 Pyroclasm  
3 Savage Twister  
1 Umezawa's Jitte  
4 Vinelasher Kudzu

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15 sideboard cards

## Ruud Warmenhoven – Orzhov Aggro



### Main Deck

60 cards

4 Caves of Koilos  
1 Eiganjo Castle  
4 Godless Shrine  
5 Plains

2 Faith's Fetters  
4 Mortify  
4 Umezawa's Jitte

### Sideboard

4 Castigate  
1 Kami of Ancient Law  
3 Last Gasp  
2 Manriki-Gusari  
1 Nekkartaal

1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse  
8 Swamp

10 other spells

2 Okiba-Gang Shinobi  
2 Otherworldly Journey

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23 lands

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15 sideboard cards

4 Dark Confidant  
2 Ghost Council of Orzhova  
2 Hand of Cruelty  
4 Hypnotic Specter  
3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda  
1 Kami of Ancient Law  
4 Ravenous Rats  
3 Savannah Lions  
4 Shrieking Grottesque

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27 creatures

## Antoine Ruel – Owling Mine



### Main Deck

60 cards

11 Island  
2 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea  
1 Mountain  
4 Shivan Reef  
4 Steam Vents

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22 lands

4 Kami of the Crescent Moon

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4 creatures

4 Boomerang  
4 Ebony Owl Netsuke  
4 Exhaustion  
4 Eye of Nowhere  
4 Gigadrowse  
4 Howling Mine  
2 Pyroclasm  
4 Remand  
4 Sudden Impact

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34 other spells

### Sideboard

4 Cerebral Vortex  
1 Evacuation  
3 Gaze of Adamaro  
1 Goblin Flectomancer  
1 Mana Leak  
2 Pyroclasm  
3 Twincast

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15 sideboard cards

## Beatdown

This style of deck was not just viable, but the most successful at the tournament. Doing the Gruul proud, both of the finalists' decks were among the most aggressive in the format. Mark's deck was a pure beatdown deck, all sharp edges with no elegant sweeps or arcs. Though he didn't play the beach house deck, Mark drew on their knowledge... He removed his slow Rumbling Slums from the main in favor of Giant Solifuge because of Faith's Fetters. Sick of losing to Loxodon Hierarchs, Heezy played main deck Flames of the Blood Hand and Frenzied Goblin to get past the life gain... as well as that whole "giant blocker" thing. Craig's deck, first out of the Swiss before finishing second in the

tournament, played more tricks than the Norse god Loki. Beyond bending his mana base to accommodate creatures like Watchwolf and Kami of Ancient Law, the white addition gave Jones the miraculous Bathe in Light. Part Falter, part Counterspell, and totally unexpected, Bathe in Light was one of the most unusual and effective instants to be played in the finals or anywhere in the tournament.



More than the g-r(-w) finalists, the two b-w decks in the Top 8 were *also* pronounced aggressors. Honolulu's b-w contingent was the largest and most diverse of the Guild colors, with adopters stretching from aggressive one-drops to the slowest of glacial control decks (many b-w players topped off on seven mana Debtors' Knell or Angel of Despair). Ruud and Olivier, though, played decks with early curve attackers and Umezawa's Jittes. Certainly both men sought to control the game to some degree with disruptive or permanents-hostile elements, but their core strategies featured Savannah Lions or Hand of Cruelty sideways in the Red Zone.

## Combination

The most surprising archetype to make Top 8 was Maximilian Bracht's Heartbeat of Spring combo. Bracht's deck lacks the critical mass of four mana card drawing spells that allowed Star War Kid's *Extended* Heartbeat to manhandle control so easily; it focuses instead on card *selection* and a surprisingly robust permission suite. Bracht has probably the most extensive -- and versatile -- transmute deck we have ever seen at a high level. His Drift of Phantasms can select either of Bracht's primary combination elements, Early Harvest or Heartbeat of Spring, or either of his kill cards, Invoke the Firemind or Maga, Traitor to Mortals. What is even more interesting is Maximilian's Muddle the Mixture suite. The most exciting thing he can find main deck is Weird Harvest, which in turn finds him four Demonic Tutors (Drift of Phantasms) *and* a kill card. After boards, Muddle becomes Pyroclasm, the deceptively dominating Savage Twister, or a lone (and perfectly positioned) Umezawa's Jitte. Incidentally, Bracht's Muddles were *also* effective at leveraging his mana advantage to protect a combo kill from permission decks.



