

Mike Flores

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As I understand it, most of you read *Swimming With Sharks* each week for one reason: to help you win at PTQ-level **Magic**. Usually the services rendered by this column manifest themselves in the relevant format's most recent deck lists (cough, googols of Regionals deck lists, cough), but this week I decided to do something different, something that incidentally might appeal to anyone else, at the same time. Over the past ten years (wow, has it really been ten years?) I've won a reasonable amount of PTQ-level **Magic** (and, sadly, virtually no actual professional level **Magic**), and have a couple of tales to tell; all of the lessons following come from PTQs or Regional Championships where I actually walked away with the Blue Envelope. I think that, taken as a whole, they paint an interesting picture of what it takes to win at local level **Magic**. You may even be surprised at what that is...

12 October 1996

The Season: QT for PT Dallas 1996 (Paul McCabe's)

The Format: Ice Age Block Constructed (pre-bannings, no *Homelands*, no *Coldsnap*)

The Deck: B/R Necropotence/land destruction

I wish I could post a decklist, but even my tournament report from 1996 didn't list it and therefore no record of the said exists anywhere (except perhaps as some wrinkled piece of paper stuffed somewhere in a desk at the former Gray Matter offices). I can tell you that while I was playing a Necropotence deck (and therefore a much better deck than basically anyone else in the tournament viz. more-or-less anyone not playing a Necropotence deck), it was nevertheless a Necropotence deck incompetently assembled the evening before the tournament. When I say "incompetently assembled," I mean to the tune of 63 cards of which *three* cards were copies of namesake Necropotence... The same number of card drawing cards as the deck's other slot, the *three* Thawing Glaciers. No, really.

Round 2 Stephen J. Good

In the first tournament report I ever wrote, this is how I described my match against Stephen:

"Steve was playing an aggressive mono-red deck. He eventually went onto make the semifinals of the tournament, so I suppose it was a good deck. Unfortunately for Steve, I had an *ungodly* measure of land destruction in both of my opening draws. He was dead to Specters, Knights, and fire before he could really do anything defensive. Our match was over in under seven minutes -- and in the second game, I even had two *more* Pillages in my hand when he conceded!"

Translation: "He was manascrewed."

It's been ten years, but I honestly don't remember him playing more than a Mountain Goat in either game. I'm sure that I had some land destruction, but if I had overload Pillages, it was probably



because he kept a pair of two-landers or something. It's a good thing he was manacrewed, too, because I'm sure that if he actually drew any lands, Good's Slight deck would have plowed my 63-card Necro like a field in springtime (or autumn? I don't really know about farming). Luckily Lauer eliminated him in the semifinals and I never had to worry about his Orcish Librarians again.

Finals: Erik Lauer

My first Swimming With Sharks column ever recounts this battle between noted deck designers-to-be. I played Snow-covered Swamps for my Withering Wisps; Erik played Legions of Lim-Dul. The story goes that I tried (unsuccessfully, mind you) to block with my Lim-Dul's High Guard, but that pesky Snow-Covered Swampwalk text kicked in. So I settled for blocking Lim-Dul's Cohort. I went to regenerate, but... Well, you can probably figure out how this went.

Luckily it was a two slotter.


Having "won" only my third PTQ ever, I was pretty full of myself afterward... It actually took me a long time to figure out that while I probably had a better deck than most people, I certainly didn't have a better deck than Lauer (who, with his own first PTQ win ever, would eventually grow into the greatest deck designer the game has known... at least to date). I technically lost my match against Erik, but that hardly matters (or mattered); these matches, one won, one lost, had basically nothing to do with my ability, and I can't say that I did anything to control the outcome of either. I got lucky against Good and unlucky being paired with Lauer. I probably wouldn't have beaten Steve without a favorable aligning of the stars, and I *didn't* beat Erik... and let's face it, my cards weren't exactly favored against his. The Mad Genius even dealt me one with an Icequake along the way! Luckily – there's that word again – when I hit Erik, the slot was no longer in danger.

