

Over the Top: A *Dissension* Card Pre

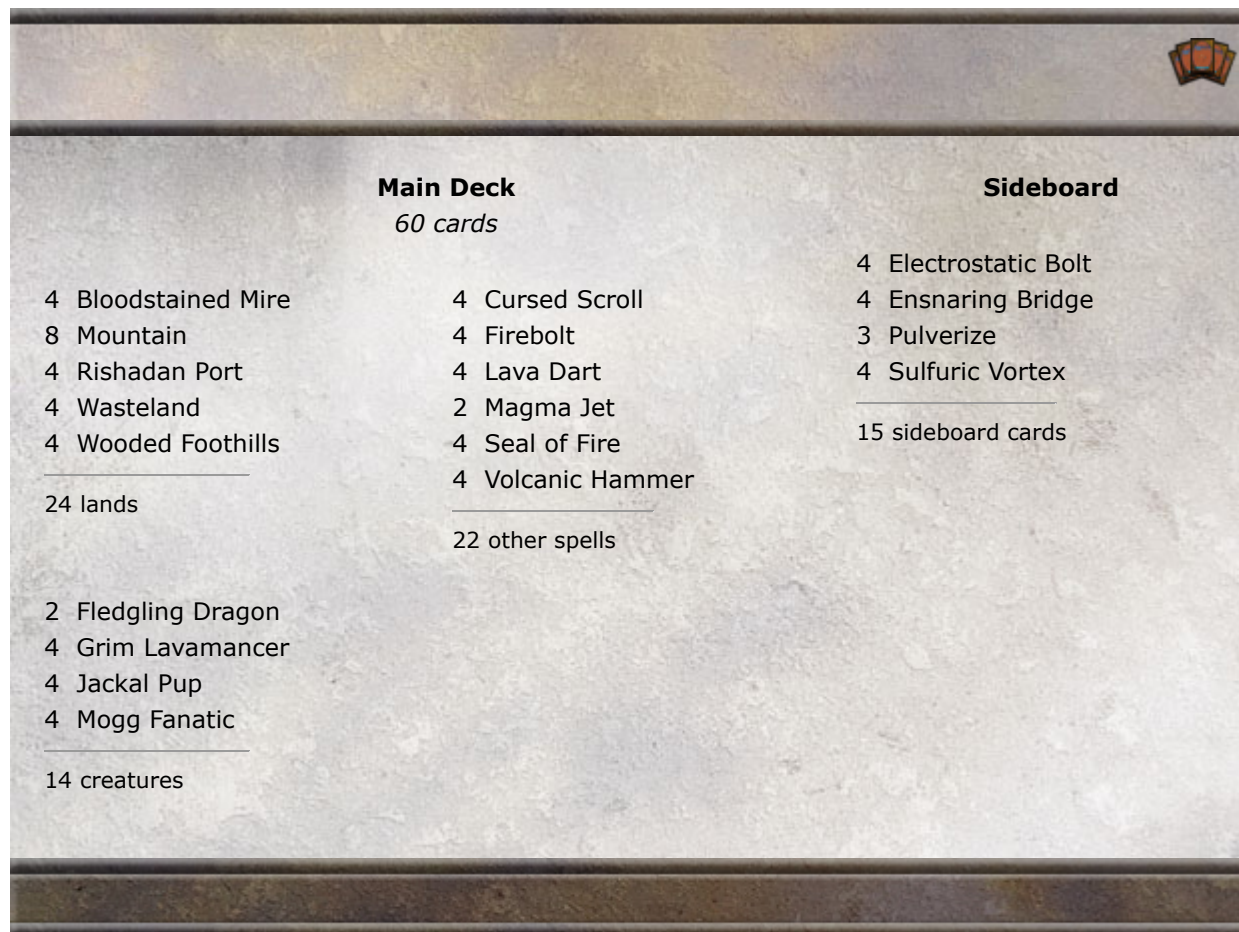
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A little more than a year ago, I earned a special little kudo I like to call "The Dan Paskins* Seal of Approval." The format was post Pro Tour--Columbus Extended (that is, Pierre Canali's Extended), and the deck that really resonated with me was Tsuyoshi Fujita's version of Red Deck Wins; you know, the version that eventual Level VI Mage Shuhei Nakamura used to reach the finals. Our early read on the metagame, in the ignorance of decks like Masashi Oiso's Diamond-Cutter-out-of-nowhere Aluren (that came four months later), was that the beginnings of the format would be players copying Tsuyoshi's deck or trying to improve on that busted block of cards that Pierre used to win it all, with other decks being much less important in the short term. The solution was to try to make a deck that could do all the things that made Red Deck Wins a good choice at the Pro Tour even when there were more exciting options, but one that would both have an advantage in the mirror *and* post a strong matchup against Pierre's deck (especially once every amateur figured out that *this time* it was the *pros* that had gotten it wrong, and more people should have been playing artifact lands).

