

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



Inside U.S. Nationals

*Brian David-Marshall
The Week That Was
Friday, July 28, 2006*



hey all. I am writing to you from inside the tournament of the Magic Weekend, which will encompass U.S. Nationals, Junior Super Series Championships, and a jumbo-sized Friday Night Magic. There will also be plenty of other events taking place, from side events to PTQs to the Game of the Year. There are even free snow cones in five **Magic** colors all weekend long.

The great majority of you reading this will not be in steamy Atlanta this weekend, so I have decided to give you a guided tour of the site to show you what you are missing. The venue is the same one that housed last season's Pro Tour-Atlanta, the Cobb Galleria. All photos by Craig Gibson.



Players arriving Thursday walked underneath a banner welcoming them to the Magic Weekend. As you can see the banner is themed in two colors with a deep red for U.S. Nationals and a teal blue for the JSS. If you look closely you can see the art from **Heidar, Rimewind Master** on the red side and **Allosaurus Rider** on the blue one. No word on whether the decision to include art from opposing colors on each side was deliberate.

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Once through the doors, players are greeted by a sign inviting them to take part in Super Friday Night Magic. SFNM debuted in Charleston and had well over 100 participants. The idea behind the event is for local stores, who might otherwise lose their typical FNM crowd when the Wizards of the Coast circus rolls into town, to pool their resources to make this particular Friday night a special opportunity for local players. Not only are they playing for a plethora (and yes, El Guapo, I do know what a plethora is) of foily prizes they have a chance to see how they will fare against players from other parts of the country.



There are usually two key stations at a large event such as this one (in fact, for this one there were three) – and the first one that a player has to contend with is Player Registration. At 4 p.m. on Thursday the competitors for U.S. Nationals began to queue up to claim their rightful place in the tournament. It is also serving as the registration area for the JSS on Friday, as well as side events all weekend long.

This area is the domain of one Steve Port. Steve is the brains behind Legion Events and he also handles all side event operations and tournament registration at Pro Tours and Nationals. Steve is also responsible for the matrix-like green numbers scrolling across his face in the accompanying photo. Steve had his guys cobble together a piece of software that allows him to export the pairings and standings from DCI Reporter and either display them on monitors, which he does at his store for PTQs, or project them onto a large screen.

Steve was using the projector for the Limited grinder that took place on Thursday and was expecting to use it for a number of other events over the weekend. Steve recalled the first time he used the software at one of his own events:

"The first time we used it was at the store and we had four 27-inch monitors there. We put the first pairings up and were worried about whether or not it would work. There were people crowded around the monitors and I thought to myself, 'this is no better than printing them on pieces of paper.' I turned around to tell someone it was not going to work and then when I turned back they were all gone. People just dissipate. You don't have the problem of people crowding into the pairings sheet and then crowding back."



Many of the people here Thursday were hoping to 'grind' into U.S. Nationals in any of five tournaments that will put a total of 20 people through to Friday's competition. As of this writing, three events had started including two Standard and one Limited. Dan 'Rodman' Rodemann of KK's fabled Atlanta house was one of the players in the lone Limited Grinder this weekend, and he was pretty happy with the card pool he opened—just three of which he displayed for the camera.



Once players are through the registration area and have signed up for their desired tournament, they often head to the dealers tables in search of those last elusive cards they need for their deck. From a coverage reporter's perspective, they are also a valuable source of intel. According to sales figures from Queen's Domain head honchette Michelle Cove you should expect that Solar Flare will a popular deck this weekend.

"Paladin En-Vec, Trygon Predator, Court Hussar, and Zombify are the big cards. Lots of Zombify. Thoughts of Ruin has also been big. It has been really across the board. I probably sold 30 Zombify today. It's a good thing I accidentally brought lots of them with me," Michelle laughed.



If players are looking for some deck feedback, or even just a duel against a Hall of Fame-caliber opponent, they need look no further than Alan Comer's little corner of the venue. Alan will be the deck doctor on call for any competitors looking to fine tune their mana, hone their sideboards, or shave the last few cards from a deck. For those people comfortable with their decks, Alan is also gunslinging all weekend with a variety of wacky post-*Coldsnap* Standard decks. One deck attempts to abuse **Jester's Scepter** while another completely abuses **Thrumming Stone**.

You heard me right. **Thrumming Stone**. That's why he is a Hall of Famer, people – building crazy decks and trying to make them work. Now this one is not quite there yet but it does some crazy stuff and in the late game can convert each unit of mana into three new cards. The Gunslinger laid down his weapon for a moment and explained the engine:

"The engine is **Sensei's Divining Top** and **Thrumming Stone**. The combo...well that is not really in the deck yet. I will find something to do with it sooner or later and I am open to any ideas. Once you get a **Thrumming Stone** down and keep casting **Sensei's Divining Top** until you find another. Then you cast your second Top and put your first Top on top of the deck, drawing a card. Then the ripple puts the one on top of your deck back into play. Very rapidly you find all four Tops and for every mana you can convert you draw three cards. Effectively you can run through your deck really quickly. Currently I am using **Heartbeat of Spring** and **Early Harvest** so I can have enough mana to run through the deck. I think the kill mechanism – **Reminisce** and **Electrolyze** – is the weakness. Plus, it needs a couple more lands."

