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# Seven Coins

Noah Weil  
 Limited Information  
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My time with Limited Information is nearing its end. After this week, there's an insanely cool theme week, followed by my very last edition. As next week is on-theme, and the final week is earmarked for something special, that means this is my last chance to explore strategy and theory. As it turns out, there are a few things I'd like to discuss while I still have the pen.

**Magic** players, competitive and otherwise, come across common situations over the course of playing the game. These situations are definable by their two choices. There's one side of the coin or the other. I've found over many years of play that the best players, players whose talents I highly respect, tend to fall on a particular side. I too do my best to play on that side of the coin, but despite one's best efforts, it's not as easy as it sounds. I believe a very small percentage of players today act on these principles on a consistent basis. The ones that do, you'd know as the players consistently at the top of the standings of premiere events around the globe.



For me, I do my best. When I misstep and a tournament ends badly, it's usually because I failed on one of these points. These concepts are seven important aspects to becoming a stronger player, but there are plenty more. However, mastering these would be extraordinarily helpful for your quest towards the next level. These points are exactly how I embrace tournament **Magic**.

## Checking Out versus Scrapping for Every Advantage

We might as well start off strong. My favorite lesson on strategy revolves around one simple quote:

*"Winning is a byproduct of making good decisions."*

Interesting, no? It's a bit simplistic, but I adore the essence. Stop trying to win the game, and start trying to play every turn correctly. The winning will take care of itself. It seems obvious, but if you make every correct play you maximize your chances of winning. For every bad play you make, you reduce your chances of winning.

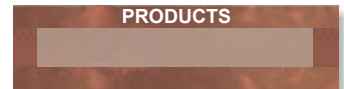
The problem comes not from poor decisions, but the belief that your decisions are irrelevant. This can happen in a variety of ways, but it usually occurs in the beginning of the game. An opponent triple-mulliganing, or you doing the same, may lead you to believe that the outcome of the game is predetermined. Nothing could be further from the truth. To be sure, someone's going uphill. But whenever you make a play that's clearly incorrect or lazy, you make their climb just a little easier. Do it often enough and you become the one moving running against the wind.

True story: I once won off a triple-mulligan in Limited. I was very happy to receive it, mostly because I felt I earned that win. I fought like crazy for every scrap of edge I could muster: pushing damage, earning card advantage, setting myself up for lucky draws, anything and everything I could do. My opponent, I'm afraid to say, played a little lazily. Now, this was an Online match so I can't know for sure, but I have to believe he felt an opponent starting at the bad end of a **Fugue** was going to be easy pickings. And frankly, if he'd played superbly I would have been. But by keeping my head in the game while his wasn't, I was able to turn the tables.

There are times when the game is a foregone conclusion and nothing you do matters. They're rarer than you think, though, and you won't even know you're in that game until the end. The best players play their hardest every time, whomever their opponent is or however they operate. They'll make the strongest play possible every time, because they're competitors and that's what they do. You struggle and eke out advantage and make your opponent earn that win, because you're going to fight them every step of the way. And afterwards, win or lose, you can say you played your best. If it's true, that counts for a lot. Every game, every turn, every *move*, look for the best play with the most advantage. Win or lose, your moves are *never* irrelevant.



## Being Victimized by Luck versus Making Luck Work for You



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Ah luck, that bastard child of equality and betrayal. It's an awfully loaded concept for such a high-strategy game. A lot of players hate it, up until an opponent's quadruple mulligan gifts you a blue envelope. The fact is luck is not only a part of the game but a necessity. Mark Rosewater wrote on the good things mana screw does for the game, not the least of which is adding some excitement and thrill to many situations. From a purely business standpoint, having your players experience highs and lows is good for the long-term. But that's a bitter pill when it's *your* fourth mulligan that cost you the PTQ finals.

So how even-keeled are you on the subject? Do you feel you're less likely to mulligan in Round 2 if you mulliganed twice in Round 1? Do you feel you're less likely to mulligan in Round 3 if you mulliganed all over the place in Rounds 1 and 2? Let's make it even simpler: Do you ever feel you're "due" a win? If the answer to any of this is yes, then you have entitlement issues. Luck doesn't owe you anything, and that especially includes favorable treatment. The winds of fate blow both ways. If you get mad because you feel singled out, you're in for a rough time. The good news is that lady luck doesn't hate you. The bad news is that she doesn't care about you at all.