Here is the deck that we came up with:



Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
4 Bloodstained Mire	4 Cursed Scroll	4 Electrostatic Bolt
8 Mountain	4 Firebolt	4 Ensnaring Bridge
4 Rishadan Port	4 Lava Dart	3 Pulverize
4 Wasteland	2 Magma Jet	4 Sulfuric Vortex
4 Wooded Foothills	4 Seal of Fire	
	4 Volcanic Hammer	15 sideboard cards
24 lands	22 other spells	
2 Fledgling Dragon		
4 Grim Lavamancer		
4 Jackal Pup		
4 Mogg Fanatic		
14 creatures		

We figured out that the mirror was about two things primarily: 1) who has Cursed Scroll advantage, and 2) who *doesn't* get hit by Blistering Firecat. As such, the direction we went in may seem odd given that 1) we removed Tsuyoshi's Pillages (i.e. the only card that can actually destroy a Cursed Scroll main), and 2) if the goal is to not get hit by Blistering Firecat, why in the world would we have cut them all?



The answers are interesting, but make sense once you think about them. Just as you didn't try to win a Jitte fight in *Kamigawa* Block with Terashi's Grasp, Cursed Scroll advantage wasn't - or at least wasn't *just* - about the ability to destroy a Cursed Scroll. Generally it's about having a Cursed Scroll *and* having a small enough hand to use it; it may seem counterintuitive at first, but a slow card like Pillage that costs three mana is worse in a Scroll-on-Scroll fight than a card like Lava Dart... just because you can cast a Lava Dart for one mana and can therefore get your Scroll online more quickly. A three mana card like Pillage may just be *clogging* your hand and keeping you from being able to activate the Scroll you have. Moreover, Red Deck Wins would not necessarily have enough mana to operate multiple Cursed Scrolls, so that in some games, the Pillage Player would destroy a Cursed Scroll for basically negative economy just because the Lava Dart player would have a second Scroll (which was good in the sense that it was reducing his hand size, but actually "came

online" only because of the Pillage).

Most important, especially in the context of today's article, was our use of Fledgling Dragon in lieu of Blistering Firecat. When I said that it was important to *not get hit* by the 7/1, that didn't mean that *hitting the opponent* was key to *winning*, only that *not getting hit* was key to *not losing*. With our slightly upped burn count due to the inclusion of Lava Dart, we weren't getting hit by opposing Blistering Firecats like, *ever*, even when we tapped out. In exchange, and for the same drop, we *started* Fledgling Dragon. This creature changed the paradigm of the mirror match. The Dragon lived through any single burn spell, and unlike a Blistering Firecat going long, would have the chance to go *over the top* for more damage than any single Firecat could typically accomplish. In the worst case scenario, the Dragon drew multiple burn cards and let us operate according to standard procedure while the opponent spent his mana and resources fighting a battle to which he had no analogue.

The main thing that got Red Deck Wins mastermind Paskins's blood a-boiling was the sideboard swap of Electrostatic Bolt over Flametongue Kavu. The Bolt did basically the same thing the Kavu did (killed one creature), but as per the goal of dropping its hand, was much more synergistic with the Cursed Scroll plan *and* generally faster against the lethal three-turn clock of a tuned Affinity deck. Unlike a four-mana 4/2 that didn't actually kill anything if the game went too long, the one-mana Electrostatic Bolt could put away an Arcbound Ravager before it could get too big, help bait away the opponent's entire board paired with another piece of fire, or kill a Disciple of the Vault before that pesky banned card cost even a single life loss.

