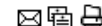


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# Double Billing

Brian David-Marshall  
The Week That Was  
Friday, May 25, 2007



Last weekend was an event coverage double bill with two Grand Prix tournaments taking place on two different continents. The first was in Europe, featuring the identical Block Constructed format to the one that was used at Pro Tour–Yokohama. While Block is going to be the format for the upcoming PTQ season, [Grand Prix–Strasbourg](#) had little bearing on the qualifiers since we won't know what the impact of having *Future Sight* grafted onto the format will be until the bandages are unwrapped on the PTQ Top 8 decklist page in several weeks.

The second event took place in North America and featured the rarely-used-in-high-level-play Legacy format, which just happens to be my focus for this week. You could argue that going back and looking at the results from the Legacy event is even less relevant than discussing lame-duck Constructed results that will at the very least provide a foundation for the incoming format—especially when you consider how much has already been written about Legacy over the past few weeks. Still I find myself looking through the Top 8 decks from [Grand Prix–Columbus](#) and marveling at how so many different players could look at a format with a clear best deck and arrive at radically different deck decisions.

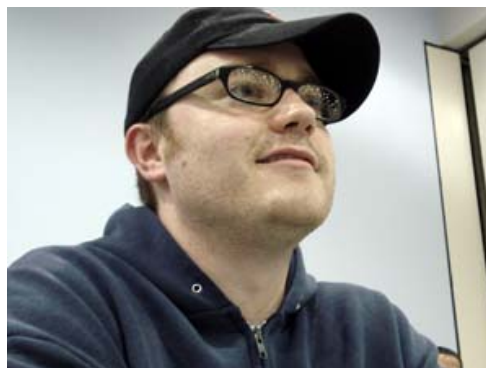
If there were one thing that virtually everyone agreed upon going into Columbus, it was that a combo deck built around the recently unerrata'd *Flash* and *Protean Hulk* would be the default best deck in the format. Whether the Hulk was parlayed into four *Disciple of the Vault* and six or seven  $\times$  casting-cost artifacts or a more complex but smaller combo of *Kiki-Jiki*, *Mirror Breaker*, *Karmic Guide*, *Body Snatcher*, and *Carion Feeder* was up for debate (although most agreed that the latter was the best plan). But no one doubted that Hulk Flash would be the most successful deck in the tournament, and the Day Two results backed that up—one quarter of the 128 Sunday players were running one of the Hulk Flash variants.



As soon as the technology behind the deck began to spread throughout the **Magic** community, Billy Moreno put the deck up on the lift and got to work—he knew what he would be playing. Billy rose to prominence as a deck designer when he piloted his MadDog 2020 to the finals of Pro Tour–Los Angeles at the end of the 2005 season. He proceeded to finish the next Constructed Pro Tour in Hawaii with a virtual Top 8 playing a Zoo deck that could transform into a modified Glare deck.

His most recent creation—a Hulk Flash deck featuring *Counterbalance*, *Sensei's Divining Top*, and a *Quirion Dryad* sideboard package—earned him a hard fought Pro Tour point, \$200, and a 39th-place finish. In the hands of Steve Sadin, the deck proceeded to win the whole tournament despite Steve's recent time away from the game, plus a rocky start to the tournament where Steve threw away at least one match due to inexperience with the combo.

Bill Stark does not have the playing resume of Billy Moreno, but he is clearly a player whose star is on the rise. Earlier in the year I interviewed Bill about his PTQ success with Affinity, and under his editorship the Londes.com site has been added to my regular reading list of **Magic** sites—one of his featured writers is Columbus finalist Owen Turtenwald. Bill's site was one of the first sites to "break" the story about Hulk Flash on their front page. His reaction to the existence of the deck was the opposite of Moreno's, choosing to play a mono-black deck that originally could mulligan to *Leyline of the Void* with the help of four *Serum Powders* (although as he got closer to the event, they migrated to the sideboard).



Stark was on top of the Flash situation from the beginning.

Both players agreed to take part in an interview about their decks, decisions, and what they might do differently with a Desmond do-over.

**BDM:** Were you planning on attending GP–Columbus even before the *Flash* combo came to light?

**Moreno:** I was definitely going to be attending the Grand Prix. I haven't missed a North American GP since PT–LA two years ago.

