

JMS returns to magicthegathering.com, this time with his eyes set on building rogue decks for tournaments.

Going Rogue: Curse of the Stromgald Knights

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Okay, let's talk deckbuilding.

If you are thinking of playing in any sort of constructed competition--be it [Champs](#), [Regionals](#), [Friday Night Magic](#), a [Pro Tour Qualifier](#), or even just a home-brewed tilt among friends--you are faced with a key initial decision: Build your own deck, or find a deck that someone else has built.

Finding an existing deck is often the best choice. If you copy it from some Pro player's tournament report, for example, you're getting a deck with proven success. More importantly, you're picking a deck that has dozens, maybe even hundreds, of hours of playtesting behind it. This means that you can jump right in to learn the deck, figure out how it plays against what you're likely to face in a tournament, and make whatever tweaks (sideboard or otherwise) that you feel comfortable making. In other words, you can spend your time and effort *playing* the deck instead of *building* the deck.

A much more risky choice is to make your own deck. It's risky because you are probably not a premiere deckbuilder. There's no shame in this, since most of us aren't premiere deckbuilders. It takes as much time or more to learn to make decks as it does to play them, and it's becoming an underdeveloped skill as access to tournament results has promoted net-decking. The risks don't stop at your deckbuilding skill, though. No matter how much you play your new deck, you are unlikely to be able to log the hours that tournament-winning decks have undergone. And even if you are able to find the hours to playtest your deck to death, it's unlikely that you're testing against the caliber of players or decks you'll find in a tournament. Thus even if your deck tests well, you could get smoked in the smallest of tournies. Decks that have won tournaments, especially Pro Tours, are proven commodities. The sad truth is that you are saddled with huge handicaps when choosing to make your own deck.

So why do it? Why subject yourself to the needless hours of building, tweaking, and testing it takes to make a home-brewed deck that struggles to be on par with proven, published decks? There are several reasons, but two stand out to me. First, *if* you're able to create an original, tuned deck then you have a strategic advantage over net-deckers. No one will have tested against your deck. No one will know how to sideboard against your deck. Opponents will make ignorant mistakes either out of confusion or a misunderstanding of your strategy. If you show up with a good rogue deck then the element of surprise is on your side.

The second reason for bringing your own deck to a tournament is that it just plain feels better. There is enormous satisfaction in thinking of a deck idea, testing, tuning, and showing up with your own creation. If you happen to win, or at least threaten to win, then your satisfaction multiplies a hundredfold. Getting known as the progenitor of a new deck taking the world by storm? That's quite an ego boost.

You probably guessed from both the author and title of the article that today is for those of you who choose to make your own decks instead of choosing a proven net-deck. There is a lot to be learned in picking a published deck, how to learn to play it well, how and when to tweak it, etc. but I won't address any of these questions. This article is dedicated to how you go from the kernel of an idea all the way through to competition-worthy deck.

Up until this point, almost all of my articles have been geared to casual or new players, so it might seem odd to have me talk in a tournament context, discussing sideboards and, well, winning. Interestingly enough, though, I'm *still* talking to the casual and new players. Let's be honest: I'm not the guy to lead you to a Pro Tour victory. But I *am* a guy who makes a lot of decks with a decent winning percentage. I can certainly lead you to a Friday Night Magic victory given time and a little luck, after which you can graduate on to such gurus as [Mike Flores](#), [Zvi Mowshowitz](#), [BDM](#), and the like.

Also, you should know that today is an experiment. Scott Johns and I think this is an interesting and worthy approach for an article. I think, given the topic, that what I'm doing below is a good structure and format. You are the one that either learns something or is entertained, though, so pipe up on the Boards to let us know what you think and whether you'd like to see a "Going Rogue 2" sometime in the future.

I'm writing this article in diary format. That is, I'm making my own deck to play at Friday Night Magic and taking you along for the ride. For me, the only real way to learn is through concrete example.

The only problem is that--thanks to both a busy life and my "Past Returns" cameo [last week](#)--I'm starting this article a mere five days before the deadline, a span of time that includes the Thanksgiving holiday. Can I make a solid deck in less than a week? I, uh... Well, I *think* so. Let's find out.

Day 1: A Cursed Idea?



