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Anatomy of a Nationals Team

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The Week That Was
Friday, August 3, 2007



Yesterday Mike Flores walked you through the inner workings of [the Top 8 decks](#) from [U.S. Nationals](#). Today I am here to walk you through the elements that make up the U.S. National team. These four players will be working together over the coming months as they learn to master two Constructed formats – including the non-MTGOable Legacy format – a brand new Limited format, and play together in three different permutations for the recently revamped team competition.

I have done some quick sketches of other teams over the past few weeks but I was in a unique position to steal some time with each player after the event to find out how they got started playing **Magic**, a little about their deck and their drafts, and how they will work together over the next few months as they complete the last leg of the Road to Worlds.

The most recognizable name on this year's team is Luis Scott-Vargas, who is returning to Worlds on the U.S. National team after joining Ben Lundquist and captain – and Luis' good friend -- Paul Cheon on last year's squad. Luis and Paul stormed the team last year playing Solar Flare. Flare was a last minute addition to last year's metagame – very much like Gabe Walls' Blink deck from the Kentucky Open was this year. Solar Flare has gone on to become a Standard standard in the intervening year but Luis was not certain his OmniChord deck would similarly stand the test of time.

"I am not sure how much I would advocate the deck," he shrugged after returning from his photo shoot. He felt the deck had some very bad aggro match-ups especially with the Rakdos and Rakdos10 decks that did so well in the event. "I beat that deck once when Adam Chambers mull'd to five and I was going to lose to Antonino before we drew. It is really good against control decks but you have to play it a lot. The deck has a lot of weird interactions. Just picking it up is not a good idea – it probably isn't a good idea with any deck, but especially with this deck."

The deck ended up emerging as something of a compromise between Luis and Paul Cheon. "I wanted to play Pickles combo because I liked it against Solar Flare, the prevailing control deck, but it could not beat the red decks. Paul wanted to play **Wall of Roots** and **Loxodon Hierarchs** because from Gifts Rock in Extended that is how we always beat red decks."

"If you look at the deck it is actually MonoBlue with **Wall of Roots** and Hierarchs," laughed Luis. "We tried to mash it all together and we played it enough to get it to work even though it was a little awkward at first. We started working on it probably two or three weeks ago."

Luis did the bulk of his testing online despite Tenth Edition not being available yet. He and David Ochoa played one-on-one matches of Classic using Arcanis from Onslaught and gerry-rigged **Frostlings** and some manual scorekeeping to replace **Mogg Fanatic**. The fine tuning was done in Baltimore.

"While we were here at the site we did a fair amount of testing to hammer out the sideboard and stuff," he explained. "We talked with Gerry Thompson and those guys about the deck but they went with the Blink list that Gabe used in the Kentucky Open."

Last year Luis had the opportunity to observe a National champion manage a team first hand in Paul Cheon but he felt that many of the lessons he learned would not be applicable to this year's squad.

"Last year was kind of a unique situation. Me, Paul, and Ben knew each other -- we didn't know Ben really well but he was friends with Tim Aten and we actually went to Tim's house before Worlds and practiced for two weeks." Luis was nervous that this year's team was not going to have that same foundation. "We are four guys from all over and it is going to be a little different. We are going to communicate – we all traded contact information and that is the plan but last year I was teaming with two people I knew really well and who were friends of mine. That is not really there yet with this team."

One of the challenges will be getting everyone together in one place to practice. Luis is the only member of the team who is qualified for the upcoming Pro Tour before Worlds.

"It is useful to know how you play together," he admitted. "I was hoping that a couple of these guys would be in Valencia because that would be a good time to do a 2HG draft together but it doesn't look like that is happening, which is a little unfortunate. Other than that I guess we will have to play together before the event in New York, which is okay."



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Luis was hesitant to make any predictions about the team – not because he doubted that they could win but because he felt that last year's team was going to excel and fared poorly. As he reviewed his teammates' decks he was encouraged by what he saw.

"I really like the mono-green deck that Michael Jacob played. I thought it was a really good call and is very promising. Thomas Drake did not play **Remand** in his Blink deck and had the only Blink deck in the Top 8 despite it seemingly being the most played deck in the tournament. It shows that he is able to adapt because they are much better in the mirror."

I asked Luis how he got started in **Magic**. The first time I ever remember noticing the Californian player was during the final round of Pro Tour London when he took part in an epic game with Tomi Walamies which would determine which of them would reach the Top 8. Luis did not win that match but still had fond memories of the battle.

"That is easily in my top one or two games I have ever played," Luis smiled. "Both me and Tomi talked about it afterwards – there were points in that game where we both thought we couldn't lose and it kept switching back and forth until there were like ten turns left. I knew he had the **Hinder** and I knew it was going to happen but I couldn't do anything about it. And I couldn't concede because maybe he would miss it. But he didn't and that was that."