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**Stark:** I was planning on attending. I'm coming up on graduation and trying to take as many chances to travel and compete now, just in case I can't later working in the 9-5 world. I'm hoping that won't be the case, but you never know. I also felt the Legacy format would be a lot of fun, essentially a mixture of all the Extended seasons I've played in the past with some unique flavor of its own thrown in for good measure.

**BDM:** Traditionally, do you want to play a deck that beats the best deck or the best deck?

**Moreno:** I think that's not exactly the right question. Everyone wants to play the best deck, the deck that will win the most matches in a tournament on average. As to the spirit of what you're asking, I guess I always start looking for that deck among those decks with the strongest proactive plans. I think your deck's proactive plan is slightly more important than its reactive plan. Of course, having the most of both is the real challenge.

**Stark:** I'm actually pretty notorious amongst the lowans for refusing to play "the best deck." I felt we (at Londes) put out the first article on Hulk Flash, though there was a lot of great coverage on it at Starcity, TMD, The Source, and even on [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com), but I only thought I might play it for a split second at the initial stages of testing. I won't play "the best deck" unless I feel I bring something to it that sets it apart from the other versions of "the best deck." That's partly why I think Billy Moreno's deck was so fascinating, though I think given the chance to replay the matchup I certainly could beat it. I'm probably too timid to walk into a field of hate with a straight jaw and simply hope for the best, so I'm usually going to play the deck to beat the most degenerate deck.

**BDM:** What was your first thought when you saw the *Flash* combo?

**Moreno:** My first thought was "That combo's sick...you only need two cards in hand. And the only one you have to play is a two-mana BLUE instant." Julian Levin, who had been knighted a thousand times with a thousand titles by Mike Flores, asked me (before we knew if it would happen) would I rather *Flash* be banned for the GP or not. I definitely wanted it not to be banned, not because I had everything figured out yet, it just gave me a clear focus for testing.



Moreno was pleased no action was taken to preemptively ban *Flash*.

**Stark:** Initially I was certain it would receive errata, but when Aaron Forsythe indicated that would not be the case, I started preparing to beat it. I'm not one to complain about the world falling about my head. As a tournament player and deck builder, I take a page from Mike Flores's book (literally) by keeping things in perspective. It's not my job to build decks and compete in a pretend world where the format is exactly as I feel it should be, be that believing there should be no *Fires of Yavimaya*, *Tolarian Academy*, or *Flash*. Instead, I have to build for what I'm given, and for GP—Columbus, *Flash* as it is was what I was given.

**BDM:** How set were you on the deck you played and did you ever seriously consider anything else?

**Moreno:** There wasn't a real time (ignoring a short period of panic the day before the tournament) where Hulk Flash wasn't the deck I was playing. Every match I tested had at least one *Flash* deck in it. I didn't anticipate more than 20 percent *Flash* at the GP and that would have surprised me. I didn't expect less than 20 percent Goblins. There's no way I was going to try and figure out a deck to beat both. So all of my testing was focused on beating the mirror and beating what people thought would beat *Flash*. I generally find that people overestimate their ability to beat decks with strong proactive plans.

**Stark:** [Hulk Flash] is resilient to hate and "good," but getting all the cards for it, playing through a wall of hate, and fighting through 14-16 rounds of a tournament were daunting tasks.

**BDM:** Your deck changed from the time you arrived at the tournament site to the start of Round One...what were the changes and why did you make them?

**Moreno:** Interestingly, the maindeck didn't change at all. The sideboard changed in the details but the plan was always to transform into a *Counterbalance* aggro-control deck against almost any Leyline deck. The *Flash* combo demanded such drastic countermeasures that effective anti-*Flash* sideboarding plans left people extremely vulnerable to even the smallest of *Quirion Dryads*. The big change, after testing against Kyle Goodman's Fish deck, was to max out on *Massacres* and cut the *Engineered Plagues* in the board. *Massacre* was pretty awesome. I beat Goblins twice and Steve beat it in the Finals but it was never comfortable so the *Engineered Plagues* might have a place.



