

## Preparing for the prerelease. An Arctic Blast From the Past

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AN ARCTIC BLAST! IN JUNE  
NEW CARD SET TO BE A HOT NUMBER AT CANADIAN COMPETITION

Renton, Wash. (April 25, 1995) -- Alongside Canada's inaugural National Magic: The Gathering(tm) tournament in Toronto this June, the world premier of cards from the next Magic expansion, Ice Age(tm), will sizzle. Wizards of the Coast, Inc., the publisher of the trading card phenomenon Magic, is holding its first-ever Ice Age sealed-deck tournament at the Canadian Comic and Card Spectacular, June 3-4. Ice Age is unique in being both a standard Magic expansion set and stand-alone game.

I still remember seeing this post on the Usenet as anticipation about the first ever stand alone set for **Magic** loomed on the horizon. To this day, I regret not making the trip to Canadian Nationals to take part in what was an unprecedented event at the time. Not only was it the first ever prerelease tournament, but the term "prerelease" had not even been coined yet.

I have been thinking back on my missed opportunity to travel to Toronto as *Coldsnap* - the "lost" *Ice Age* expansion - is about to crest over the horizon line. As is the case each time a new set is released, my job is to convince you not to make the same mistake I made in 1995, and instead **get out there and play!** Why should you stay home this weekend when you could travel back in time to your local tournament and the era of cumulative upkeep and snow-covered lands? I have not missed a prerelease since that very first opportunity, so I can promise you that I practice what I preach.

The tournament, which is not connected to the Canadian National Magic event, is expected to draw more than 1,000 curious competitors, even though it isn't sanctioned by Wizards of the Coast's Duelists' Convocation. "Since Ice Age won't officially be released until shortly after the tournament, this will be the first time players will have seen cards from the expansion," says Skaff Elias, Magic Brand Manager. As a result, security around the cards will be tight. Wizards of the Coast will use Royal Canadian Mounted Police to guard and dispense the cards at the tournament.

Things have certainly changed in the decade-plus since the *Ice Age* release – and not just putting the "pre" in Prerelease or writing in the past tense. Local law enforcement will not be involved and the Duelists' Convocation – later expanded globally to the Duelists' Convocation International and then later shortened to DCI – most certainly will. Prereleases are always sanctioned events, whether you play in the main event, 3-person teams, or Two-Headed Giant.

This means you will have to sign up for a DCI number if you do not already have one. This involves a nominal amount of paperwork and no financial commitment from you. Having a DCI number allows you to play in sanctioned **Magic** tournaments, track your rating and ranking against all the other **Magic** players in the world (although you can narrow it down to see how you fare against more local competition), and makes you eligible for player's rewards – free cards, foils, and tokens which are distributed to active players based on how many tournaments they play in per quarter. Quite a change from the early days of the Duelists' Convocation.

What has not changed is the exclusivity of the event. There will be hundreds of tournaments all over the world this weekend to highlight the impending release of Coldsnap, accommodating many times the 1000 anticipated players in 1995. While there will be hundreds more opportunities for players to attend around the globe, there will only be one weekend for you to get your mitts on the new cards before it goes on sale at your local card shop. If you are entertaining fantasies about opening Soulscour or Dark Depths (which I think is the most flavorful morsel of **Magic** since Form of the Dragon) out of a booster pack then you will have to make the journey to a Prerelease.

You will also receive an exclusive card that is not available unless you take part in a *Coldsnap* prerelease. At each of these tournaments, Wizards produces a special commemorative foil card with alternative artwork and a date stamp to celebrate the release of the new set. The card is always a rare and is almost always a creature. (I think the only exceptions to the creature rule were the Voltron-like Kaldra parts from the *Mirrodin* block and even they combined to form a creature – sort of.)

There are a number of reasons Wizards of the Coast is holding the first Ice Age tournament at the Canadian Nationals. One is the event coincides perfectly with the expansion's release date. "This is also a way of showing the world that Magic is indeed an international phenomenon," says Elias. Organizers expect participants will particularly enjoy the challenge of playing with cards they've never seen. "In this tournament, skill will outweigh experience and card collection size," says Elias.

Skaff's soundbite remains apt today, even if the menace of Mr. Suitcase is not quite the nightmare inducing shadow of the boogeyman it once was. Prerelease tournaments are an excellent starter tournament for someone who is not a PTQ hardened veteran of the competitive **Magic** scene. Players come to the Prerelease – first and foremost – to get their hands on the new cards. Rarely do I find the cutthroat stereotype of a tournament **Magic** player perpetuated at these events. The atmosphere is generally supportive and friendly with enough competitiveness – it is a tournament after all – to keep it from being a pillow fighting slumber party.

At a prerelease the abilities to recognize card potential and spot card interactions are just as important as tournament experience. I have even seen tournament experience work against a player at a prerelease. Many times players will make historical judgments about cards. Take Thrive as an example. When it was first released back in *Prophecy*, the green X-spell was not very good in the block and it was quickly dismissed by many players with experience dating back to its original appearance. Thrive has tremendous synergy in *Ravnica* block, as players who tried it out at the *Dissension* Prerelease quickly found out.

Of course one of the nice things about playing in a prerelease is the opportunity to rub up against some better players in competition. Even if you don't win, it is a great chance to learn some of the subtle points of the game from deck construction – most players will take some time to look over how you have built your deck and offer some constructive criticism – to actual game play. Don't be afraid to ask about some unexpected plays or in-game decisions. The only way to truly get better at this game is to continually play and study the play of others. The low-key atmosphere of the Prerelease makes this more possible than at any other level of competition.