The inspiration for a new deck comes from many places. My personal muses tend to be single cards, two-card interactions, new mechanics, old school archetypes, and, honestly, reading about other people's decks. By far the most common of these, however, is the single card.

Whenever a new set is released, I jot down a list of cards that intrigue me and around which I'd like to build a deck. I call these my "menus," and when it

comes time to make a new deck I take out the menu and decide which cards are pulling most on my attention. Time Spiral was no exception, and I had ready a long list of cards I thought would be fun to showcase.

One of the cards I really like in *Time Spiral* is [Curse of the Cabal](#). For one thing, it's a big splashy spell with a "9" in its cost, and I've got a huge [Timmy gene](#). More than that, though, it reminds me of [Smokestack](#) (I know it's more of an ode to Braids, but Braids was an ode to [Smokestack](#), so work with me here). Back in the Urza Block days, I had a mono-green [Smokestack](#) deck that won me several local tournaments and that took me far (I think Top 8, but I honestly don't remember) into a Pro Tour Qualifier. It was a blast to play, and a deck that still brings a slow, warm smile to my face. [Curse of the Cabal](#) isn't nearly as reliable as [Smokestack](#), but it does have Suspend, one of Time Spiral's new mechanics I'm interested in trying out.

The reason I haven't built a [Curse of the Cabal](#) deck yet is that I've been playing all of my **Magic** games in the Casual Decks room of *Magic Online*. For better or worse, the Casual Decks room has an unwritten code of etiquette, and playing a deck that humiliates an opponent--either through land destruction, countermagic, or the like--is frowned upon. I think this code is silly, but I know it exists and I haven't been eager to be put on everyone's "Blocked" list.

This experiment gives me a perfect excuse to take an "un-fun" card and play it, though. In fact, it's probably the only card on my *Time Spiral* menu that I'm unlikely to use in a casual deck. As a result, my first inclination is to make my new pet deck built around [Curse of the Cabal](#).



It seems to me that [Curse of the Cabal](#) and [Smallpox](#) go hand in hand. Both have similar effects. Both are Black. In my mind, then, whatever deck I make is starting with four copies each of [Curse of the Cabal](#) and [Smallpox](#).

This decision, as you will see, will be significant.

Before I make a decklist, it's time to do my research. Numerous set reviews exist around the internet on *Time Spiral*, and Champs has given us a big crop of new Standard decks. I type "[Curse of the Cabal](#)" into Magic-al search engines, and here's what I find:

- Almost all set reviews say that [Curse of the Cabal](#) is too slow (essentially forcing an opponent to sacrifice a permanent every other turn). They also say that it will never be cast for ten mana. On the flipside, almost everyone seems to agree that [Smallpox](#) is good and deadly.
- Still, people have brainstormed [Curse of the Cabal](#) decks. I looked at Monoblack decks, Black/Green, Black/Red, and Black/Blue decks. All of these decks were hypothetical and untested, which I assume means they weren't good enough in testing to bring to Champs. They were also all slow control decks.
- In Aomori, Japan, two Top 8 Champs decks used [Curse of the Cabal](#): A Monoblack deck by Tadashi Satou and a Black/White deck by Jun Obara. Tadashi's deck is the more interesting of the two to me:

Day 1: A Cursed Idea?



Main Deck

60 cards

21 Swamp	1 Consume Spirit
_____	4 Cruel Edict
21 lands	4 Curse of the Cabal
	1 Jester's Cap
2 Plague Sliver	4 Phyrexian Arena
4 Ravenous Rats	4 Phyrexian Totem
4 Twisted Abomination	4 Smallpox
_____	4 Stupor
10 creatures	3 Tendrils of Corruption

29 other spells

Sideboard

4 Deathmark
4 Ghost Quarter
4 Last Gasp
1 Loxodon Warhammer
2 Swamp

15 sideboard cards



The news after I've done my research is good. No one is particularly focused on [Curse of the Cabal](#), so it still feels like fertile territory for me as a deckbuilder even after the massive diversity of Champs. The several decklists I could find sparked a ton of ideas without being anything I would build exactly. My mind is swimming with decklists, which is a good place to be this early in the process. I've spent all evening picking a card and reading others' opinions on this card. On one hand, that doesn't sound very productive, especially given my tight deadline. On the other hand, I think I just gave myself a huge head start for when I wake up tomorrow and start playing.