| Billy Moreno                 |                         |                        |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Grand Prix-Columbus          |                         |                        |
| <b>Main Deck</b><br>60 cards |                         | <b>Sideboard</b>       |
| 4 Polluted Delta             | 4 Flash                 | 4 Leyline of the Void  |
| 3 Flooded Strand             | 4 Brainstorm            | 3 Swords to Plowshares |
| 2 Underground Sea            | 4 Daze                  | 4 Quirion Dryad        |
| 1 Tropical Island            | 4 Force of Will         | 3 Massacre             |
| 1 Swamp                      | 4 Mystical Tutor        | 1 Reverent Silence     |
| 2 Island                     | 4 Counterbalance        |                        |
| 1 Tundra                     | 4 Sensei's Divining Top | 15 sideboard cards     |
| 14 lands                     | 4 Chrome Mox            |                        |
|                              | 1 Echoing Truth         |                        |
|                              | 1 Massacre              |                        |
|                              | 34 other spells         |                        |
| 4 Protean Hulk               |                         |                        |
| 4 Dark Confidant             |                         |                        |
| 1 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker  |                         |                        |
| 1 Karmic Guide               |                         |                        |
| 1 Carrion Feeder             |                         |                        |
| 1 Body Snatcher              |                         |                        |
| 12 creatures                 |                         |                        |

**Stark:** Initially I was all-out set on beating Flash with Serum Powder and Leyline maindeck. Talking with Tim Aten, Gerry Thompson, and even "arch-nemesis" Dan Skinner helped convince me I was being a bit paranoid and that the Powder/Leyline combo would be better off in the sideboard. It didn't occur to me until I was competing that Hymn to Tourach and Umezawa's Jitte, the cards that took their places in the maindeck, were actually very good against most Hulk Flash builds as they each served to disrupt the combo in one way or another. Hymn was particularly spicy because the Flash players often have to mulligan aggressively and their five-card, turn-two win looks REAL awkward when two of the pieces are randomly nabbed from their hand, leaving them with blanks and a single land.

| Bill Stark                   |                   |                       |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| GP Columbus 07 Top 8         |                   |                       |
| <b>Main Deck</b><br>60 cards |                   | <b>Sideboard</b>      |
| 16 Swamp                     | 4 Sarcomancy      | 3 Cursed Scroll       |
| 4 Wasteland                  | 4 Hymn to Tourach | 4 Leyline of the Void |
| 20 lands                     | 4 Unmask          | 4 Serum Powder        |
|                              | 4 Duress          | 4 Engineered Plague   |
|                              | 4 Umezawa's Jitte | 15 sideboard cards    |
|                              | 4 Dark Ritual     |                       |
| 4 Carnophage                 | 24 other spells   |                       |
| 4 Order of the Ebon Hand     |                   |                       |
| 4 Stromgald Crusader         |                   |                       |
| 4 Nantuko Shade              |                   |                       |
| 16 creatures                 |                   |                       |

**BDM:** How many Flash decks did you expect to play over the course of a tournament and how many did you actually play against?

**Moreno:** I expected say 15-20 percent Flash at the start of Day One, with strong advancement. So in 15 rounds, I thought I'd play it once or twice (more so, if I was doing well). I played it twice.

**Stark:** I actually expected to see a lot more than I did, but an early loss put me in the sort of "random" bracket (no disrespect intended to my opponents as you would certainly qualify my deck of choice as "random"). I played two Hulk Flash on the first day, then three on the second day before falling to my sixth at the hands of Steve Sadin in the semifinals. I was 4-2 against the deck on the weekend, and have to admit that both matches I lost were within my ability to win, I simply punted.

**BDM:** Despite a lot of dire predictions the format was very spread out with lots of deck archetypes packed into the top tables. To what do you attribute the diversity of the tournament?

**Moreno:** I think diversity breeds diversity. The fact that you could reasonably dodge the best deck lets players justify playing what they are most comfortable with. There's some rationality to playing a pet deck when you are going to spend two days in random matchups. Sticking with what you know eliminates some of the unknowns that cause mistakes. I think Legacy also supports the mindset of "play what you want" just from its deck construction rules. Standard and Block players can't get by unless they are willing to try new things. Even if Wafo-Tapa always

plays the same deck, he has to use new cards every year. Legacy doesn't demand adaptability, so of course people who mainly play Legacy are less adaptable. It's Darwinism.

**Stark:** Diversity can be attributed to size of card pool and player base. One of my opponents had the Standard dual lands from the *Ravnica* block because he couldn't afford the original duals. I think you saw a wide variety of deck choices because the format was so large and many players wanted to play their own pet decks. I'm not sure if I would call Legacy more metagame-resistant, however. The larger the card pool gets, the greater the likelihood you will see a broken deck of some type develop, and the metagame will start centering around that deck. That's what happened at Columbus, and a deck designed to beat "the deck" and the decks that beat "the deck" (in this case Fish variants), like mine, could be very successful. Get rid of **Flash**, and I think the Legacy world returns to Goblins, Goblins everywhere, rendering aggro black a very poor choice.