Because Ice Age is a stand-alone game, it will be sold in both starter decks and booster packs. To participate in the Ice Age tournament, players must buy one Ice Age deck and two boosters. Participants will compete for four prizes: a diamond-studded Ice Age medallion worth \$1,000, another worth \$750, and two worth \$500. Wizards of the Coast is planning several similar future competitions.

If “several similar future competitions” meant that there would be prerelease tournaments for every subsequent expansion and stand alone, then this was an accurate statement. This weekend's event is the least similar in that it is the first time – outside of the “Un” events – that players will not get a starter deck/tournament pack to build their deck with. While some TO's have been stockpiling *Ice Age* sealed decks for some full block sealed events, it is not practical for the Prerelease. Players will instead receive five boosters of *Coldsnap* to build 40-card minimum decks for the main sealed deck events. It is the same size card pool you get with one tournament pack and two boosters, once you discount the 30 basic lands in the tournament pack.

The prizes are certainly much different. There are no diamond-studded medallions this time around. (Does anyone out there know where any of these prizes ended up? I have never seen any of the Toronto prizes. If anyone knows, please drop me an email or link to a picture.) While the prizes are a little less ostentatious, they do go a tad deeper and are much more practical. While the diamond studded neckwear is a little difficult to pull off at any level of competition besides Worlds, the prerelease player can always use more packs.

Generally at these tournaments there are a fixed number of rounds after which everyone with one loss or fewer receives booster packs as prizes. Organizers tend to offer these tournaments in two different flavors. The first is what is known as a “box tournament”, which has no limits on the number of participants and will be played out until there is a lone undefeated player, who wins an entire box of the new set with smaller increments of prizes given out for players with less perfect records. There is usually a fixed starting time in the morning for these events and they will run for the duration of the day.

The more common version is known a “flight”. Flights have a fixed number of entrants – 16, 32, or 64 players -- and will begin all day long as they fill up. The flight will then run for 3-5 rounds, after which some number of packs will be given out to everyone with zero or one losses. These tournaments tend to be better for the less experienced player, as the better payout of the box tournament tends to attract the tougher competition. If you are not a tournament veteran, you may also not be used to the length of the bigger tournaments. With the flights you can generally predict how long the tournament will take – somewhere between 4 and 6 hours based on the number of rounds.

If straight sealed deck is not your thing, there should be several other formats for you to explore with *Coldsnap*. Since PTQs will be featuring *Coldsnap* for the Top 8 drafts starting next weekend, this could be a perfect opportunity to get the jump on the competition. If you are looking to play with some friends, there should be 3-player team tournaments with 10 booster packs being given to each team. Teams will then build three 40-card minimum decks and try to win two out of three matches against competing teams. This is always a fun format, because even if you lose a round there is still a chance your two teammates can bail you out.

Two-Headed Giant is an increasingly popular team format and should be on the schedule for most organizers. As always, this is the ideal format if you have a potential teammate who is just learning the Magical ropes. Since one player ultimately makes all the decisions for the two heads, you can guide a newer player through the finer points of the game.



The biggest challenge that many players have at these events is the one of deck construction. Hopefully the guild flavor of *Ravnica* block will not leave a lingering taste for four-color decks on the tongues of most **Magic** players. I do not really know how much mana fixing there will be in *Coldsnap*, but it cannot possibly approach the saturation level of RGD, which relied on mana-fixing to pull off 4- and 5-color decks.

As we roll back thematically to *Ice Age*, I am reminded of an old rule of thumb from way back in the days of snow-covered forest walk. Basically you want to have a base two color deck with seventeen creatures, five spells, – ideally removal or combat tricks – and about 18 mana sources. The reason to go into a third color is obviously for removal or to shore up glaring weaknesses in the colors you have featured, such as enchantment removal in Red/Black or burn spells in Green/White.

Remember that you can count alternative mana sources – elves, signets, talismans, icebergs – in the land slot. I generally count two alternate mana sources as one land. So if I had two signets, I would cut one land. Also remember that if you cannot keep your deck to 40 cards, you should make sure you adjust your mana totals accordingly.

Remember that combat tricks can often be the same as removal. Here is an uncommon combat trick that you might open [at the event this weekend](#) and should keep in mind against opposing green mages as well.



This card reminds me of the morph dilemma from *Onslaught* – do I block or not? While there is traditionally value to blocking a creature and drawing out an opponent's trick, that may not be the case here if your opponent has 2GG open. For example, if a 1/1 comes over and you block with a 4/4, your opponent could Resize his creature, making it 4/4 and trading with your beefy blocker. But then he can use the remaining 1G to get his Resize back too. So, once that Resize is in the graveyard some of the trick may be finding opportunities to kill off an opposing creature while the opponent doesn't have the mana to get the recover spell back. If so, trying to control when recover spells get to the graveyard in the first place could be an important skill when playing with the new set. If you can catch an opponent tapped out with this spell in the graveyard, you can force it to be removed from the game.

The Ice Age tournament will run at the same site as the Canadian National Magic tournament. The National event is expected to draw more than 1,000 players from Canada. The top players of the National tournament will advance to play at the World Title competition. A site for the world event hasn't been announced.

There are no conflicting tournaments this time out. You have no excuses – even you Canadians – to regret missing this event eleven years from now.