

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns



# The Happy Head and the Sad Head

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Last weekend at Pro Tour—San Diego we saw the debut of the Two-Headed Giant Limited format at the highest level of competitive play. I was in attendance and I'm glad I went—it was one heck of a ride. If you haven't checked out the event coverage (especially the video stuff), do so [here](#), and congratulations to Mssrs. Lachmann and Van Lunen for winning it all.



San Diego Champions Jacob Van Lunen and Chris Lachmann

Everyone, and I mean everyone, at the event had an opinion on the format, and they varied from "love it" to "hate it" with more of the pro players falling on the "hate" side of the line. I believe that a lot of that frustration comes with a virgin format; they've all been taken out of their comfort zones and don't really appreciate the change. To the pros, the formats we normally run—mainly booster draft, block constructed, and extended—do a great job of testing their skills against one another to determine who the best player is. So why mess all that up by throwing in a "more random" format like Two-Headed Giant Limited?

I'll try to tackle all the relative points first by going over the format's positives, followed by an analysis of some of its perceived negatives.

## Positive 1 – The format is hugely successful at lower levels of play.

Here's a statement that may take some of you by surprise: *The goal of the Pro Tour is not to find who the best Magic player is and give him lots of money.*

I know that's what it may seem like, especially if you are entrenched in its lifestyle, but the main goal is to create a spectacle that gives **Magic** as a whole something very grand and important feeling, something players can participate in, admire from afar, or choose to ignore all together, content with the knowledge that the game is stable and destined to be long-lived because somehow, somewhere there is a tournament being held with a \$50,000 first prize. That prize money comes from card sales, and the Pro Tour plus the entire structure of organized play beneath it helps to sell those cards.

We have a room full of coverage guys, video reporters, and podcasters because we want people to be interested in what is going on—and not just the next level down of player that just missed qualifying, or the personal friends of people that are at the event, but as many **Magic** players as we possibly can. And to make that happen, we need the Pro Tour to be played using formats that all levels of players can enjoy and relate to. Two-Headed Giant Limited is exactly that.

Pro Tour Qualifier attendance was up for the round, and the number of "new entries"—players who played in their first PTQ ever—was incredibly high. The 2HG flights at prereleases consistently do well. Even more telling is the fact that events in the format are being sanctioned at local stores even when we aren't telling them to, which is a huge sign that **Magic** players as a whole enjoy the format. And if they enjoy playing the format, they will probably enjoy watching and/or reading about the top players in the world playing it as well.

Compare all the good stuff about 2HG to the Pro Tour's previous default team format: three-person Team Sealed/Rochester Draft. Most of my own personal Pro Tour success came in that format, and I currently have two people that won a Pro Tour in that format working for me (Site Manager Scott Johns and **Magic** Developer Mike Turián). To that end, we certainly understand that the format is massively skill testing. Players could be very good at it, and the best teams (headed by Kai Budde's Phoenix Foundation) did well consistently. But it was massively unpopular outside of the PT and very expensive to practice in terms of product needed per game. No one ever played it just for fun. The three-man Team Sealed/Rochester format was initially conceived to get players who wouldn't otherwise try tournaments to play, but the way the format worked it made the gameplay incredibly daunting—a weaker player could not hide and often had to suffer the wrath of his own teammates! A failure on all levels.

## Positive 2 – You can talk!

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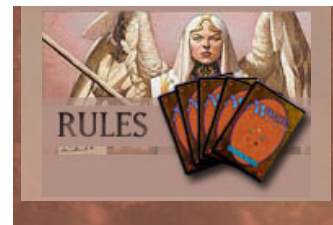
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Being able to talk during both the draft and the game is a huge shift in this format over previous team Limited formats, and it may be the best change of all. You can actually stop your teammate from making a grievous error instead of just watching in silent horror as he loses the game. You can walk less experienced teammates through certain situations. And most importantly, you can behave naturally. Most of us want to talk while we play games, and the rules surrounding previous formats were just lame—they'd create rifts between teammates instead of bonds, as your only recourse when something occurred you didn't agree with was to flip out on your teammate after the match, whereas with 2HG you can prevent such mishaps from ever happening.