Day 2: A Slow Start

It's the Wednesday evening before Thanksgiving. My daughter is asleep upstairs. My wife has taken our son, who had a rare afternoon nap, to see a 7pm showing of "Happy Feet." This gives me two hours to finally put together my disparate thoughts on [Curse of the Cabal](#).

The truth is that I'm fairly conservative and systematic when it comes to deckbuilding. Since both [Curse](#) and [Smallpox](#) are Black, I don't feel a huge need to think of two- and three-color decklists right away. Instead, my inclination is to build a mono-black deck, figure out its relative strengths and weaknesses, then address the weaknesses with a second color if, and only if, I need it. I know that



Ravnica Block has made mono-colored decks nearly obsolete, but I appreciate the elegance of at least trying mono-black. This is why Tadashi's deck from Champs particularly interested me.

As I said, I'm starting my deck with four copies each of [Curse of the Cabal](#) and [Smallpox](#). The other "four of" cards that feel like automatic inclusions are [Phyrexian Arena](#) (Black's most reliable way to draw extra cards), [Skeletal Vampire](#) (Black's best generic "finisher," in my opinion), [Stupor](#) (a

crippling discard spell of yore), [Cruel Edict](#) (a nice one-two punch with [Smallpox](#)), and [Mishra's Bauble](#) (I'm a sucker for "deck thinning" cards, or cards that let me essentially play with a smaller deck).

If I use four copies of each of these cards and assume twenty-four land (almost always my starting point for a new deck unless I have a good excuse to do otherwise), that gives me only eight card slots left.

Clearly what I'm making here is a mono-black control deck. The question is what part of my opponent's strategy am I not yet adequately controlling? I've got some creature removal, some discard, some card-drawing engines to fuel my deck, and of course the sacrificing goodness of [Curse of the Cabal](#) and [Smallpox](#). Straight black doesn't have any good land destruction in Standard right now except in the form of [Caustic Rain](#). If I decide to go for a land destruction strategy, I'm probably splashing Red. Since I'm trying to stay mono-black, what else is out there?

I'm actually tempted by the idea of adding quick pressure in the form of [Stromgald Crusader](#), [Skulking Knight](#), and [Haakon, Stromgald Scourge](#) (a card still on my *Coldsnap* menu, and one I've already done my Internet research on). That's an idea that's more aggro than control, though, so I don't think I'll go there right now. File this idea away, though.

The way I think of mono-black control, I need mana acceleration and a little more oomph than just [Skeletal Vampire](#). As a result, here's where I'm starting out in terms of deck construction:

SmallCurse v.1.0



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Quicksand	4 Coldsteel Heart
17 Swamp	1 Consume Spirit
2 Urza's Factory	4 Cruel Edict
_____	4 Curse of the Cabal
23 lands	4 Mishra's Bauble
	4 Phyrexian Arena
4 Skeletal Vampire	2 Phyrexian Totem
2 Twisted Abomination	4 Smallpox
_____	4 Stupor
6 creatures	_____
	31 other spells



I have a lot of questions about this deck, chief among them whether this deck actually qualifies as “rogue” or whether it's just a mono-black control deck. Before I can play it to answer this and other questions, though, I need a sideboard in order to test in the Tournament Practice room. A sideboard is clearly premature at this point, and anything I put together is at best a shot in the dark. Still, let's look at Tadashi's as a foundation and go from there.

Sideboard

4 [Deathmark](#) - Which sure seems good against White and Green
4 [Ghost Quarter](#) - Which sure seems good against “karoo” lands or decks with no basic lands
3 [Persecute](#) - Which seems good against other monocolored decks
2 [Sudden Death](#) - Which seems good against decks killing me with quick creatures
2 [Tormod's Crypt](#) - Which seems good against decks that like a graveyard
Ugh. It hurts to throw a sideboard together so haphazardly. Still, it gives me the ticket I need for the Tournament Practice room and you do have to start somewhere. Here goes nothing...