3 April 1999

The Season: QT for PT New York 1999 (Rye Town... Casey McCarrell's)

The Format: Extended (High Tide era)

The Deck: Suicide King

Suicide King		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	<i>60 cards</i>	
4 Mishra's Factory	4 Cursed Scroll	4 Dystopia
14 Swamp	4 Dark Ritual	4 Engineered Plague
4 Wasteland	4 Demonic Consultation	4 Funeral Charm
_____	4 Duress	3 Spinning Darkness
22 lands	4 Hymn to Tourach	_____
	4 Sarcomancy	15 sideboard cards
	4 Sphere of Resistance	
4 Carnophage	_____	
2 Flesh Reaver	28 other spells	
4 Skittering Skirge		

10 creatures		

I got this deck from a then-Lehigh student who would eventually grow up to be a **Magic** Lead Developer, Brian Schneider. Our conversation went something like this:

Him: "Play this, don't ask any questions, and don't change any cards."

Me: "What about one Kaervek's Spite?"

Him: "Play this, DON'T ASK ANY QUESTIONS, and don't change any cards."

Me: "Goblins just won the Grand Prix ... I really don't know if..."

Him: "PLAY THIS, DON'T ASK ANY QUESTIONS, AND DON'T CHANGE ANY CARDS!"

Thank God I did.

Brian's Suicide King was meant to be very absurd against the dominant High Tide deck, but I questioned its ability to win against creatures. When I got to the PTQ, I played against another eventual **Magic** R&D member, my then-teammate Tournament Organizer Mike Donais... Who proceeded to manhandle me repeatedly with the High Tide deck I had used to make Top 8 at the previous PTQ. "Don't worry that your deck doesn't even beat the deck it was built to beat," Mike said. "We also have side events."



DON'T ASK ANY QUESTIONS!

Round 1 Dan Fountain

Dan took Gordon's Goblin strategy to the next level, and showed me second turn Goblin Mutant care of Goblin Lackey. Luckily I had an aggressive anti-beatdown sideboard. The following games went Dark Ritual, Engineered Plague or so on the first turn.

Round 2 Micheal Wickham

If Round One Red wasn't enough... Wickham was Red as well. Luckily I sideboarded again. This match I was tempted to hold my Funeral Charm for Jackal Pup so that I could eventually Spinning Darkness it, but luckily I didn't or I might have lost. I mean it *does* feel a little icky to Spin a Ball Lightning and Charm a Pup rather than the reverse, but it's a lot better than taking 10.

Round 5 William E. Baldwin

I managed to win both of Red matchups, but Baldwin's deck was actually a worse matchup - and one I didn't really plan to play - Pox. I actually had him dead on board in Game Three when William took a turn from my old playbook (alluded to above): Demonic Consultation for the one Kaervek's Spite!

The Pox matchup was no fun, and ended up being a precursor to what felt like a million more Pox fights on the day (with "a million" meaning "two" even given the interminable Swiss rounds). The Rack was basically it for my deck... You have to play out cards or automatically lose the Cursed Scroll fights, but if you don't keep cards in hand, you lose to The Rack; therefore you only win if the opponent doesn't draw The Rack, or you kill him first (again with the "playing out your hand"). I won the next two Pox battles to make first Top 8 and then Top 4, but needed both of my opponents to screw up key Game Three situations in order to advance (luckily, they did). I eventually hit High Tide

in the Semifinals – the *tenth* round of play – but that was the only time I got the matchup I wanted (and I even managed to lose Game Two).


To wit: to win a PTQ, you pretty much have to a) have a good deck, but more importantly b) get lucky. In the *Ice Age / Alliances* PTQ, the dice rolled the right way for me a couple of times, but in this one, I had to win actively horrendous matchups on four different occasions. In situations like this... you've just got to do what you can. I elected to run a very aggressive anti-offensive sideboard that gave me coin flips in sideboard games; conversely edt has written that if you have a good deck with one or more unwinnable matchups, the best plan is to ignore it / them and keep making Top 8 week after week until you qualify (this wasn't really possible for me, given that it was the absolute last PTQ of the season held in a faraway city). While it is a truism that regardless of your plan, when the opponent has strategic advantage, you still have to get lucky, it really helps if you come to the tournament with the tools to exploit the opportunities the opponent gives you.