But let's back it up for a second. What if, and I'm just throwing this out there, you lost that game because of some mistake rather than bad luck? What if you built your mana base wrong, and *that's* why you keep getting land troubles? Or what if you were just a touch too passive and gave your opponent that extra turn needed to topdeck the **Fireball** for the win? It does happen, but you'd never know it by blaming all your troubles on misfortune. Before you start your unfairness tirade, consider whether there were things you could have done differently. I know it's *comforting* to feel that you did everything right and lost anyway; in fact sometimes that's true. But every single time you lose? Unlikely I'm afraid. If you don't enjoy the sensation of loss, start getting investigative before feeling persecuted. What you call bad luck may just be a signal that your instincts are out of whack. Good info, if you want to find it.

But let us assume the bad luck bug bit you bad. How in the world do you get to making luck for you? If you could control luck, you'd never get mana screwed again, .0 right? Unfortunately that's always going to be some randomness in the world. But for you, o talented one, it can be minimized risk. There are players who aren't quite as aware. If you're up seems to constantly misbuild their mana, why not increase their chances of bad "luck?" Draw first over playing first, perhaps side in some land destruction. There are lots of ways to help a player shoot themselves in the foot. Luck only seems fickle when you don't appreciate how she operates. It goes the other way too.

Currently I'm playing an internal *Time Spiral* sealed event. Want to see the deck?

**Noah Weil**  
Time Spiral/Planar Chaos Sealed Deck

txt

**Main Deck**  
40 cards

<p>8 Forest</p> <p>9 Mountain</p> <hr/> <p>17 lands</p>	<p>1 Aetherflame Wall</p> <p>2 Citanul Woodreaders</p> <p>1 Durkwood Baloth</p> <p>1 Firemaw Kavu</p> <p>1 Giant Dustwasp</p> <p>1 Goblin Skycutter</p> <p>1 Keldon Halberdier</p> <p>1 Penumbra Spider</p> <p>1 Scarwood Treefolk</p> <p>1 Skirk Shaman</p> <p>1 Spectral Force</p> <p>1 Thallid Germinator</p> <hr/> <p>13 creatures</p>	<p>1 Boom // Bust</p> <p>1 Dead // Gone</p> <p>2 Fire Whip</p> <p>1 Foriysian Totem</p> <p>2 Hunting Wilds</p> <p>1 Orcish Cannonade</p> <p>1 Prismatic Lens</p> <p>1 Pyrohemia</p> <hr/> <p>10 other spells</p>
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Yes, that's two **Fire Whips** out of one Sealed. This deck is, in technical nomenclature, "stupid dumb." Seriously, Spectral-Geddon? Pestilence-Kavu? Double **Hunting Wilds**, double **Citanul Woodreaders**?! There were no decisions to be made here, just a collection of awesome cards thrown together. Some lucky opens, but that's no reason not to help the process. What's relevant here is that mana base. Specifically, 17 lands plus two artifact sources plus those pair of Wilds. Seems a bit mana heavy, right? Part of that is Bust recovery, but part of that is my acknowledgment towards luck. As you'd expect, this deck is vastly superior to most of the other decks out there. So much so that I feel the most likely way to lose isn't an opponent's cards, but mana screw. So I'll skew mana-heavy, just to offset that risk a little more. I could justify cutting a land here, but the extra mana is a nice cushion protecting me from my biggest vulnerability, bad luck.

On the other end of the spectrum, let's look at *Mirrodin* Block. Once in a while I'd play against someone with a sick artifact selection for their draft. We're talking triple **Loxodon Warhammer**, double **Icy Manipulator**, whatever. What was someone to do against all that craziness? The problem was that the standard channels wouldn't cut it. If you played your normal game and they played their normal game, you'd get trounced every time. Thus you had to break from the norm. You needed some luck to win. My favorite card for this?

Goblin Archaeologist.