I only had time for one match before the movie ended, and it wasn't pretty. I played against a mono-blue control deck. In the first game, he suspended two [Riftwing Cloudskates](#) on Turns 2 and 3 while I got stuck on two [Quicksands](#) and a Swamp. I couldn't play my [Phyrexian Arena](#), [Curse](#), or [Smallpox](#), and his Cloudskates put me way behind. In the second game--after I sideboarded in my [Persecutes](#) and [Ghost Quarters](#)--I was feeling good after playing three consecutive [Curse of the Cabals](#). The problem was that he played [Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir](#), which negated my suspended Curses. Since he suspended two [Ancestral Visions](#), he had more than enough countermagic to smack me around easily. Time for sleep. I don't want one match against another control deck to sway me right away, but I'll admit that was a frustrating debut. That nagging thought that I'm not really “rogue” is there too. Ah well. I'll give it another go tomorrow.

Day 3: A Day Of Thanks

Ah, Thanksgiving, holiday of overeating and American football. My family planned to spend the day at a park serving food to the homeless (we sort of use Thanksgiving to show our thanks more than say it), but that left the whole morning free while my daughter and wife napped and my son played on his computer.



My morning matches went better than the mono-blue fiasco. I lost to a Rakdos aggressive deck 1-2. The first game was brutal, as he used [Nantuko Husk](#) and [Mindslicer](#) to empty my hand of eight (!) cards and rolled from there. I won the second game handily behind Curse, [Smallpox](#), and [Tormod's Crypt](#). The third game was long and close, with him winning at two life behind the strength of a [Greater Gargadon](#) and the self-inflicted damage of my two [Phyrexian Arenas](#). Still, I wasn't displeased with the way the deck had played.

After that, I beat a Blue/Red Control deck 2-0, a White/Blue/Red [Firemane Angel](#) deck 2-0, and a Black/White Control deck 2-0. All three matches were similar in that I won the first game with Curses and [Smallpoxes](#), and then got an early concession in the second game when my opponent started falling behind. I'm not sure that's a true test, since in a tournament my opponent wouldn't concede just because I was playing a no-fun deck. Still, I'm just getting a feel for my deck at this point so I appreciated the experience. After that, I lost 1-2 to a Green/White/Blue Aggro deck sporting [Watchwolf](#), [Mystic Snake](#), [Looter il-Kor](#), and [Moldervine Cloak](#). The first game was an easy win, but in the next two he had enough quick creatures to make my [Smallpoxes](#), etc. irrelevant, and I couldn't recover life fast enough to stabilize the board. With four more matches under my belt, I decided to call it a morning.

That evening, after everyone was asleep, I logged on again. This time I went against my better judgment and just hit the Casual Decks room. Something was bugging me about this deck, so I was looking for quantity rather than quality in terms of games. I went 10-4 in games, and was surprised to find that not only did no one concede prematurely, most people said "cool deck" at some point. Apparently [Curse of the Cabal](#) falls into the "bad rare" category that people can appreciate. Anyway, after twenty eight games with my first draft deck, I have come to the following conclusions:

- [Smallpox](#) is indeed awesome. [Curse of the Cabal](#), in my opinion, is better than people were giving it credit for.

- The deck has a hard time against quick weenie rushes (no surprise there) as well as Blue countermagic. It's really annoying to suspend a [Curse of the Cabal](#) only to have my opponent sit in waiting with Teferi or [Remand](#).
- It doesn't feel like I put enough pressure on my opponent for Curse and [Smallpox](#) to matter as much as it feels like they should. Another way of saying this is that my card quality feels a half-step behind my opponents'. [Coldsteel Heart](#), [Stupor](#), land, [Mishra's Bauble](#), [Twisted Abomination](#), [Phyrexian Totem](#)... There are too many times when these are dead draws when what I really need is a threat or an answer.
- ...Which is probably why the deck seems completely reliant on [Phyrexian Arena](#). If I get an early Arena then I can usually outpace my opponent, casting threats in addition to disrupting their game plan. Without it, my opponents are usually the ones outpacing me.
- That said, I need some sort of way to recover the life lost by [Phyrexian Arena](#). Games I win go long, and that Arena damage adds up. I either need to win faster or find a way to survive longer.
- In addition to Arena, [Cruel Edict](#), [Skeletal Vampire](#), [Mishra's Bauble](#), and [Urza's Factory](#) have been fine. Everything else feels situationally good.
- I can't decide whether [Quicksand](#) or [Ghost Quarter](#) are the better maindeck card. I'm leaning towards [Ghost Quarter](#) because of the predominance of "karoo" lands.
- My sideboard is... not correct. Not only that, what I sideboard out when and for what isn't clear to me yet, so I'm playing at a disadvantage in Games 2 and 3.