To be fair, we did lift the "no talking" rule for both PT Charleston's Team Block Constructed (and Team Standard PTQ round) and the Team Rochester drafts at Worlds last year. That did make gameplay more fun, but strained the integrity of those formats—the game that finished last of the three often turned into a 3-on-3 competition; the whole point of having three separate games was to test each player individually. Which leads us to point #3...

## Positive 3 – There is only one game going on.

With all the players involved in a single game, everyone is on the same page, has the same goals, and is concentrating on the same things. Three individual matches—the hallmark of previous team formats—split the attention of what was going on, and often times one of the matches was irrelevant. The single game also makes watching and/or covering the format much more enjoyable, as the round won't ever abruptly end mid-turn just because both of your teammates lost, and who is winning and losing at any given moment is easy to determine.

## Positive 4 – Cards have different values in the format.

There was some amount of reevaluating of cards in the old three-person Limited formats, most notably landwalkers and other cards that were good against specific other strategies. But in 2HG, the valuations of cards change drastically over normal one-on-one play. If you were following the coverage, you probably heard over and over about the cards that are better (Volcanic Awakening, Urborg Syphon-Mage, Frozen Aether, Essence Warden, Gift of Granite, etc.) and worse (Null Profusion being the biggest offender) in the format. Those differences really make the format unique and, dare I say, skill testing.

Which leads us to the perceived negatives of the format, the first one being the biggest blanket knock on the format.

## Negative 1 – The format isn't skill testing enough.

I'll remind people about what some of the pros said about the format prior to the event on this very site: "I think it is actually pretty skill-intensive and not that bad a format," and "I think this format will reward preparation more than any other format." But then when two rookies win the title in fewer than ten total turns and two more "no-name" teams are in the Top 4, the prevailing opinion seemed to sway toward, "Well, so much for this being a skill-based format."



I think the naysayers were being a bit too hasty and were still tasting the bitter grapes of defeat. The truth is that all the teams at the top did prepare for the event via heavy testing and proper reevaluation of cards, and the winning strategy was beautifully executed by Lachmann and Van Lunen draft after draft over the weekend. It all just seemed so random because there's no sense of history behind it.

When Mike Hron wins a Pro Tour by going against conventional wisdom and drafting black in *Time Spiral/Time Spiral/Planar Chaos*, he is lauded as brilliant because (a) he has a known history of being a great Limited player and (b) he defeated other known good limited players on his way to the top. The same holds true for Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, now the Resident Genius, and his victory in the Block Constructed Pro Tour. Similarly, Grand Prix—Montreal was acknowledged as having a great format because of the quality of names at the top of the standings. So what changed in San Diego?

A lot. A new set of skills was necessary, quite possibly skills more different than any needed on the Pro Tour previously, and the reigning top-level pros didn't necessarily have those skills. We don't know which players are good at this format historically, but three teams in the Top 4—the three you never heard of—had won at least one 2HG tournament recently—the qualifiers that got them there—which is one more than most of the current crop of pros.

Steve O'Mahoney-Schwartz's words stuck with me. As the GP Boston winner was getting ready to leave San Diego after a disappointing 3-3 finish on day one, he said, "There were about five or six little things I could have done differently yesterday that would have changed what happened. They seemed like the right things to do at the time, I think, but it's so hard to know. They'll keep me up at night." He had high hopes coming into the event, didn't get a chance to realize them, but never put the blame on anything other than what he had direct control over. We should all be so pragmatic.

On to some more specific complaints about what makes the format less skill-intensive:

### 1a – One game matches leave too much to chance.

One game matches are a harsh reality for this format. We don't like it, either, but we have to accept it. Jeroen Remie told me that he did a four-team draft with himself, Frank Karsten, and some other Dutch players and

played out the whole thing best 2-of-3 and it took nine hours—that could be a bit of exaggeration, but the fact is that we can't run best 2-of-3 during the Swiss because of time issues. We are already in a situation where we have to run the final Swiss rounds on Sunday because there isn't enough time in two days to run enough rounds to create a clean Top 8 break, even with one game matches.

That said, one game matches are plenty skill testing. As developer Matt Place said about the format, "You play **Magic** all day for two days and all the games count. How is that not skill testing?" The truth is that players don't want all the games to count. They want to be able to "throw out" their mana-screw games by winning the other two games in the match.