If Osyp didn't play the best sideboard in the Honolulu Top 8, then Bracht did. His transformation into a beatdown deck gave Bracht considerable game against decks with relevant sideboards, Cranial Extraction, or no coherent Game Two plan. An effective surprise in most matches, Bracht's sideboard plan flabbergasted Olivier Ruel in the round of eight, and was perhaps *even more* confusing to an opponent who knew what could be coming. Which deck is he going to play *this* game?

## Control

Even if it didn't dominate the Top 8, Control was out in force at PT Honolulu. For example, most of "the beach house" played a long game control deck that won with Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree subsequent to an attrition war. The Control deck in the Top 8, though, was Osyp Lebedowicz's URzatron deck. Urzatron (or Izzatron, or whatever else you call it) as a base strategy is nothing new, but Osyp's deck took what was previously good about 'Tron decks, while at the same time shoring up the archetype's potential weaknesses. Particularly innovative is the inclusion of Remand among the



many "draw a card" class of spells. An archetype chosen for its card power rather than any perceived good matchups, Osyp's deck doesn't really care about controlling the deck over any long period of time... His Mana Leaks and Remands are just there to buy time. Using cards like Electrolyze that can help control the tempo of the game, Osyp just wants to hit his land drops (hopefully into the 'Tron) so that he can tap out for Keiga the Tide Star.

"It's not likely that whatever he is doing on his turn is better than Keiga or Meloku."

Generally speaking, the weakest element of the old Hattori-Hanzo 'Tron decks was their mana. The Worlds deck ran 12 Urza's pieces but *three* colors regardless. Beatdown decks used to joke that they wouldn't play Blood Moon to screw the UrzaTron for fear of giving the opponent Pyroclasm mana. By limiting the URzatron deck to two colors, Osyp's deck was made much more consistent. Its only strategic loss was sideboard Cranial Extractions, which would have been significantly inferior to Annex and Giant Solifuge anyway. Annex was a key addition to the archetype for use against Gifts Ungiven and other 'Tron builds, while Solifuge played many roles at once. As the deck has only two primary win conditions main, there was a perceived need for a third class of fat finisher (initially it was Mahamoti Djinn, but became the Falling Star) to dodge multiple resolved Cranial Extractions. Solifuge, in addition to diversifying the deck's threats against Extractions, was unbelievably strategic. Most controllish decks would remove their Pyroclasms against URzatron and would be hard pressed to deal with a 4/1 untouchable haste creature, especially out of a deck with eight time-controlling permission spells.

If there is a flaw in this type of control strategy, it may be against Kird Ape and his friends. Osyp only played two Pyroclasms main (instead of the three or four normally run in this type of a deck) because it is so much weaker against Kird Ape, Watchwolf, and Burning-Tree Shaman than it would have been against the smaller White creatures you would expect out of a beatdown deck a few months ago. Some u-r control decks opted for Volcanic Hammer, which generates no card advantage but can buy a few life points.

## Turbo Stasis



Beyond the generally accepted triangle points of beatdown, combination, and control, PT Honolulu pulled a page out of ancient history. At US Nationals 1996, in the middle of the Necro Summer, a group of players brought a rogue Howling Mine deck to the show and took 50% of the spots available on the US National Team. Turbo Stasis was a metagame deck; its Howling Mines raced and defied the card Necropotence and its namesake enchantment was notoriously difficult for Necro to remove from play. Vulnerable to White decks that packed a lot of Disenchants, Turbo Stasis was an ideal and unexpected choice to do well in a single tournament.

Embracing that philosophy of old, Tiago Chan and Antoine Ruel came to Honolulu with different looks at Owling Mine. A deck with literally no chance against beatdown decks in the main, Owling Mine is equally as strong against controlling decks. Howling Mine erases the advantages generated by the popular Orzhov discard decks and makes dedicated card drawing like

the five mana Tidings look a bit silly. With the right matchups, Owling Mine can be the most dominating deck in the format... but meet up with a member of the Gruul clans and the same cannot be said. Antoine and Tiago won a total of one game between them in their matches against Craig and Heezy.

Despite joining the same Guild as URzatron, Owling Mine takes the opposite look at the metagame. Rather than saying "I have a powerful deck; as long as I survive the early game, I am going to outclass whatever other players try to do," Owling Mine takes specific aim at the projected environment. It expects certain decks to show up and continue to do well, and relies on those metagame predictions in order to do well. Of the various types of decks that you can adopt coming out of this Pro Tour, Owling Mine's continued viability seems the least clear, especially considering which decks ended up fighting for the title.

