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Write in the Middle

Brian David-Marshall
The Week That Was
Friday, February 2, 2007



We are now one month into the new year and **Magic** is bubbling at every level of play. Pro players are huddled around draft tables arguing the relative pick orders between **Erratic Mutation** and **Shaper Parasite**; aspiring pros are still slugging it out on the PTQ level as the Yokohama season approaches the halfway mark; and in North America over 4,000 players have taken part in the opening weeks of the City Champs Beta season.

There will be plenty of time to discuss Pro Tour–Geneva preparations next week as we head into the main event. Now that *Planar Chaos* previews are out of the way, Mike Flores is back in the Swim of the Extended metagame. That leaves me with City Champs to talk about – which is just fine by me. I have long been a proponent of this type of tournament series, which harkens back to my Grudge Match days at Neutral Ground.



The Grudge Match was a tournament series hosted by me and Rob Dougherty where Neutral Ground and Your Move Games would each generate an ultimate store champion to go up against his counterpart for a big cash prize. The tournaments were successful on a number of levels. For me, the measure of those tournaments success was how much fodder the weekly qualifier tournaments and the resultant decklists would provide for the various player/writers in the Northeast region of the United States.

The weekly Standard tournaments provided not only fodder for the writers but a whetstone for many an aspiring pro to hone their skills. If you look through the old Grudge Match standings and decks, you will regularly see names like Gerard Fabiano, Ospy Lebedowicz, and Jon Sonne. It was not too long thereafter that their names began appearing in the Sideboard tournament coverage for the Pro Tour.

That the tournaments could support players striving to reach the next level while providing a narrative thread which the game's storytellers could weave into their work is what excites me most about **Magic**. The Grudge Match could be taken strictly as a contest with winning the championship as a single goal, but it was also a laboratory for area deck builders to play with their fiendish concoctions as well as a constant source of tech, stories, and personalities for the game's writers to draw upon.

When the City Champs were announced last year, I hoped that this tournament series would pick up where the Grudge Match left off years ago. For this week's column I turned to three people who dually inhabit the game as both players and writers to see what they thought of the burgeoning series after its first few weeks.

Sean McKeown is a New York player who was also a featured writer for Neutral Ground the Dojo, Sideboard, and currently writes a weekly free-side column at startcitygames.com that is one part SWS, one part TWTW, two parts spreadsheet, and essential reading for any PTQ player. Not only that, but he is also a veteran of the old New York/Boston rivalry.

"I'm really digging the Champs experience, it feels a lot like the old Neutral Ground – Your Move Games Grudge Match Series, which was a lot of fun to play in as well as a great motivator for new technology," McKeown said. "That tournament series gave birth to the original **Replenish** deck, among others, and this year's City Champs looks already to be giving 'paper' **Magic** a motivating boost.

"Playing **Magic** is fun and people will do it happily if you give them the least excuse, so I'm just glad to see something worth caring about, it's very mentally stimulating in a period that's usually the doldrums for Standard play if you're above Juniors age. We'll also get the first chance to shuffle up some *Planar Chaos* cards, so I'm looking forward to seeing everything we thought we knew about Standard hitting the wall in a few weeks, since for once we'll actually be able to play *Planar Chaos* Standard before **Magic Online** does, giving us a rare opportunity to break into virgin territory with 'paper' **Magic** while also practicing for Regionals... and, I hope, having fun."

McKeown said he's training for the upcoming Legacy Grand Prix to see if he can widen his scope a little and make an attempt to qualify for the Pro Tour. However, when asked he definitely associated himself more as a writer than a player.

"Between work and having just moved in with my new fiancée Nicole, I can only dedicate so much of my free time to that effort," he said. "So I'd say I'm definitely a writer at the moment and a sometimes competitor, though I do try and be a stronger competitor on Magic Online when I can't dedicate the time to 'paper' **Magic**."

Mark Young is another weekly columnist over at Star City, as well as a regular contributor to Beckett's **Magic** magazine. The theme of Mark's work has always been about his striving to improve as a player and I was curious to hear his answer to the same question I put to Sean.