The changes were key in other matchups as well. No reasonable Red Deck operator would claim he *wanted* to hit Life every round, but the Fledgling Dragon deck was a heck of a lot better than the Firecat version against that hated opponent. Many times a Life player would have the "biggest butt combo" but wouldn't necessarily have the last piece of the combo necessary to actually finish. While an ostensibly dangerous Blistering Firecat would have no way of getting through a Spiritualist with 1/1000 stats, a Fledgling Dragon could go *over the top* and potentially win the game before that key Starlit Sanctum appeared. Meanwhile the versions of The Rock that were played at the time had cards like Smother for creature control, and few legitimate answers to a firebreathing 5/5 flyer. These weren't exactly the



Sir Mix-a-Lot would be proud

matchups that our version of Red Deck Wins was trying to win, but the additional capabilities of the deck made those matchups more favorable than the default *anyway*.

The spoils of our version of deck templating were significant: Of the three people who played it, I started Grand Prix--Boston 5-0 before the wheels came off and Dan Bridy finished just out of the money, but Josh Ravitz was the big winner. Josh beat Shuhei Nakamura himself (playing Red Deck Wins, of course) in one of the Grand Prix's early feature matches, and though Josh didn't make Top 8, he *did* finish Top 16, earning the necessary Pro Tour Points to cement the Level III status he's been milking for premiere event invitations since Pro Tour Philadelphia (including his Top 8 and Top 16 finishes at the U.S. National and World Championships).

But michaelj, you are probably asking yourself, *why should we care about this arcane format? they don't even let us play Cursed Scroll in Extended any more...*

Some players didn't like the Gruul Deck Wins "Zoo Update" that I posted after *Guildpact* came out, but thankfully Scott Johns, Producer of **magicthegathering.com** and *the most significant Zoo player of all time* (given his first place Pro Tour finish with the original Zoo at Pro Tour--Dallas), was not one of them. Lucky me, Scott picked a *Dissension* preview card that fit *exactly* my sensibilities and how I like to approach beatdown Red Decks such as updating his beloved Zoo:



Denotation: Rakdos Pit Dragon on the Elements

Body: 3/3; Cost: four

On stats alone, 3/3 for four is generally below par for a Constructed creature. However Morphling, once considered the finest creature of all time, was a 3/3 for *five* mana, on the basis of having enough, and potent enough, special abilities to counterbalance the pure statistics (there are five lines

of abilities on "Superman" but let's be honest, he's only *really* got four-and-half). In the idiom of **Magic** mana, five is actually about *twice* four mana in terms of tournament card cost, and Rakdos Pit Dragon compares reasonably in the special abilities department, with three lines of his own, with two of them - all right one-and-a-half of them - equivalent to Morphling's.

Flying... err... "jumping":

The 🐉 cost associated with Rakdos Pit Dragon's flight status is a bit underwhelming, especially in comparison to other four-mana creatures of its ilk (Dragon Whelp, Fledgling Dragon, Furnace Whelp), but probably necessary to keep it from being all-out busted in context.

Firebreathing:

This ability is costed exactly the same as the other four-mana cards in Rakdos Pit Dragon's class. I would posit that the most recent addition to the family is the most dangerous given that last *hellbent* ability:

Double Strike:

Probably Rakdos Pit Dragon pushes Double Strike more than any creature ever with the ability (with Dragon Tyrant blasting into Top 8 legend only in the context of a gimmick deck, and in the hands of the then-Resident Genius). In the right deck, this guy should be smashing for ten or more damage the turn after it hits play. To translate, if you see a Pit Dragon on the other side of the table, *just kill it*. Don't dance around, don't get cute; when someone picks a Red Deck, he isn't picking it because it can gain infinite life, draw a lot of cards, find a clever Silver Bullet, or otherwise realize the closet Johnny fantasies inside the hearts of some of **Magic's** most avowed Spikes. Red Deck players exist for one reason and one reason only: to leave a trail of corpses between Round One and the finals of every tournament they enter, and relentlessly. Deride their Ironclaw Orcs or jeer at their pairings of Dwarven Soldier and Goblins of the Flarg (in the same deck) to *your own* peril.