All in all, *Guildpact* Standard seems not only the most diverse, but most *balanced* in some time. All five colors made the Top 8, with more than four radically different strategies employed by the various players to advance.

## **Bonus Section: My Ballot**

The criteria for this ballot is talent + personality (or talent \* personality), however you want to gauge it.

### **#5 Mark Herberholz**

The talent you know about. I cast my votes prior to the PT past, but if there was ever any doubt about Heezy's ability, I figure there never will be again. As for personality, I can give you the transcripts to any number of conversations I've had with Mark over the past four years since Pat Chapin introduced him to me at a celebratory Denny's dinner at Grand Prix Milwaukee, but, sadly, not a single one is fit for print on even a rated PG-13 website. He can't say "I lost last round" without insulting good taste, let alone describe last week's date night... You'll just have to take my word for it that the human spring that appeared on *The Price is Right* is a pale specter of the bigger than life engine that drives his personality.

### **#4 Antonino De Rosa**

The reigning US National Champion and a multiple Grand Prix Champion, Ant is a player of phenomenal ability. Credited as the guy who "invented" Deep Analysis for *Odyssey* Block, he is also one of the world's foremost strategists. As for personality... He's the only guy with two flags on his Pro Player Card, because, frankly, a single country can't contain the force of nature that is De Rosa. I would have rated him higher except I am assuming that Ant will crush all opposition in the North American ballot and that he frankly doesn't need my vote.

### **#3 Tsuyoshi Fujita**

Possibly the world's finest deck designer, Tsuyoshi is in the rare position of master strategist *who focuses on beatdown decks*. I admire Tsuyoshi's game more than maybe any other player on Tour, and it is no surprise that he took the Players Ballot. Tsuyoshi's "fun" decks make Top 8 of the Pro Tour (LA) and his brutal decks change the speed of even the Extended format (Sneak Attack).

### **#2 Osyp Lebedowicz**

My great fear after being voted into the Invitational myself is the donut, the bagel, the zero. After perusing the nominees for possible Invitational opponents, my conclusion was that Osyp was the only player on the ballot I had a reasonable expectation of beating. I mean, Craig owned me in side drafts before he acquired a single Pro Tour point and you know that Small Child (tm) who destroys you in every local Standard tournament? For me that Small Child (tm) was Timothy Aten. Self preservation almost demanded that I give Osyp a high vote.

*And then he went and finished Top 8.*

Drat!

Is it possible that Peppermint Von Joe Black Lebowitz has put the wheels back on the wagon? I can only hope his Honolulu performance was in fact merely one of the elaborately constructed lies he has perpetrated on the **Magic** community for the past five odd years. Oh well, there's always manascrew.

## #1 Jeff Cunningham

People call the Invitational the All-Star Game of **Magic: The Gathering**, but at least as far as this Writers Vote goes, I am thinking of it more like the Pro Bowl. The NBA All-Star Game is a popular vote among nominees for each position, but *one third* of the Pro Bowl is elected for the end of the season by the NFL players themselves. You rattle a guy with a big tackle? You break his arm on the way down or take the feeling out of his left incisor? If his concussion has worn off by the time he has that ballot in his shattered fingers, you might reasonably expect him to vote for you... even if you never made another good move the rest of the year.

I still haven't gotten over the last time Jeff Cunningham hit me, and I think it was five months ago.

People constantly ask me why good players play my decks. The importance of changes I make to existing archetypes is sometimes hard to see, and I am famously poor at actually executing. Yet some of **Magic's** best players still enjoy working with me. Why? The answer is that I never lose in playtesting.

... Except to Jeff Cunningham.

Jeff gets my Pro Bowl vote. In LA testing I could never take a game off of ffej. I am fairly sure he won nine games out of ten games we played, regardless of matchup. I would play Psychatog against his decks with seven or even nine mana cards and lose. I had at least two games in an online mock tournament where I played first turn Dwarven Blastminer against ffej's Tooth and Nail... and got my butt handed to me.

From the first time I met Jeff, at his first grown up Pro Tour where I played a Hunted Wumpus into his Tradewind Rider... and then played it again into his Verdant Force, then tried one last time with the little Wumpus that could, giving ffej a Spirit of the Night, to the last session when Josh Ravitz called me up to tell me to Apprentice Jeff at a certain IP Address for no other reason than that I could go to bed weeping in the fetal position, Jeff Cunningham has had my number. As such, he is my Number One.

As for personality, Jeff also wrote the best *three* **Magic** articles of the year 2005... and he only wrote three.

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