Here was a card that was chock-full of variance and that normal players shied away from for that exact reason. Yet recognizing when an abnormal situation comes up is the hallmark for that card. I needed more than a little luck to beat an insane-o deck, so why not give myself the opportunity? Side in an Archeologist, maybe take out a land or two (cause if you're going to go for it, really go for it), and cross the fingers. Once in a while I'd catch a lucky break and win a few flips before losing one. Invariably my opponents would declare me the luckiest sac that ever saced. I'd just smile, concede my good fortune, and move to the next round, up a win.

After de-sideboarding, of course.

## Caring about What You're Doing versus Caring about What Each Player Is Doing

There are at least two players playing a game at any given time, but I'll bet you like one more than the other. That's okay - you really should be hoping you triumph over the opponent. The problem, and it's a small issue really, is that your opponent is doing his or her very best to stop you. Focusing on yourself seems less relevant when there's a crazed planeswalker summoning Heroes and Pegasi to beat you down. Maybe give that opposing wizard some attention?

People like to focus on their own plans. To be more precise, people like to make plans and then focus on them to the exclusion of all else. In an interactive card game, with hidden information no less, that's not the ticket to success. Your opponent provides scads of information to the observant player, including but not limited to: what they draw and how they're going to try to kill you. To tell the truth, I'm not a fan of plans in general. It's so rare they take into account what the other person is doing. For example, my G/U draft deck may have the scheme of "play guys and attacking." That sounds nice and reasonable except for the times my opponent interferes, which is all the time. The strategy of "win" usually turns more specific when faced with opponent opposition.

For recent examples, check out my or Frank Karsten's game walkthroughs (my [Walk of Ages, Vol. 1](#) and [Walk of Ages, Vol. 2](#); Frank's [A Desired Walkthrough](#) and [A Desired Walkthrough, Part 2](#)). As far as I can tell, each turn is modified based on what an opponent does. Either it's bad for us and we adapt, or it's good for us and we exploit the advantage. You don't *ignore* what an opponent does, you *integrate* it.

So for you, my self-centric friend, instead of using your opponent's turn to further scheme your strategies, just put your hand down. Put it on the table and just watch your opponent. I assure you, those cards will be there when you get back. For the moment, watch what your opponent does and why they do it. Are they attacking? Are they hesitant about attacking? Are they counting mana? Why would they do that? If you were in their seat, what cards would you be holding to act in a similar way? It's not rocket science. It just requires a little observation, logic, and most importantly, patience. Watch, care, and move forward.

## Hoping for the Best versus Preparing for the Worst

The number one mistake of deckbuilding, Limited and otherwise, is probably playing too few lands. I can help you with that: Play more lands! The second biggest mistake I see time and time again is an unhealthy dose of optimism.

Let me start out by saying that **Magic** is such a great game because there are times when any card can be exactly what you're looking for. Name any card in any set, and you can concoct a scenario where that card is great. Unfortunately, people have an overly rosy view on the chances of a card actually being good. Just because it's *possible* a card will be useful doesn't mean it's *likely*.

For example, let's look at the *Planar Chaos* card **Dash Hopes**. Here's a card for  that either counters a spell (any spell!) or deals five free points (like **Lava Axe**!). Win/win right? Without overly getting into specifics, this card is terrible in Limited. I'm sure there are plenty of people who agree with that sentiment, and I'm sure there are lots of people who are mentally preparing their post on that time **Dash Hopes** won the match. **Magic**'s a great game because you can sit around the fire and tell stories on how **Dash Hopes** didn't suck. When considering whether to put the card in the deck, I imagine a player sat down and considered some convoluted series of events where **Dash Hopes** is a key component to the victory. Like I said, creating best-case scenarios for cards isn't that hard.

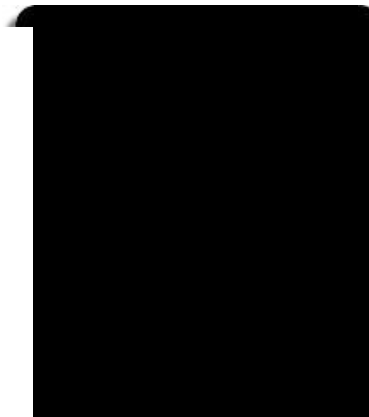
Player: "He was at four life."