Connotation: What Rakdos Pit Dragon Means to Me (and you!)

Rakdos Pit Dragon tickles that special somewhere inside of me that was trying to do two specially focused things with the Grand Prix--Boston version of Red Deck Wins: It plays for the empty hand (similar to lowering the curve to set up Cursed Scroll advantage in the mirror) and tries to go *over the top* in a way contemporary Standard Red Decks are generally ignoring.

The cards that make Red Decks sad in the current Standard include Loxodon Hierarchy, Faith's Fetters, Descendant of Kiyomaro, and Shining Shoal. Mark Herberholz showed us how some well-placed Red cards could offset the *particularly* onerous half of the first two (using Flames of the Blood Hand), and his Scorched Rusalkas silenced Faith's Fetters to a degree. It is not likely that a Hellbent deck is going to be able to race Descendant of Kiyomaro in terms of hand size, but a flying creature can throw a monkey wrench into most Descendant decks' plans; at least the 3/5 Spirit Link won't be blocking, and even if it goes aggro, an x/3 double strike flyer is going to be difficult to race. Again, a wings flapping Rakdos Pit Dragon should be hitting for 10 or more damage at a time in the right deck (Loxodon Hierarchy is another one of those ostensible "problem cards" that doesn't pose much of a problem in the creature combat area). There isn't much you can do about Shining Shoal, unfortunately, but Rakdos Pit Dragon should be fast enough on offense that you can win before the opponent *draws* his key Shoal, similar to how GP Boston Red Deck Wins was behind against Life, but could still win more than the default.



In sum, Rakdos Pit Dragon is one of the most exciting creatures I have encountered in recent sets. It's not quite next week's card, but this thought-provoking new Dragon seems to me the kind of creature that can be included in "a" deck, just because it is a good creature with a high potential upside *or* the kind of creature that can have a deck *built around* it in the same way that we bend our otherwise flexible or even reasonable card choices to accommodate Tallowisp or Magnivore. What follow are not tuned decks per se, but the ideas that I've had thinking about Rakdos Pit Dragon and the kinds of choices I might make in building a deck to maximize the chances of actually hitting the opponent with one and taking the biggest chunk out of his life total that I possibly could. Be forewarned: I don't know a lot more *Dissension* cards than you do, so if two weeks from now it seems like I missed something... You know where this is going I'm sure.

R/G Rakdos		
Main Deck 60 cards		
4 Karplusan Forest	4 Frenzied Goblin	4 Char
12 Mountain	4 Kird Ape	4 Commune with Nature
4 Stomping Ground	4 Rakdos Pit Dragon	4 Shock
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Scorched Rusalka	4 Volcanic Hammer
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Tin Street Hooligan	
24 lands	20 creatures	16 other spells

The goal of this deck is to maximize the chances of hitting Rakdos Pit Dragon while playing a very low curve. Commune With Nature, an unusual card last seen at Wisconsin States 2004, helps ensure action (especially digging up the Dragon) without disrupting the pre-four mana part of the curve overmuch. "R/G Rakdos," as with the next two decks, plays more lands than I typically would want in a Red Deck because even with a low curve, it will be important going long to have enough mana to drop your hand *and* to maintain operating mana for Rakdos Pit Dragon and the key one-drops.

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Likely this is not the optimal direction for a Rakdos Pit Dragon deck, but as with the next decks, it is just a jumping off point for further exploration.

Extreme Rakdos		
Main Deck 60 cards		
24 Mountain	4 Frenzied Goblin	4 Blazing Shoal

24 lands	4 Frostling	4 Char
	4 Rakdos Pit Dragon	2 Genju of the Spires
	4 Scorched Rusalka	4 Lava Dart
	16 creatures	2 Pithing Needle
		4 Shock
		20 other spells

Other than the key card of the deck (and the subject of this preview), almost everything here costs one mana or less. The idea is to ensure that once you find Rakdos Pit Dragon, you can always ALWAYS keep an empty hand for Hellbent; the only concession is Char, and that's just because Meloku the Clouded Mirror is probably Rakdos Pit Dragon's worst enemy, in Standard, anyway.