"Right now I see myself more as a competitor, but that could change," admitted Mark. "I didn't have a weekly

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column until a couple weeks ago, so as I get used to writing weekly I might start to see myself as a writer first. Whichever one I am, I love playing **Magic**, though, so I don't see myself giving up on the competitive end in the near future."

Finally, Bill Stark is a name that may seem familiar to readers even if they had not read his work on tcgplayer.com or heard that he had taken over the editorship of Londes.com. For the past couple of weeks Bill and his Iowa crew of players have been chasing blue envelopes throughout the heartland. While Bill has not quite gotten there yet, he has secured two Top 8 berths with Affinity and was featured Thursday in Mike's column.

"I'd have to cop-out a little bit and claim a 50/50 split," waffled Stark when asked which label he preferred. "Wanting to be a writer is one of few things that has been with me longer than **Magic**, but a competitive spirit has been with me even LONGER than that. **Magic** is an outlet that has let me focus on furthering my proficiency at both; without it my writing and ability to compete wouldn't be what they are, and they kind of play off each other. There have been times where I've been frustrated with where I'm at in regards to my playing and writing has kept my nose to the grindstone, keeping the game fresh. Still other times my playing has given me writing opportunities I wouldn't have been able to have otherwise, like when I interviewed Jon Finkel at Pro Tour-Prague."

After an 11th-place finish at last year's Regionals, Sean would love to bypass that grueling event and get on the road the Worlds – a road that happens to lead into his hometown this year. But in the short term, he's just looking for more opportunities to play **Magic** and have fun.

"The weekly Champs tournament series has just the kind of hook I'm looking for to keep my interest, something that happens every week that adds up in the end to some very real potential benefits," he said. "It lets me have some fun playing **Magic** – an experience I don't really get enough of right now, except for occasionally drafting online. As a writer, the hope is that it will provide another interesting tournament circuit to follow, because Standard is often overlooked for the first three months of the year ... we have a really interesting format with a very dynamic metagame, and that's the perfect kind of material for me to follow in the scope of the column I write."

While Bill can see the value of the tournament series from a writer's perspective, it's the player in him that gets the most excited about the program.

"Personally I'm hoping to make the City Champs final tournament and am making the effort to get there," the Iowa-based player declared. "As a tournament-minded player, I 'map out the road to Worlds' every year, and I'm excited there is an additional path for 2007. I'm lucky that Iowa is a 'city' and I can travel to a number of shops within a two-hour traveling radius to try my hand at every format imaginable."

"I'm not so sure the tournaments provide me that much as a writer, although they do provide for an excellent new water-cooler topic in the **Magic** writing world" he continued. "But as a player I think they're great. Even if I'm not focusing on making the final day of play with City Champs, the stores in my area are now offering tournaments nearly EVERY DAY OF THE WEEK. I just can't imagine a better scenario for players interested in playing sanctioned **Magic**. I haven't seen so many tournaments in Iowa since I started playing in 1995! I'm now able to hone my skills in a variety of formats all week long, something I couldn't get from the IRL tournament experience prior to City Champs."

Mark Young was not optimistic that he would be able to take advantage of the full tournament schedule in his area. Even without looking for the on-ramp to the Javitz Center, Mark was excited about the opportunity to sharpen his game.

"I was really not looking to get on 'the Road to Worlds' because of the unusual nature of my local area," Mark explained. "It's not just Washington, D.C., but the entire Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area, so there are a lot of tournaments that are too far away for me to travel on, say, a Thursday night. The guys who live in the Maryland suburbs have a big edge over me already, since they can travel to so many more events, so I'm not really looking to challenge them for the top spots."

What Mark was looking for was a steady tournament environment to hone his practice skills.

"For Limited, I have **Magic Online** to do that, but Constructed can be quite expensive online (especially Extended). Also, mouse-clicking **Magic** can make you lazy in some areas as a player, because you get used to the interface doing so much for you. So I was hoping for some small tournaments that would be more competitive than Friday Night **Magic** but less stressful than Champs, a PTQ, or other giant event."

One of the exciting aspects of a citywide competition that involves the competing stores is the prospect of cross-town rivalries. Sean did not think that anything approaching the YMG/NG Grudge had taken root yet on the New York scene, but has seen some signs of something sprouting.