Buddy: "Right."

Player: "And he cast **Damnation**..."

Buddy: "Lucky open, dude!"

Player: "Totally, and he cast **Damnation** to stay alive 'cause my double



Ghitu Firebreathing creature was going to end him next turn, and then I just casually tapped a pair of swamps and cast **Dash Hopes!**  
 Buddy: "Gnarly!"  
 Player: "You know it! And then he said a bad word and got a warning and then I won the game!"  
 Buddy: "Cowabunga! Awesome story man!"

Now let's try that same card with its worst-case scenario:

Player: "He unsuspected **Durkwood Baloth** and I cast **Dash Hopes**. He paid five of his fifteen life..."  
 Buddy: "Cause you're playing cards like **Dash Hopes**?"  
 Player: "Right, and then he killed me."  
 Buddy: "Uh huh."

Doesn't seem as good. Unfortunately, the second scenario is much more realistic. It would be cool if you could always counter a game-warping spell with **Dash Hopes**, but in truth they can usually eat the five life or throw away an irrelevant card. The times it does something useful is far outweighed by the instances where it doesn't.

You can take a card like **Molder** or **Keen Sense** and imagine all the times where they're exactly what you need to win - or, more likely, not lose. No one is questioning your imagination! I remember those Transformers commercials in the 80s, where the kids are playing with Optimus and Megatron. There's always some awesome music playing, and they have crazy block/cushion forts that the Decepticons knock over, and they're messing around in the Grand Canyon, or wherever. The point is, any toy looks great when you surround it with an advertising budget. What about playing with the toy in your basement, with no crazy techno music or TV props? Still as fun? Well, the Transformers probably, but Go-Bots? No chance!

Er, a bit sidetracked there. The thrust is that when you chisel a deck out of your Sealed pool, look at your options in both a positive and negative light and make an informed decision. Instead of just "what if," reflect on "what if it *doesn't*," and then see how strong the card looks. So many times, that's going to lead directly to something more consistent and more effective.

## Believing Everything you Read versus Separating Fact from Fiction

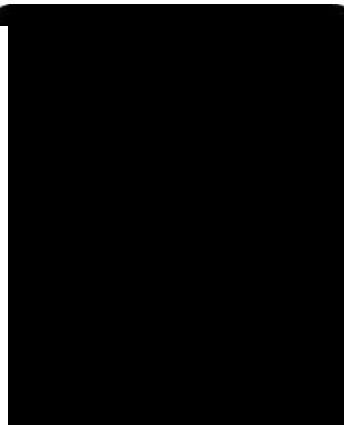
If you're reading this right now, you're probably the kind of person who reads Internet strategy articles. That's great and all, but there's really a lot of content on the Web. Some of it is amazing, some of it is contradictory with other beliefs, and some of it is just worthless. How to know which is which?

Personally, I've made some mistakes over the course of my writings. I believed it at the time, but history proved I was in error. I like to think it's been rare, but it has happened. Someone who reads this column and blindly integrates every piece of data would have done less well than someone who kept the good information and discarded the bad. How do you know the difference? There's no obvious answer, but if something seems dead wrong to you, put your finger on why. Just as importantly, figure out why the other person is advocating their position. This is absolutely true in watching games too. Just because a strong player makes a move doesn't mean that player is right, as is the opposite. If you can't figure out why they made the play they did, ask them after the game. Don't just assume they did it "because they're better." Start a (respectful!) dialogue. Most players will be happy to answer a question if you phrase it as a wish to understand.

Finally, don't forget the relevance of style in the game. Some plays are correct via one style (aggressive, card-advantage seeking) and wrong towards another. A lot of draft is done with deck preferences and style in mind. If there's a card that everyone seems to love and you don't, and it's a card that's really never, ever works for you, don't feel bad about not playing it. Being balanced and fair-minded is best, but en route, do respect your natural tendencies.