29 April 2000

The Season: Northeast Regionals 2000 (feeding Jon Finkel's U.S. Nationals)

The Format: Standard

The Deck: Napster / Flores Black / Finkel Black / whatever you want to call it

Napster / Flores Black / Finkel Black 		
Main Deck		Sideboard
	60 cards	
1 Dust Bowl	1 Agonizing Memories	1 Eradicate
4 Rishadan Port	4 Dark Ritual	1 Massacre
2 Spawning Pool	4 Duress	2 Perish
16 Swamp	1 Massacre	2 Phyrexian Negator
-----	3 Powder Keg	1 Powder Keg
23 lands	1 Rapid Decay	4 Rain of Tears
	1 Stupor	2 Rapid Decay
	3 Unmask	1 Thran Lens
2 Phyrexian Negator	3 Vampiric Tutor	1 Unmask
2 Skittering Horror	4 Vicious Hunger	-----
3 Skittering Skirge	4 Yawgmoth's Will	15 sideboard cards
1 Thrashing Wumpus	-----	
-----	29 other spells	
8 creatures		

This might be the best deck I ever made. I mean it's embarrassingly untuned (*three* Vampiric Tutors much?), which actually brings up an interesting point: when you playtest decks that - how shall I put this - *always win*, it is sometimes difficult to see how your deck can improve (not an excuse, mind you, just the reason). Still... Looking at the old list still makes me happy; yes, yes, by the time Jon played it, we had worked in the fourth Vampiric Tutor and added Persecute, yes.

Round 3 Dennis Tsao

I only lost three total games this Regionals and one was Game Two against Dennis. I had him at no board and no cards in hand, having set it up that his top card was a certain Xena-reminiscent Defiant Hero thanks to Agonizing Memories. At the end of his turn, I Vampiric Tutored for an Eradicate... *that was still in my sidebar*. Long story short, he tapped to fetch a Protection from Black Glider and I lost a game where I had cards to his no cards, I had Thrashing Wumpus online against Rebels, and I had cast both Massacre and Vampiric Tutor.

Semifinals Sayan Bhattacharyya

Both of the other games I lost were to Sayan. Side note on Sayan: He's awesome. You might think that it is because he was one of the finest technical players Neutral Ground ever produced, or that via the Grudge Match he was the innovative co-creator of the Parallax Replenish deck (along with Donald Lim) that dominated 2000 Championship Season Standard, but my reason is that one night, we were out drinking and he asked me if I knew who Harriet Wheeler was. I mean of course *I* knew, but I didn't expect any other **Magic** players to know, let alone ask the question, and anyone who would is by definition awesome. End side note.

Anyway, we split the first two games (both blowouts), and it came down to his having Enlightened Tutor versus my Duress on turn 1, finding Circle of Protection: Black (I had no Vampiric Tutor in the short term to answer). A few turns later I had eight in hand, so I tapped four (tapped out) for Unmask, to which he responded with Mystical Tutor. It wouldn't normally be that embarrassing to lose to a small Replenish this spot, especially as I had already clinched the envelope, but I had the Rapid Decay in my hand, so tapping out for a "free" spell wasn't exactly the best use of my resources. Blah blah blah Opalescence, blah blah blah Attunement, blah blah blah Parallax-this Parallax-that.

It will be rare that you can use the specific implementation from this tournament, because tournaments where your [deck] edge over the rest of the field is as pronounced as the one I had at Regionals 2000 come maybe once every five years; the only other time I felt like I could basically never lose was States 2005 (this past season), when every single person who played our Jushi Blue made Top 8 and we only lost to each other... and from my perspective, that tournament that tells the exact same lesson. When you have a huge edge over the rest of the tournament, your mistakes are much more significant. The corollary, anecdotally, I have found, is that I am most likely to throw a game away, really toss it in the grumper, when I think I have it well in hand or I have some kind of huge edge and can't actually see *how* the opponent can play out to win it. When you waltz the other guy into exactly the spot you want him, and he makes every move you anticipate, *that* is the danger zone. The previous examples were all about doing your best but knowing that you have to put yourself in a position to get lucky sometimes... It's a different story entirely when your deck makes almost every opponent's look like the caveman sixty special (or, again, in tactical situations where everything seems to be going your way). Incidentally, I lost the finals at States 2005 to a misplayed (or actually *not* played) free spell, same as this Regionals.