"I've definitely seen a bunch of players I didn't recognize from the Manhattan tournament scene, so I assume we're already seeing Brooklyn players trying to invade Manhattan stores and I'd guess the opposite is happening during the week. Ironically, the Manhattan store seems to have a strong Long Island contingent, with three out of the top four competitors not being from New York City at all, and I wouldn't be surprised to see my success continue... nor that of Robert Seder, known to the Manhattan crowd as 'Gather Courage Guy' from a Top Eight drafting mishap back in *Ravnica* Block."

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"Rivalries will definitely pick up as we start to figure out who's in competition for those eight slots, and I'm sure by the last weeks there will be more than a few elbows thrown to secure your slot at another's expense. Early in the season players can afford to work together, and be friendly and laid-back, so I'm enjoying it right now while I sharpen my claws, as it were."

For Bill it was less about rivalries and much more about keeping the home fires burning: "We haven't seen much in the way of rivalries yet. However, seeing players I don't know come to my local store to 'steal points' for their home town does raise a good-spirited sense of competition; I certainly want to do my best to keep those points in-house, and I'm sure many other players would agree."

While Mark and Sean have kept their Champs forays limited to their local store, Bill has been trying to get to as many events as possible – and hopes to cast an even wider net in the coming weeks. And why not? He already has one win under his belt as well as a couple of finals appearances. Ironically the only event he has done poorly in was an Extended tournament with Affinity – despite multiple Top 8s with the archetype on the PTQ level.

"I've only been playing the local tournaments so far but only because of schedule conflicts," Bill elaborated. "I had already worked my schedule around the local card shop's Tuesday night draft (as I'm sure many players do), so it's easy to hit those. Cedar Rapids, just up the road 30 miles, holds their tournaments on Saturdays when I'm generally at PTQs, so I haven't been able to hit those up yet, but plan to. The players from my home base are currently working out a driving schedule to hit events 1-2 hours away so we can maximize our tournament exposure and play all over the state. There's also a big push amongst Iowans to make sure turnouts are as large as possible so we have as many slots for Nationals from the City Champs tournaments as we can procure. To some extent there's a conscious effort to move some of us out of the Regionals scene so we're not fighting each other for the spots to Nationals."

"I've played in Draft and Extended so far, with plans on playing Sealed and Standard. I stay away from Vintage and Legacy because I long ago liquidated my old card stock, focusing on formats that are used at the Pro Tour level. I'm excited to see stores encouraged to offer these formats, however, and have found nearly every major format available in Iowa."

In New York, all eyes are on Standard. Sean shared his quick take on the state of Standard in the city, as well as a rogue deck he recently piloted to a Top 4 finish at a Champs event. By Sean's account, the New York metagame is a cross between Worlds data and Magic Online premier events courtesy of someone who may or may not have an evil robot version of himself running around.

"Robert Seder won his event with TriscuitTron, but another key competitor, Micah Liebert, was doing well with what looked like the *Magic Online*-updated version of Dralnu du Louvre that you'd see in just this past week's Online Tech as tracked by Frank Karsten," Sean recalled. "There's a bit of a jarring collision as the two metagames interact, and beatdown decks like Boros are starting to be starved out of the environment because the *Magic Online*-metagame decks are well-prepared to face off against it."

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Sean McKeown – Ghost Hack		
Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Blood Crypt 2 Desert 4 Gemstone Mine 3 Mountain 4 Rakdos Carnarium 4 Sulfurous Springs 3 Swamp <hr/> 24 lands <hr/> 4 Greater Gargadon 4 Magus of the Scroll 4 Mindslicer 4 Mogg War Marshal 4 Nantuko Husk 4 Nether Traitor 4 Shadow Guildmage <hr/> 28 creatures	4 Hit // Run 4 Rise // Fall <hr/> 8 other spells	4 Cry of Contrition 3 Demonfire 4 Ghost Quarter 4 Last Gasp <hr/> 15 sideboard cards

"It doesn't really fit the metagame," shrugged Sean. "It's completely off anyone's radar... but somehow it's now a blip on the Neutral Ground metagame, with people saying 'prepare for Gargadons or prepare to go home'."