*"Is **Lightning Axe** really so good that the card getting past 3rd pick makes the three people before you n00bs? I really do not agree with how highly this card is picked when you cannot abuse it with graveyard effects and/or invoking madness. Let me state for the record that it is a broken card when invoking madness on something like **Reckless Wurm**, **Nightshade Assassin**, **Gorgon**, etc., but without anything like that, it is just bad removal!"*

*Lets say you don't want to discard a card to it- you have to pay for a **Fireball** at x=5, which is a pretty darn expensive removal spell. Something like **Pull Under** from Kamigawa, a card you play if are really lacking in removal, but under no circumstances are you picking it before 8th pick pack one. Also let's say you want to play it for one mana and discard a card. I understand you may have a bad card in your hand to discard, but early game thats going to be a creature, and you are gaining early tempo, but your opponent has just 2 for 1'ed you! You're probably going to lose, unless you happened to somehow 2 for 2 them. Also, late game when you*



may have extra land, you will have the mana to pay six anyway. Plus, it can't even dome... its just a red *Pull Under.*"

Now personally, I disagree with this poster's view on **Lightning Axe**. I find the card exciting and flexible. But all I can do is discuss my own experiences and let the readers do what works for them. If you have had nothing but woe with L'Axe, so be it. All I can do, and any writer really, is relate my own experiences with a card.

Essentially, don't believe everything you read. If something resonates with you, give it a shot. If it doesn't work, you move on. There's no author writing who's infallible, and nothing is set in stone. It's always about what works for *you*.

## Being Content with Easy Wins versus Seeking Out Challenge

A few weeks ago I wrote on the value of other players in regards to testing and overall improvement. Most players realize that their **Magic** experience improves with other people, online or otherwise. **Magic** is at heart a social game. Your fellow gamer adds all sorts of positive dimension to the experience. What doesn't register for some people is how important the play group is for improvement.

I've discussed this concept before so I won't go overboard but basically: Your skill can only rise far enough to beat who you play against. If you're squaring off against PT champs and Hall of Famers, you will need serious skills to fight back. Likewise, playing against the local pushovers take your skills exactly as far as it needs to beat pushovers, which usually isn't very high at all.

Now I do understand that losing is no fun. I *really* understand that. But instead of using that as an excuse to reduce the possibility of a loss, why not use it as a goad to get better? Those PT champs et al may still beat you roundly, but simply the act of facing off against them is highly instructive. **magicthegathering.com** editor Kelly Digges recently played **magicthegathering.com** content manager Scott Johns in that very same *Time Spiral/Planar Chaos* Sealed Deck league mentioned above. Now Kelly is more than competent at running the cards, but Scott Johns is a phenomenal player and a multiple Pro Tour winner besides. Kelly faced off against Mr. Johns pretty sure he was going to get crushed, and it turned out he was right. Didn't matter to Kelly, who told me afterwards how much he learned simply in the process of playing the match. Losing is hardly a barrier to improvement. In fact it's often a necessity.

Need proof? I can't give you that, but I do have a fascinating article on the science of skill and mastery, written by a Phillip Ross. While the studies in the article focused on chess, a great many conclusions apply to all intellectual pursuits, **Magic** included. Here's a [link](#), but if you don't have time to read it all, check out this relevant quote:

*"[Researcher Anders Ericsson of Florida State University] argues that what matters is not experience per se but 'effortful study,' which entails continually tackling challenges that lie just beyond one's competence. That is why it is possible for enthusiasts to spend tens of thousands of hours playing chess or golf or a musical instrument without ever advancing beyond the amateur level and why a properly trained student can overtake them in a relatively short time. It is interesting to note that time spent playing chess, even in tournaments, appears to contribute less than such study to a player's progress; the main training value of such games is to point up weaknesses for future study."*

I love that term "effortful study." This statement has plenty of implication, but two parts immediately stand out. The first is that the effort is defined as "strain" or "beyond comfort," at least as far as opposing skill is concerned. I'm sure the physical education sector has something similar to say about becoming more physically fit. For **Magic**, the answer is simply throwing yourself at greater and greater challenges. The trick is that "just beyond" bit. Losing's not so bad, as long as you know why you lost. If you have the awareness to replicate the maneuvers used to beat you, you're going to be in great shape. The other interesting aspect to that quote is the tournament line, where again, playing in tournaments means nothing without the challenge to back it up. Don't think yourself amazing because you win a lot of FNMs. All you know is that you need to move forward towards greater opponents to continue to improve. Don't let the allure of easy wins blind you from the reasons you started playing tournament **Magic** in the first place.