That's a lot of observations for as little as I've played the deck. It also helps set up what happens next.

On a whim at 11pm, I decided to brainstorm an aggro version of my deck, using the idea of [Haakon, Stromgald Scourge](#) I had earlier. I'm not sure why I did this, except to say that my first deck was still bugging me. It seemed like the deck needed a lot of work, and I wasn't sure I had the time to make it something work playing. More than that, though, there's a way that early decks either click or they don't. For me at least, the control deck wasn't clicking. Still, thanks to my experience with the slower version, I was able to quickly throw this together:

Black Knights v.1.0



Main Deck

60 cards

23 Swamp	4 Blackmail
_____	4 Cruel Edict
23 lands	3 Curse of the Cabal
	4 Phyrexian Arena
3 Haakon, Stromgald Scourge	4 Smallpox
4 Plagued Rusalka	_____
4 Ravenous Rats	19 other spells
3 Skulking Knight	Sideboard
4 Stromgald Crusader	1 Curse of the Cabal

18 creatures

- 4 [Deathmark](#)
- 3 [Nightmare Void](#)
- 3 [Persecute](#)
- 4 [Withered Wretch](#)

15 sideboard cards



Curse, [Smallpox](#), Arena, and Edict are all still there, now with Haakon and his buddies [Stromgald Crusader](#) and [Skulking Knight](#). [Blackmail](#), [Plagued Rusalka](#), and [Ravenous Rats](#) are there to speed the deck up and make my disruption later in the game more relevant.

In three quick games in the Casual Decks room, I crushed a Black/Blue milling deck, a White/Green aggro deck, and a White/Blue Angel deck. Interesting, but my eyes were bleary and I needed to go to bed.

Day 4: A Crossroads

So what's up with completely changing my deck? Well, like I said, I was feeling that I wasn't putting enough pressure on my opponent so I wanted some quick creatures. Since I had the whole "[Smallpox](#)-Haakon" urge earlier, I decided to give the Black Knights thing a try, and if you notice my observations from the previous day you'll see that this idea meshes well with my conclusions. The idea is to drop some weenies, then disrupt my opponent with discard, Edict, [Smallpox](#), and [Curse of the Cabal](#). The result is a Mono-black Aggro-Control deck.



Still intrigued, I fired up the 'ole Tournament Practice room with the Knights version instead of the Control version. I was very aware that I might be wasting time if what I wanted to do was pursue the Control deck, but somehow this deck felt more up my alley and smoother.

I beat a Black/Blue reanimator deck 2-1 that smacked me around with [Garza Zol](#), [Plague Queen](#) in the first game, with me discarding Haakon in the next two for an unstoppable army of Knights backed by a series of Curses.

I then lost 0-2 to a mono-green Elf deck, which was frustrating only in that he won the first game at one life with a [Moldervine Cloaked Silhana Ledgewalker](#), and I made dumb sideboarding errors in the second game and drew all of the cards I didn't want.

In my third match I beat a traditional [Solar Flare deck](#) 2-0. In the first game I beat down with Haakon, [Skulking Knight](#), and [Stromgald Crusader](#), outracing two [Firemane Angels](#) in his graveyard. The next game was closer because he dropped [Ivory Mask](#), shutting down my [Cruel Edicts](#), Curses, and [Blackmails](#). Thankfully a [Withered Wretch](#) removed two [Firemane Angels](#), and [Smallpox](#) handled [Akroma, Angel of Wrath](#), so that a series of [Stromgald Crusaders](#) won me the match. He challenged me to a rematch, and I beat him again 2-1.

I then lost 0-2 to a Blue/Red deck built around [Empty the Warrens](#). To be honest, I was distracted since my son was rushing me to finish so I could go outside, but my opponent beat me fair and square by countering my spells, killing most of my creatures with [Electrolyze](#) and such, then finishing me off with a pack of Goblin tokens. Meh.

After a break I lost 1-2 to Rakdos aggro where in both losses he ended at one life. Next I beat Izzetron 2-0 behind [Curse of the Cabal](#) and [Phyrexian Arena](#) advantage. Finally, I beat a Solar Pox deck 2-0.

Time to pause and reflect.