Generally speaking, I hate Pithing Needle in Red Decks because it does no damage, but I think that it is probably useful in Game One situations to shut down cards like Glare of Subdual (and Meloku in a pinch), especially when the opponent's outs against an x/3 flyer with Double Strike are relatively few. Even decks with, say, eight outs against Rakdos Pit Dragon may fall into the "very few" category, just because the opponent shouldn't have more than maybe two shots at defending himself given solid Pit Dragon board development.

Seething Rakdos

One of my most important models for Red Deck design is Patrick Sullivan. This is an excerpt from the 2005 U.S. Nationals Blog, featuring Pat (thanks to Brian David-Marshall):

"I just played the most satisfying game of **Magic** in my entire life," beamed Patrick Sullivan after Round 12.

Patrick was playing (of course) Red Deck Wins against a Blue opponent and found his Furnace Whelp Vedalken Shackled to the wrong side of the red zone.

"I wanted to draw burn spells," he said. "I assumed I was going to have to burn him out, but all I kept drawing were useless cards."

Or so Patrick thought. After drawing three straight Seething Songs he finally topdecked a Shatter. When his opponent tapped out end of turn to cast Thirst for Knowledge, Pat saw his opportunity and pounced. He Shattered the Shackles and got his flier back. His opponent took his turn and played a fresh Vedalken Shackles and attempted to take the Whelp back but Patrick pumped its power out of range with a Seething Song and countered the ability.

"I untapped and killed him with the two Seething Songs. I did exactly 11."

As with the boost Seething Song gave Patrick's Furnace Whelps, Seething Song might end up being be a fine friend to Rakdos Pit Dragon, feeding its front end, giving it wings, activating Hellbent, and even dropping the death machine a turn early in some cases. Here is a first look at a Seething Song-driven Rakdos Pit Dragon Deck:

Seething Song/Rakdos Pit Dragon



Main Deck

60 cards

24 Mountain

24 lands

4 Frenzied Goblin

4 Frostling

4 Gruul Guildmage

4 Rakdos Pit Dragon

4 Scorched Rusalka

20 creatures

4 Char

4 Seething Song

4 Shock

4 Volcanic Hammer

16 other spells

Some notes:

1. Any or all of these deck ideas may benefit from Flames of the Blood Hand. Loxodon Hierarch *is* still probably the single most effective drop in Standard, after all, and Flames *is* that card that let Red Decks back into the format despite the Hierarch's stranglehold on Worlds Standard.
2. It may seem odd that this is a Rakdos Pit Dragon but that I haven't mentioned a single Black spell or dual land, but there is method to that decision: Rakdos Pit Dragon's operating mana costs are insanely Red mana intensive... Unless a card is there specifically to set up a faster Rakdos Pit Dragon (and maybe there will be Black cards that do that in the next set... I have no idea), I would generally avoid them for the purpose of this exercise.
3. Don't forget that you can just drop this Dragon into "a" deck and it will probably still be very good as long as you pay attention to your curve. The three decks posted above are just first blush ideas I had given my excitement over the spicy new finisher.



Check back next week when I preview the single best card in *Dissension***, and possibly all of Standard*** once everything is said and done.

* For those of you not in the know, Dan Paskins is generally considered the father of Red Deck Wins. He lost in the finals of his National Championships with the original version of the deck, but that's okay... First Place finisher Mark Wraith was also playing Red Deck Wins.

** Having not seen the *Dissension* spoiler, I can only estimate that it is the best card... But it's awfully exciting, breaking many of the rules of recent set design *and* prompting notes from both R&D's Aaron Forsythe (i.e. former **magicthegathering.com** guy) in Honolulu *and* special attention from our current producer, the aforementioned Mr. Johns.

*** This is not to say that the card won't see Extended play, or play in other formats. I'd be shocked if it *didn't*.