For Mark, every time he has expected the metagame to zig in one direction it has zagged in the other: "I had expected the Standard event to be like a Friday Night **Magic**: lots of homebrews and beginners who had just pulled together random chunks of their collections. Instead, a lot of netdecks had turned up, especially the Dralnu

deck. I had expected the Extended event I played in to be like PTQ practice with a lot of netdecks, and instead I played against surprises such as blue-green *Mind's Desire* and black-white beatdown. I think that eventually some sort of metagame will develop, especially in Standard, but right now I don't know what to expect."

Bill seemed to enjoy the unpredictable nature of his local metagame:
"There are players who regularly read all of the newest deck tech and have the card pools to build every new creation Frank Karsten throws at them, and then there are guys who are really excited to play their second *Loxodon Warhammer* so their *Petrified Wood-Kin* is REALLY big. It's a bit surreal to me to see these guys mixing it up over and over at City Champs just playing *Magic*, and I have to admit, sometimes it's kind of exciting to see the Dralnu/Teferi player squirming a little in his seat, desperately asking himself 'How can I possibly be losing to PETRIFIED WOOD-KIN?'"

In closing, I asked all three players to share some advice about playing in a City Champs event for players who might still be on the fence about trying the new format out.

Bill: "I think if you're actively looking to plot out your road to Worlds with City Champs that you're going to have to hit up as many tournaments as possible. We're nearing the end of the first month of play and the Iowa leader has 50-plus points; over a four-month season he's going to hit 200 if he keeps up that average and, even though he doesn't get to COUNT all those tournaments, that's an impressive bar to have to hit.

I really think City Champs is a great way for players who don't regularly PTQ to get to Nationals; when I look at the top 20 from the Cedar Rapids city there are hardly any names I recognize, a sign to me that casual players are taking advantage of the lack of competition at Saturday tournaments while the players who regularly play on the Pro Tour are off working their PTQ game. I think it's worth it to play any event available to improve your game, win prizes from the store, and of course build up your point totals simply to have a shot at making that final tournament and possibly the World Championships."

Mark: "Just play well. There will be a large mix of players there, from the beginner to the veteran. Some stores feature genius deckbuilders, some don't. Some events will have a definable metagame, some won't. If you don't know what to expect, then the only thing you have control over is your own play skill. Just watch yourself for mistakes and you should do okay."

Sean: "Remember first and foremost that you have to be playing *Magic* to have fun ... for a long-haul series of events like this one, you need to be motivated to keep attending week after week, and you can't guarantee that the prizes each week will flow freely enough to get you out of bed any given Sunday morning to play in the City Champs. Having fun will help give you the mental toughness it takes to show up and compete, though you might want to try having fun with decks less goofy than I picked up for my first Sunday-morning foray ... if you can play the current hot deck from this week's *Magic Online* Premier Events and have fun, so much the better. The community of players can help sustain you as well, by adding to the rewards of your experience, because hanging out with the local crowd and gaming regularly also helps add to the fun and give you another reason to get out of bed instead of just press the snooze button ... and if you're networking and collaborating, you might also reap some benefits like gaining access to cards you don't own for the new hot deck, a partner for playtesting and someone to talk to about the metagame, which is a wonderful check on the predictions you make inside your head as to what everyone else is playing and how to beat them. I know at the end of the season you hope to stand above a lot of other people, so collaborating might only help "the enemy" do better than you and nudge you out of place in the final standings. But the benefits to yourself are also quite large, and can make sure that you are playing good decks well enough to secure your berth in the playoffs.

...Then you can murder them."

Five Questions with John Grant

For more insight into the new City Championships program, I turned to Assistant Program Manager John Grant and got him to sit down for the latest installment of Five Questions.

1. *How has the response been to the Beta season of City Champs?*

John: Response by the players and tournament organizers has been fantastic. Attendance is higher than expected, with many players going to multiple stores to play.

2. *How many players have taken part in the program so far?*

John: We don't have all the January reports in yet, but so far, over 4,100 DCI members in the U.S. and Canada have played in a City Championship tournament so far. I was so surprised by this number that I triple-checked the data!