I'm at a crossroads, the kind that makes sweat collect between my shoulder blades. The Control deck better uses [Curse of the Cabal](#) and has a decent winning percentage, but is less fun to play and needs, in my estimation, a lot more work (and likely a second color). The Knights deck is really more of a [Smallpox](#)-Haakon deck, and thus means I probably drop Curse altogether. Do I stay loyal to Curse and experiment with splashing a second color or do I go with a deck I've enjoyed playing more? Given more time, I'd do both. Given that I'm now one day away from my deadline (the article's due Monday, but I know that I won't have time at all Sunday to play or write), I can only pick one. These are the sorts of

dilemmas that plague deckbuilders with limited time and/or budget. I have often felt this way with a Friday or Saturday tournament looming and me struggling with a few half-finished decks.

I decided to go for the deck that feels smoother to play and likely has fewer revisions needed. I think that if I make a few modifications to the [Smallpox](#)-Haakon deck, it might be scary. That's a risk, but hey... I figure even if I flame out at the tournament, that's a good lesson in deckbuilding.

So, okay. Black Knights it is.

The two things I've noticed about the Knights deck are 1) I need more ways to discard Haakon than just [Smallpox](#), and 2) the deck wants to be even more aggressive. Let's see what I can do to push these two insights a little further...

-3 [Curse of the Cabal](#)

+3 [Delirium Skeins](#)



Might as well pull the band-aid off right away. I imagine several folks are going to be disappointed that I'm not actually building the deck I set up to build. I can understand this frustration, and I hope folks will post innovative [Curse of the Cabal](#) decks in the Message Boards.

In my heart of hearts, though, I know that I'm not building a [Curse of the Cabal](#) deck anymore. Curse was, apparently, a mental stepping stone for getting me into a deck that I'm excited about. This happens in deckbuilding all the time, so I suppose it's an important lesson here. I still think a Curse deck might be fun, but it will require a lot more tinkering than I have time for to get to anything that approximates my old Smokestack deck.

[Delirium Skeins](#), it seems to me, gives me a good way to discard Haakon (along with any other Knights in hand) as well as disrupting my opponent in a large way. What I've noticed in my several matches is that the deck actually runs out of cards quickly, so Skeins probably hurts my opponent a lot more than me.

-4 [Phyrexian Arena](#)

+4 [Dark Confidant](#)

With [Curse of the Cabal](#) out of my deck, I can go with the faster and more deadly card-advantage engine of [Dark Confidant](#). My deck is clearly looking more "aggro" than "control" with these two changes, but they feel like the way the deck wants to go.

-1 [Blackmail](#)

-1 Swamp

+2 [Call to the Netherworld](#)

I may be getting too cute here, but [Blackmail](#) has only been decent, while a free madness spell after discarding creatures seems like a neat trick. Since I'm playing [Plagued Rusalka](#) and [Ravenous Rats](#), too, I can see a benefit to reusing my creatures. I'm not sold enough to use four copies of [Call to the Netherworld](#), but I'm interested enough to try out two and see what I think.

Which puts me here:

Black Knights v.1.1



Main Deck

60 cards

22 Swamp	3 Blackmail
_____	2 Call to the Netherworld
22 lands	4 Cruel Edict
4 Dark Confidant	3 Delirium Skeins
3 Haakon, Stromgald Scourge	4 Smallpox
4 Plagued Rusalka	_____
4 Ravenous Rats	16 other spells
3 Skulking Knight	Sideboard
4 Stromgald Crusader	1 Blackmail
_____	4 Deathmark
22 creatures	3 Nightmare Void
	1 Slay
	2 Stinkweed Imp
	4 Withered Wretch

	15 sideboard cards



The sideboard is still a mess, but I'll work on that later.

Late at night, I sat in bed and played a few games in the Casual Decks room just to get a feel for the changes. It was so fun that I kept playing until the wee hours. I went 11-2, which should be taken with a huge lump of salt but is a nice sign. Much more important than the winning percentage, the deck felt smooth. To put it in my earlier terms, it "clicked" much more than the Control deck.

I only have one day left. In some ways I've wasted some time by switching ideas, but I'd like to think my experience with the Curse deck set me up for a better first draft of the Haakon deck. Now I feel fully committed to my deck and am ready to run downhill. Tomorrow is the day where I get serious.