Alan Comer -- How to Keep a Thrumming Stone Busy

Post-Coldsnap Standard 

Main Deck
61 cards

11 Forest	4 Birds of Paradise	1 Counterbalance
6 Island	4 Carven Caryatid	4 Early Harvest
1 Mountain	4 Coiling Oracle	4 Electrolyze
18 lands	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	4 Heartbeat of Spring
	16 creatures	2 Reminisce
		4 Sensei's Divining Top

4 Telling Time
4 Thrumming Stone

27 other spells



In addition to the ones given out at actual tournaments this weekend, there will several other cool prizes handed away this weekend, including four \$1,000 scholarship awards in the Make Your Own Magic contest. **Magic** players aged 15 and younger will be bringing submissions in four categories; Fiction, Card Design, Art, and Coverage. The winner in each category will win \$1,000 in scholarship money as well as a leg up in their chosen field of endeavor.



If you are looking for sleeves or just want to update your DCI information, you can stop by the Wizards retail booth/DCI Information center. Ron Foster – a fixture on the Japanese **Magic** scene – was manning the DCI side of the booth this weekend and had already handled requests from more than 50 players. Mostly they seem to be about players making sure that they have the correct address information associated with their DCI numbers in order to reap DCI Rewards.

"We can confirm your registered information in the DCI database so that when we send you free cool stuff, like textless cards, it arrives in the right place," Foster said. "We can also check your rating, answer any questions about the DCI you might have, file appeals on your match history, combine multiple DCI numbers...whatever you want. Everyone who updates their information or confirms it gets some cool free stuff this weekend."



The artists area was a little sparse on Thursday but that is because Dan Scott and Dave Dorman were not here yet. Rest assured that they will be mobbed with fans lining up to get cards signed, buy prints, and meet their favorite **Magic** artists.



The head judge for U.S. Nationals this weekend is Mike Guptil (seen here waving through the JSS trophy case). Mike has head judged events at virtually every level of **Magic** competition but always has a special place in his heart for Nationals.

"Nats is one of the best formats ever as a Head Judge. The split format makes it really, really interesting. You get people that really excel at one format but not at the other. It can be pretty stressful for them and it keeps the judging staff on its toes," Mike explained.

U.S. Nationals is a big step on the road to Worlds and represents much more to the players here than just cash prizes. This is an opportunity for players to represent their country against the best players in the worlds; something that is not lost on Mike.

"This is a big job. That is why we put together such a good staff. We take it really seriously. We want to keep it fair. We want to have good sharp turnaround. We want to give good consistent rulings. We want to make it fair for everyone so that no one walks away feeling cheated."



Another person responsible for keeping this event running is Tournament Manager Scott Larabee. Like Guptil, Scott has great reverence for this tournament – the oldest continually running event in Premier Events. It dates back even further than World Championships. Scott's job is to make sure the tournament runs smoothly and when it does not to put out any fires – literal or otherwise.

"In Columbus the concession stand had a grease fire," Larabee recounted. "That was an interesting case. The concession stand was in the hall and they could not put it out. So they close the stand and it was starting to get a little smoky. We are in the middle of Pro Tour-Columbus and it was possible we would get kicked out by the fire department. We had to huddle up and come up with a solution. We decided what to do and luckily it never came up it was just smoky for a little while. That is the kind of thing I do. Something will happen and you have to make a decision. If a guy passes out in the middle of a match you have to make a decision. Does he lose? Do you wait?"



There are areas here set aside for parents to lounge while they wait for their sons and daughters playing in tournaments. It will be much more crowded on Saturday when several hundred small children arrive for the JSS.





By Saturday both the Nationals and JSS will be underway and their respective Feature Match area will be bustling with the best and brightest players in the land. When Saturday evening rolls around those puny Feature Match area will be shoved aside to make way for the largest feature match area of all – The Game of the Year. What looks like a red carpet between the two Feature Match area is actually a massive red zone on a Brobdingnagian play mat.



When it is all said and done, one player will be crowned the U.S. National Champion. That player will lead the U.S. team at Worlds where they will all fight to have their name inscribed on the World Championship trophy alongside the game's greatest players, ranging from Zak Dolan in 1994 to Katsuhiko Mori last season.

Time Spiral Pre-Preview

You've already [seen the text for this card](#), but what's the harm in a full preview? Shown below are the English and Japanese versions of Tsuyoshi Fujita's card from the 2005 Invitational, voted on by readers of [magicthegathering.com](#). What was once Unluckyman's Paradise is now Gemstone Caverns. Enjoy!



Firestarter: Deck Doctor, Heal Thyself

Alan Comer needs your help. He has been trying to make his Thrumming Top deck work in the post-*Coldsnap* Standard environment. Feel free to hammer away at his build – this was really just a first pass he assembled on Thursday morning – and make it into something more formidable. The forums await your deck ministrations.

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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