3. *Are people still able to compete in City Champs if they have not gotten into an event yet? I have not played yet...am I frozen out of finishing in the top end of my area?*



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John: It's a great time to start playing City Champs events for many reasons. *Planar Chaos* is now Limited Legal and will be Constructed Legal very soon. We've played a bit with *Planar Chaos* here in Organized Play, and we think it's a blast.

Remember that this is not a straight point-accumulation system – only a player's top finishes count, and there are eight City Championship invites per city, so it's definitely not too late to get in the action. We haven't posted the details on this yet, but it's a fine time to mention that Top 8 invites to each City Championship Finals will pass down to the next available City Champs player on the day of the Final.

That's a mouthful, so here's an example: Say that once the final standings are posted, John G. is listed as finishing second place in the Seattle City Championship and Brian DM finished ninth. If John doesn't show up for the City Championship finals, then ninth place – Brian DM – moves up and gets to play in the finals. If Brian DM doesn't show, then 10th place would get to play, and so on. It might be easier to say that the eight players in or closest to the Top 8 that show up for the Finals will get to play in the Finals.

Even if you're not interested in playing in the City Championships Final, the CC tournaments count toward your [Magic Player Reward](#) benchmarks – one City Championship tournament a week during the 16-week season would net you six more textless spells.

On top of all of that, City Championships are another opportunity to improve your game, test out a new deck, meet new players – everyone I've spoken with is having a good time. If there's a City Championship tournament near you and you haven't played yet, now is a great time to jump in.

We'll post details about how this works soon. Be sure to check the [City Champs Fact Sheet](#) for updates to the program.



Join Magic Player Rewards to get your textless spells.

4. *Talk about the program moving forward – how many cities do you see this expanding to?*

John: It's too early to say how (and where) the program will grow. We want to gather and analyze more data before deciding the best direction to take the program.

5. *How do I know how well I am doing in my local standings?*

John: The City Championship standings are now posted! If you haven't looked, be sure to check the [Fact Page](#) for the rankings in your area. *[Editor's note: We are currently experiencing technical problems with the automated standings.]*

We're very grateful to the City Champs tournament organizers and players for making this such a success in just the first four weeks. We've received a lot of feedback about what we could do better and differently next season, and we appreciate all of the thoughtful suggestions sent in.

There's one more thing I'd like to talk about – people have asked what we mean by "Beta Season". This refers to the fact that this is a testing period – a Beta – for the program. This means a number of things, but here are the most important ones:

First, the number of locations and Cities for this season needed to be limited. There were many otherwise qualified stores that weren't invited to participate due to need to limit the number of stores involved.

Second, it also means that we may modify the program rules before the end of the season. For example, we wanted to have a bonus point system that gave extra City Championship points to the top finisher in each Regular Season tournament, but it's not technically possible just yet. Just before the program launched, we removed this part of the program, and are now giving points for all tournament rounds including top cut rounds, not just the Swiss rounds as announced in December. If we do change the rules, we'll be sure to post them on the [Fact Sheet](#) and send an email to City Championship participants and tournament organizers.

Finally, we'll be carefully reviewing the facts, figures and opinions from the City Championship stores and their players. Based on all of this information, the next City Championship season may look quite a bit different than the Beta Season. Right now, we expect the next season to start in September 07 and end April 08 with the finals in May. We'll be sure to let everyone know when this is finalized.

Friday Night Foils

I am pretty excited to play in my local City Champs events but I have to admit that as an old married man I have to budget my tournament time carefully. City Champs sounds pretty good, but my local [Friday Night Magic](#) tournament is Sealed Deck and this month's foil is a tasty carrot on the end of a stick. Rumors of the rise of Tog

abound for the remainder of this PTQ season, so there should be plenty of chances to dazzle your opponents with your **Deep Analysis**.



Firestarter: Geneva Conventional Wisdom

Next week's Pro Tour is the first big event with *Planar Chaos* thrown into the mix. By next week the pro pick orders for *Planar Chaos* will be widely known. This is your chance to see how you fare against the professional wisdom. What are the top three common picks in each color going into the third pack? What are the cards you want to set yourself up when you finally crack the planeshifted craziness that is *Planar Chaos*? Head to the forums and make your pick orders public.

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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