Day 5: Getting Serious

I now have a feel for my deck, so everything from here on out I'll consider real testing. It's time to see if my Casual Decks success translates into Tournament Practice success.

Things start well. I beat a Blue/Red Teferi deck 2-0 with just enough discard, creature removal, and Haakon advantage to pull out each victory. I then smashed an Izzetron deck 2-0, the first game thanks to my opponent getting stuck on two land, and the second because of an avalanche of discard backed by two [Dark Confidants](#).

In a reassuring example that I can beat other aggro decks, I smashed a Monored Goblin deck 2-1. He won the first game in quick and brutal fashion while I was stuck on one land, and in the next two I used [Smallpox](#) and quick creatures to keep him on his heels. He conceded after my second [Smallpox](#) in Game 2, and in Game 3 I swarmed him after his emptying his hand with [Delirium Skeins](#) (and discarding both Haakon and [Call to the Netherworld](#) for a fallen [Dark Confidant](#)).

In the next match, I beat a Green/black/white Aggro deck 2-0 thanks to, as my opponent pointed out, "drawing, like, four Edicts every game." Actually, I only drew two each game, but I also drew two [Smallpoxes](#) each game and my [Deathmarks](#) and [Slay](#) the second game. Add Haakon to the mix and it wasn't pretty.



A [Dragonstorm](#) deck absolutely smacked me around in the first game of my next match. I'm starting to realize that two of the cards I have the most difficult time handling are [Mogg War Marshal](#)

and [Empty the Warrens](#). He got both and my Edicts and [Smallpoxes](#) looked anemic. The next two games were better, where I was able to make him discard his big spells and keep his land low thanks to [Smallpox](#). The second game was a rout in my favor, the next a close affair with my dealing the last fifteen damage via [Skulking Knight](#) while he was in topdeck mode. I won the match 2-1. And so it went. I beat another Izzetron 2-0, lost to a G/R[Stormbind](#) deck 1-2, beat a Monogreen Stompy deck 2-1, lost to a Monogreen Stompy deck 1-2, beat a Blue/Red/Green[Magnivore](#) deck 2-0, lost to a Green/White aggro deck 0-2, beat another Izzetron deck 2-0, then beat a Solar Pox deck 2-1. The good news about **Magic Online** is that you can get a lot of testing done in a relatively short amount of time. I was also fortunate to play against good players, generally people whose rating was above 1700 (for non-MTGO players, that means they've had some tournament success). I've always thought it best to test against players you consider better than yourself.

The bad news is that you can't control what or who you face online unless you're a member of a clan. Since I'm not a clan member, I'm forced to basically play whatever I find. These days, I'm realizing, that means playing a disproportionate number of Blue/Red decks, decks I apparently handle fairly easily. It also means not playing any [Glare of Subdual](#) decks, a deck that I'm likely to face in a tournament. Time for more pausing and reflecting.

The cards in my maindeck I find the most anemic are [Delirium Skeins](#) and [Blackmail](#), in that order. Skeins can really hurt a slow control deck, but against a lot of decks it's the card I discard with [Smallpox](#) because it's redundant. To me, this means that [Delirium Skeins](#) is a better sideboard card. [Blackmail](#) is more consistently good, but I'm also not convinced that a better card isn't out there that would fit my deck. The good thing about it is that it's cheap and hard to counter. Let's say for now that I'm keeping [Blackmail](#) and dropping [Delirium Skeins](#) into the sideboard.

-3 [Delirium Skeins](#)

+3 [Last Gasp](#)



[Last Gasp](#) should give me a little more game initially against more aggressive decks. It also gives me some pinpoint removal instead of relying on my opponent sacrificing creatures. I'm tempted

by [Sudden Death](#) except that my deck runs on a really tight mana curve and I think two mana is going to be easier to leave open than three.

As I said earlier, the cards I have a hard time handling are token producers, like [Mogg War Marshal](#), [Empty the Catacombs](#), [Selesnya Guildmage](#), and the like. Green decks can sometimes hurt me, too, since they tend to drop easily-sacrificed creatures like [Birds of Paradise](#), [Llanowar Elves](#), etc. Aggressive Green decks can combine this fodder with [Silhana Ledgewalker](#), the kind of card I rely on killing with [Cruel Edict](#) and [Smallpox](#). Anyway, that's what scares me right now: Red decks that produce lots of tokens and Green decks that use a lot of quick creatures.