*Flash helped increase the diversity of decks, according to Stark.*

**BDM (for just Billy):** What won more games; the **Counterbalance** Combo or the **Flash** combo? The main deck combos or the **Dryad** sideboard?

**Moreno:** The **Flash** combo definitely won more games than **Counterbalance** but I think that's mostly because **Flash** was Plan A—**Mystical Tutor** doesn't get **Counterbalance**. And if you have both combos and no reason not to **Flash** you **Flash**, but **Counterbalance** only had one loss when it hit early. I played a game against Goblins, where he played a turn-two or -three **Piledriver**. Then **Counterbalance** countered two **Ringleaders** and a **Siege-Gang Commander** while **Dark Confidant** refused to block. Me and Steve did a quick tally and in 25 rounds of actual play (discounting byes, ID's, Steve not understanding the combo, etc.) we only lost four Game 1s. Our Worst Dryads Ever won a few games for Steve, but he made the point that most of the time, it didn't matter what creature they were. They won less for me, but I played a lot of matchups where I didn't have to transform. Plus, he won five more rounds than I did.

**BDM (for Bill):** Were you prepared for transformative sideboards from the **Flash** decks? How did you decide what to do for Games Two and Three against Steve in the semis?

**Stark:** I was prepared. I think any tournament-minded player was prepared for SOMETHING out of the board of Hulk **Flash** decks. My creatures were selected with that very setup in mind. I chose pump knights so they could theoretically tangle with **Phyrexian Negator** or whatever other creatures I might see, and **Nantuko Shade** could survive that fight pretty well. In regard to my match with Steve, I got to see his sideboard before the game so I felt I had an advantage (or at least didn't have a disadvantage in not knowing).

I made the decision not to board the Leylines because I was positive he would bring in Dryads. Really there was no reason not to; he could still threaten the combo while significantly interfering with my combat step creating a win/win for him. Besides, I had become confident over the weekend that my maindeck was built well to beat the combo portion of the deck and **Jitte**, which I usually boarded out for **Leyline**, was great against his creatures. Furthermore, on the chance he brought in his enchantment removal I could totally blank some of the cards in his deck. The **Divining Tops** were the real problem, and I would have given my first born to have a set of **Pithing Needles** instead of **Serum Powders** in my board for that match.



**BDM:** If you were Desmond from "Lost" and your tournament experience was actually just glimpse of the future with the tournament taking place tomorrow, what would you do? No one else would have this knowledge of the future and everyone else would do exactly the same things they did last weekend.

**Moreno:** I'd spend the evening testing **Hidden Gibbons** or **Albino Troll**, then settle on the exact same list probably.

**Stark:** I wouldn't over-extend against Dominic Lodovichetti in Round 3, I would attack into Sadin's **Dark Confidants** after he flips the **Protean Hulk** in Game 1, and I would have wagered a large sum of money on myself with Gerry Thompson.

**BDM:** What would you have played had Future Sight been legal?

**Moreno:** Probably something very similar. **Counterbalance** gets even better when people are playing actual zero casting cost cards. I'd make some room for **Facts** of my own, but not a full set of either. Neither is a primary piece, essential to the deck, and playing with them opens you up to a new set of vulnerabilities including **Chalice of the Void**. I'd probably find room for the **Lotus Petals** I wanted in the deck this time around as the mirror looks like it would speed up. Overall, I still think the control **Flash** decks are the way to go.

**Stark:** The original version of the deck with Powder and Leyline maindeck. **Future Sight** actually allows you to create a better version of



the deck, I think, allowing you to effectively ALWAYS start with Leyline in play. I'd move Jitte and Hymn to the board and possibly change the creature base around a bit with **Flesh Reaver** and Negator.

## Firestarter: Predator or Prey?

What did you do when Affinity was legal in Standard? Did you play with **Seat of the Synod** or did you load up on Viridian hate? Do you opt for the consensus best deck or do you lie in the weeds with a sharpened spear waiting for your prey to lumber by? Bill and Billy shared their different approaches from this past weekend. You can go to the forums and comment on their decks, their approach, or just share what you do when you know what deck you are most likely going to see populating the top tables.



*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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