If you are mana screwed one game in three and win all the others in a best 2-of-3 format, you'll win all your matches. But if you are mana screwed one game in two, you'll only win half you matches. So you don't get infinite opportunities to toss games out. In 2HG, mana issues one game in two will give the same winning percentage as in one-on-one, but the one game in three scenario punishes you to the tune of a third of your matches as opposed to zero. So it is more of a factor, but the important thing to remember is that it is the same for every player in the event.

The ability to avoid mana problems is probably in players' control more than they think. Most mana bases that I saw had seventeen lands, which has been more or less proven to be the correct number for one-on-one play—the kind of play where you can afford to lose a game now and again to mana issues and still win it all. But in an "every game counts" format like 2HG, maybe seventeen lands leaves too much to chance. If you couldn't afford to lose a game ever for any reason, shouldn't your mana base err towards safer? The rules of the format allow for a free mulligan to help mitigate the mana problems, but I think many players see that as an opportunity to shave mana from their decks, which essentially offsets the potential positives of the free mulligan.

Going forward, we do have tentative plans to make the Top 4 be best 2-of-3 to mirror normal Pro Tours' best 3-of-5 format for individual play. There is even a proposal floating around to try playing the whole event best 2-of-3 with 1:45 rounds, but that doesn't seem realistic to me. Either way, sideboarding rules for the format will have to change. But we are dedicated to making the experience as good as we can for players and fans alike.

#### **1b – Too many cards are too swingy in the format.**

This problem is real and is more or less a product of the *Time Spiral* block. Storm is borderline unfair in the format and if you are willing to first pick storm cards, there is little the other teams at the table can do to affect your strategy. Trust me when I say (for the tenth time) that future sets won't contain storm.

Slivers were the other big talking point, but I don't see them in the same category as storm. Yes, they were the backbone of the winning strategy, but it wasn't a secret and every team that drafted at the same table as the winners had ample opportunities to draft Slivers themselves.

### **Negative 2 – One person can make all the decisions.**

This particular issue was the one we had to wrestle with the most before allowing this format to be played on the Pro Tour, but our own practice with the format revealed it to be a non-issue. While most people will admit that, yes, it is possible for one person to play both sides, there is a huge benefit to having an intelligent teammate that can sanity check your decisions at the very least, or occasionally remind you of cards your opponents might have. Time has shown that two heads are better than one.

### **Negative 3 – The format isn't playable online.**

We working on it. Honest. It's quite possible that modern 2HG rules will be playable online before V3 releases. It is unfortunate that the format can't be played online in its current incarnation.

If it could have been, I imagine players would have had some of the kinks worked out. Maybe the groupthink would have determined eighteen lands to be correct. Maybe Slivers would have emerged as the dominant strategy going in instead of looking like a rogue one. Our other Limited and Constructed formats have become more refined as a result of constant rigorous online play by the masses, and I can only imagine that 2HG would benefit from similar treatment. Some day!

Currently there is another 2HG Pro Tour penciled in for next year. No, we don't want to run it every year, but we do want to dedicate support to it while it is still young so that it gets enough momentum to be fully self-sustaining. That probably means back-to-back PT seasons initially, followed by a two or three year rotation after that. The format does so many good things for Magic as a whole that it is worth our time trying to perfect it for the Pro Tour. We've already started designing, developing, and templating cards with the format in mind (see Grave Scrabblers), and subsequent changes to the rules, floor rules, and event structure may occur as we quest to get it just right.

Additionally, the Worlds Team competition this year will be played using 2HG; each four-person national team will be split into two 2HG teams—details to follow.

In any event, 2HG is certainly here to stay. It's a fun format—I hope you'll continue to enjoy it in the future.

### **Last Week's Poll:**

What kind of system do you play video games on?		
PC, console, and handheld	2672	30.0%
PC and console only	2357	26.5%
PC only	2173	24.4%
Console only	555	6.2%
Console and handheld only	499	5.6%
None	313	3.5%
PC and handheld only	290	3.3%
Handheld only	49	0.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>8908</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

## This Week's Poll:

**What team format would you rather see at the Pro Tour and PTQs?**

- 2HG limited
- 2HG constructed
- Three-person limited
- Three-person constructed
- There shouldn't be team play at that level

*Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D, and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.*



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