So let's look again at my sideboard. [Withered Wretch](#) and [Deathmark](#) are keepers. I've sideboarded them in consistently and have been pleased with their effect on the game. The final [Blackmail](#) makes sense, too, if I'm keeping three maindeck. [Delirium Skeins](#) is now sideboard material against slower decks. That leaves me three open sideboard slots.

What I really wish I had was a Black board-sweeper like [Infest](#), [Plague Spitter](#), or [Pestilence](#). No use crying over spilt reprints, though. About the best thing mono-black has is [Necroplasm](#), which is slow but probably not terrible for handling token swarms or armies of one-cost creatures.

My next--and possibly final--draft looks like this:

Black Knights v.1.2



Main Deck

60 cards

22 Swamp	3 Blackmail
_____	2 Call to the Netherworld
22 lands	4 Cruel Edict
	3 Last Gasp
4 Dark Confidant	4 Smallpox
3 Haakon, Stromgald Scourge	_____
4 Plagued Rusalka	16 other spells
4 Ravenous Rats	Sideboard
3 Skulking Knight	1 Blackmail
4 Stromgald Crusader	4 Deathmark
_____	3 Delirium Skeins
22 creatures	3 Necroplasm
	4 Withered Wretch

	15 sideboard cards



It's funny to think that this was once a mono-black control deck built around [Curse of the Cabal](#) and is now a mono-black hyper-aggressive Knights deck. Deckbuilding is certainly not a science.

The night brought more last-minute testing. I lost to a Rakdos aggro deck 1-2, beat a Solar Pox deck 2-0, beat a Blue/Red Teferi deck 2-0, beat a mono-white control deck 2-0, lost to a Green/Blue aggro deck 1-2, lost to a Solar Pox deck 0-2, beat a Green/Red aggro deck 2-0, beat a mono-blue Urzatron deck 2-0, beat a Boros aggro deck 2-1, lost to a Blue/White/Red [Wildfire](#) deck 1-2, then beat the same deck 2-1, and, finally, beat a Black/Blue Rack deck 2-0.

As I said, it's hard to predict if these results would match up in an actual tournament, especially since I don't get to control my testing match-ups. I can't emphasize enough that the more serious the tournament, the more systematic testing is required. Five days does not a Champs winner make. I'm only planning on a Friday Night Magic or 8-man online tournament, though, so I have enough data at this point to jump in and start swimming.

My [Smallpox](#)-Haakon deck is ready for battle.

Next Stop: FNM And The Boards!

Although rushed, I'm feeling excited to take this deck to a tournament. It seems to handle popular decks and good players competently enough to try. As I've said repeatedly, it would be nice to have more playtesting under my belt, especially systematic playtesting against the sorts of decks that won Champs (chief among them, Glare decks). Remember: This sort of playtesting is mandatory for anything other than a Friday Night Magic or small tournament.

How will I do? Well, you don't get to find out in today's article, but you do get to find out on the Boards. I'll post the results of my tournament outing, as well as changes I make to the deck, in the Message Boards thread of this article. In fact, each time I play or change the deck, I'll use today's thread to post an update. If this deck takes on "pet deck" status, I'll likely play it a lot in small tournaments before wanting it to graduate into something more serious. Anyway, throughout my

journey I encourage you to throw out advice, similar decklists, questions, etc. onto the Boards. Let's make today's thread a living, vibrant document.

I've tried to do a lot in this article (which is why it's so dang long), and I don't know if I've hit the right balance of detail versus lesson, concrete versus theory. Of the many articles I've written, I'm least sure what the reader response to this one will be. I will say, though, that this article chronicles what feels like a very typical deckbuilding story. It also feels like a story without an ending, which is why I'll keep updating the Boards.

My hope is that newer and older players alike enjoyed peeling back the skull of a veteran deck builder as he prepares on short notice for an event like Friday Night Magic. I also hope along the way I tickled your creativity and got you excited to build your own deck. Let me know on the Boards, so that Scott and I can decide whether to charge ahead with "Going Rogue 2," and if so with what modifications.

See you on the Boards, Knights in hand! Tally ho!

Think hard and have fun,

-jms
(currently GoingRogue on ***Magic Online***)