When your edge is large, the onus is actually *more* significant that you play properly, because a catastrophic mistake is in many cases the *only* way you are realistically going to lose. I don't know what I was thinking tapping out with Rapid Decay in my hand next to *seven* other cards... The absence of Eradicate in the Tsao fight was not acceptable, but the spent Vampiric Tutor made that mistake even uglier; you're really not supposed to lose when you play banned cards against, um, *White Weenie*.



9 December 2001

The Season: QT for PT Osaka 2002 (Ken Ho's)

The Format: Extended

The Deck: The Rock

The Rock



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Bayou
2 Dust Bowl
8 Forest
5 Swamp
4 Treetop Village

23 lands

4 Duress
1 Living Death
4 Pernicious Deed
2 Phyrexian Furnace
1 Recurring Nightmare
2 Vampiric Tutor

14 other spells

4 Birds of Paradise
1 Phyrexian Plaguelord
4 Spike Feeder
2 Spike Weaver
4 Spiritmonger
4 Wall of Roots
4 Yavimaya Elder

23 creatures

Sideboard

3 Choke
3 Diabolic Edict
1 Dust Bowl
3 Emerald Charm
1 Living Death
1 Phyrexian Furnace
2 Uktabi Orangutan
1 Volrath's Stronghold

15 sideboard cards



While I have been less than kind towards The Rock the past couple of years (but only because it deserved it!), I will be the first to admit that The Rock provided me with incalculable percentage for a period of three tournaments in 2001 (before anyone other than Sol Malka was playing it in Extended), winning me a Grand Prix Trial and Week Two PTQ both. The Rock of those days actually paired up really well with Trick – the powerhouse Necropotence-less Illusions of Grandeur / Donate combination deck of the era – due to a multi-pronged disruption suite of Duress, Spike Feeder, and Phyrexian Furnace, not to mention the sideboard. I was actually planning to play Trick

myself, but my friends Josh Ravitz and Paul Jordan were using all the Blue and Red cards so I was left, ultimately quite successfully, with Black, Green, or White cards to assemble the above deck.

Round 2 Al E. Sanson

This is an important lesson: change your sleeves every day of every tournament. I had only played a few rounds of Grand Prix – Las Vegas, and decided to save a couple of bucks on Day Two PTQ sleeves... This prompted Al to call the judge on me after spying what he perceived as four marked cards during table shuffle. This was scarier to me at the time than it might seem to you, as a pretty high profile player – and good friend of mine – had just been banned out of a Worlds Top 8 for marked sleeves. At the end of the deck check, the four cards didn't show a sleeve pattern, and after a routine win against Trick, I was able to make it to the eventual finish with the envelope.

Round 4 Mons Johnson

This doesn't have to do with anything, but I mention the match because Mons is currently out of circulation. A lot of people don't know this, but the guy who inspired **Magic's** first 1/1 Goblins actually contributed a ton to Goblins technology with his innovative deck. Mons actually gave me my only loss of the tournament... I had no idea how to combat his Goblin Recruiter into Goblin Ringleader card advantage (it turns out you can't actually do that). I also couldn't try to trump with Spiritmonger because the man behind the Alpha-iconic Goblin Raiders ran that hated bane of all buttocks fat: Swords to Plowshares... in his Goblin deck. If memory serves, after an easy Swiss, Mons got manascrewed out of the opposite bracket of the Top 8.

He eventually won a PTQ, validating the strength of the new deck and paving the way for many a Ringleader to come, but not during the 2001 season.

Finals Michael Bernat

At the point that I hit Bernat, I was 14-0 in games against U/R Trick over three tournaments, and Michael was U/R Trick. I wanted to play for everything, but Michael had actually just beaten The Rock, and The Underground's finest, Brian Kibler and Ben Rubin, instructed me to buy him out if I could. As such, I got the Blue Envelope and Michael took the lion's share of the travel award, free to play in additional PTQs (and therefore had my envy).