## Going Through the Motions versus Taking Care of Yourself

And finally, the last piece of the puzzle. The best players, in skill or otherwise, take strides to care of themselves. What does that mean? There are two components here. The first is physical, which is just with respect to the actual toll of playing a large **Magic** event. **Magic**, especially in the tournaments, is a taxing event. Your mind is being challenged basically every step of the way, not to mention the sheer amount of focus needed to put all the information together, every turn. If you've ever played an all-day PTQ or multiple-day Pro Tour, you know how utterly exhausting you feel by the end. Exalted perhaps, but still quite drained. You can and should help yourself

out here. The first and most important aspect is just drinking plenty of water. At the end of every round, go get a cup for yourself. I don't remember much from my high school health class, but I do remember one tip regarding water: If you feel thirsty, you're already dehydrated. Staying quenched goes an exceptionally long way towards surviving a major event. You *will* be sharper throughout the games, and just as importantly, you'll feel much better the next day. It's simple enough, but just drinking only a little more water does a world of good.

Only slightly less important is putting some food in your belly. Eating almost anything for breakfast or lunch is better than nothing, especially for a grueling tournament. Similar to water, your body functions better and you feel better with some sustenance to draw from. These days it's pretty rare to play a PTQ totally removed from civilization. There are *always* people willing to go in on a pizza, delivered piping hot to the tourney venue. Do what you need to do, so long as you get to eat something. Sleep's nice too.



I know from personal experience **Magic** players can function on zero support. To tell the truth, I've qualified for Pro Tours off nearly zero quantities of sleep, food, and water. I was much younger than, but even so, why put yourself through all that? At the end of the day, blue envelope notwithstanding, my body still felt utterly wrecked. Plus I know I played worse on no food and no water than without; how could you not? There's no reason to cost yourself additional edge. A while ago I lost in the finals of a PTQ due to flubbing a key game, probably because I was short on that food and water. It was that loss that prompted me to figure out precisely how to avoid losing to myself in the future. Nowadays, there's just no way I'm passing up breakfast or skipping frequent water breaks. The margins for error are thin enough at these events already.

This all pales in comparison to the second component of taking care of yourself, the mental one. A rarely discussed but pervasive element in the **Magic** lifestyle is taking it too far. That means considering a win the highest good, or replacing all other hobbies or interests with **Magic**, or replacing school or work time with **Magic**, etc. **Magic** is a vastly exciting and engaging game, but the tradeoff is that people can take things too far. One need only read Gary Wise's excellent [final Wise Words column](#) to see a Hall of Famer struggle with this. In truth, a lot of people attracted to this game, especially in the competitive side, do tend towards the obsessive. Whether it's because of burgeoning social skills or a lack of intellectual fulfillment in the "real world" I wouldn't know, but it's not an uncommon phenomenon. Whatever the source, this is a dangerous situation to be in.

Being overly focused on results, as opposed to the simple pleasure of playing, is a trap, and a common one. Entwining one's emotional wellbeing to a game that has such random elements is poor math. The commoner's argument "It's just a game!" is condescending, and utterly irrelevant besides. Games are awesome. Instead just ask yourself: Are you having fun? Do you feel engaged? Are you excited? If the answers to these questions aren't positive and you continue to sling spells, ask yourself what you can do to reclaim the, uh, **Magic**. If that means taking a break for a PTQ season, or just playing some casual **Magic**, so be it. Do what you need to do to take care of yourself now. I promise **Magic** will still be around when you're ready to be excited again.



## In Closing

Whew, a lot of content this week. These concepts were born out of many years of observation and trial and error. I hope something here resonated with you and has given you something to think about on your way to the next stage of your **Magic** career. Find your method, work hard, and have fun. It's the best advice I can give. Thanks for reading.



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