Keep your nose clean on the little things. If you get game losses (or worse) due to marked sleeves, *it's probably your fault*. Given my past performance against the dominant deck of the era, it actually took a colossal amount of personality suppression for me to negotiate a prize split in the finals, but it was probably right (even though I didn't end up attending Osaka); streaks are only streaks until they end, and Ben made a good point that I might just have gotten manascrewed out of a slot. Both the Round Two and Finals stories end up being cost-benefit parables... A lot of PTQ players slog it out week after week, traveling to different cities and investing in cards and gas and parking, not to mention tournament fees and the most valuable commodity of all, time, in order to eventually claim that all important invitation. Given that framework, it seems almost a given that you wouldn't allow minor costs like new sleeves to be Lilith to your game losses, or too much pride to block the real reason you get up early and show up to play, that prize beyond pure love of the game.

27 August 2005

The Season: QT for PT Los Angeles 2005 (Antoine Ruel's)

The Format: Kamigawa Block Constructed

The Deck: Critical Mass

For this tournament I metagamed about 45% against White Weenie, 45% against Gifts Ungiven, and 10% against Mono-Blue. Despite Gifts Ungiven being "more dominant in *Kamigawa* Block than Affinity was in *Mirrodin* Block," I played against zero copies of that deck in the PTQ... but instead almost entirely against Black Hand (a deck that I beat repeatedly in the tournament... but much like my 2-1 against Pox in the Suicide King PTQ, I honestly don't know if I should have won "on the numbers"). In

fact, my Quarterfinals, Semifinals, and Finals opponents (as well as sundry Swiss) were all Black Hand, and I had to get at least a little bit lucky to beat every one of them.

Right before the tournament started, I had four copies of Gnarled Mass in my sideboard for the clever anti-White Weenie swaps where Hinder would be bad (or at least worse, on three). Steve Sadin was like "why don't we just run a couple of Consuming Vortexes, which are basically the same thing, but can aim" and those cards ended up being some of the most popular sideboard swaps of my tournament; I shrugged and acceded.

Quarterfinals Julian Levin

My eventual protégé (Julian beat me in the Jushi mirror in the finals of States 2005) was at this point just an obstacle I had to get past on the way to the Blue Envelope. I had a much better board position than he in Game Three, but he was, to be fair, stuck on two or three lands the whole game, nevertheless relentlessly cracking with Nezumi Cutthroat and Manriki-Gusari. At the end of it, I was dead on board with Julian's next untap when I said, "I basically have to draw Consuming Vortex, Threads, or Jitte here or I lose." Jitte appeared, putting me into the Top 4.



Semifinals Tim Gillam

A protracted Game Three with more backs, forths, swerves, and twists than an episode of 24 culminated with Tim activating Tomb of Urami free and clear, and attaching Manriki-Gusari with me on exactly twelve (do the math). I actually had a reasonable number of outs (Vortex, Threads, Meloku, Keiga, and possibly even Jitte short-term), but I still had to draw one of them with only two topdecks available. This time it was Vortex with lethal damage coming across The Red Zone, and I was Los Angeles bound.

Topdecking is an art. It really is. People complain about topdecks all the time (when *their opponents* topdeck, that is, rarely tipping their hats to Fortuna when they are the beneficiaries themselves), but they often don't realize that they are putting the other guy into situations where he *can* topdeck to win. I certainly don't think that Julian played badly - he made the most of a manascrewed game and almost came away with it - but that is not the lesson here. Recently I have been more and more trying to visualize what card exactly I need to appear on the top of my deck, across Apprentice testing, **Magic Online**, and of course paper **Magic**, and have been literally *shocked* by how often the right card comes up exactly when I would otherwise be about to lose. No, I don't think that I am somehow bending the laws of probability or persuading the universe to alter its natural mechanisms to accommodate my game of cards, or some other trap of magical thinking...

As far as I can tell, any such happy occurrences have been about figuring out what card(s) I needed to win when behind and when, and playing *to be able* to win should those card(s) appear when they should. This is an old trick of that rascal Kai Budde, who never denied being "lucky," but was always quick to point out that with his near-perfect play, he would be able to exploit what luck *did* come his way, and whenever it saw fit to do so. This is also the equal and opposite of the Regionals 2000 lesson: Just as you don't want to hand your opponent a catastrophic measure of margin when you feel you are winning (or have a much better deck), measuring out and clawing up your plays when you are behind *in anticipation for the intervention of providence* is a fine - perhaps the best - way to steal wins when the opposite seems to be the case.

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