Like many players Luis started playing the game casually long before he ever took the game seriously. He stopped around High School. "I didn't pick it up again until a little before *Mirrodin* came out when I was in college," he explained. "I moved to a new town and there was a card shop there. I went in randomly one day and did a draft. I actually played against Brian Weissman and didn't come back for six months because he was unpleasant to play against. Once I got to know him he was fine but he was just super competitive."



The first event he qualified for was Pro Tour San Diego in 2004. He had opportunities to win PTQs before that but often walked away from the final table with everything save the blue envelope not thinking he was ready to play on the game's biggest stage. With a Pro Tour within driving distance he decided to play the final match and emerged victorious. He finished one match outside of the money at that event. His next event was Philadelphia and it was there that he began assembling the network of players he still relies upon today.

"That is when I actually started testing and got serious," said Luis. "Me and David Ochoa won back to back PTQs with the Desire deck and we both played it at Philadelphia. That's where I met Paul coincidentally. We did a couple of drafts and he was in a MTGO clan with some friends of mine and we stayed in touch. The next event I played in was London and I started 1-2 and then went 10-1 after that before losing to Tomi in that last round. After that I went to Nationals last year. I haven't Top 8'ed anything yet but I am Level 3 so I am going to be around for a while."

Networking – especially on MTGO – has been a big part of Luis' formula for success. While many players feel they can't compete without access to the top players, Luis explained that it is actually very easy to find the top players – they are all on MTGO.

"You play for a little while, you play someone two or three times, or you are in their clan and you message them about something... It is a lot like meeting people in real life. Most of the people I know here I knew first through **Magic** Online. That's how Paul and I got good because it is easy to play lots of games against a really high caliber of player. Once you get past the first few rounds of a Premier Event online you face only really good players."

So what next for Luis? "I would like to hit Level 4 this year. We still have Worlds, one Pro Tour and at least one GP. Level 4 is not unreasonable really; a couple of Top 32s should do it."

Finalist Thomas Drake – nicknamed Tamish Drake in the coverage room for his impressive facial hair – was fun to watch throughout the tournament. He was clearly having fun every step of the way but he was also – paraphrasing the words of Frank Kusomoto – studying hard and growing stronger as the tournament went on. This was the highest level of competition he had experienced, with Regionals previously setting the bar for the Virginia Beach player.

"We didn't really know what to expect," laughed Thomas when asked how well he and his car-mates expected to do at the tournament. "I have never played this format before – post-*Tenth Edition* and all – I literally made the deck on the way up here. I looked at the Australian Nationals deck lists and modified one of the Blink decks in the car. I threw it together and had no idea what to expect. Basically I liked the deck because it was a bunch of fun cards – I was just coming to have fun. Maybe get in a couple of free drafts."



It is probably not too surprising that Thomas walked away from the tournament with a huge smile on his face but he claims that would have been the case even if he had not managed to do well.

"Now that the tournament is over I am going to draft and set my trophy down and see if I can intimidate someone," laughed Thomas before talking about the overall atmosphere of the tournament. "The judging staff was really great and helpful. At some **Magic** tournaments the players are not courteous and stuff but everyone kept it really clean. Everything was on point and I have to applaud the judges and the event staff for everything they did to set up and run this event. This was the best **Magic** experience I ever had."

"When they had [The Game of the Year?](#)" he continued. "After I qualified for the Top 8 I was watching the whole thing screaming. Richard Garfield, the creator of the game was there... It was the most fun thing ever!"

"I have not been playing all that long and started during *Mirrodin* Block when I was at Virginia Tech," recalled Thomas of his first experiences with the game. "I had some friends who played Type 1 pretty competitively. I didn't know how to play **Magic** and they taught me how. They gave me one of their decks and I was just shuffling it up and had a full set of power and my friend was just cringing: "That card is worth like \$600 could you please be careful."

"I started out playing in Type 1 tournaments. It was a good way to learn because it is really complicated with the stack. I learned from really good Type 1 players with decks like Madness, Dragon, Keeper, and Hulk **Smash**. Then when *Mirrodin* came out we started drafting and they taught me how to draft too – since then it has just been fun."

Still, Thomas was not fully prepared for the rigors of tournament play. As he sat down for his first draft he found out it was nothing like drafting at the local store or playing on MTGO.

"I had no idea what was going on," he confessed. "In the first draft I probably drafted the worst I have ever drafted. I am so lucky that I 3-1'd that draft pod. I just outplayed some people but my deck was very subpar. You can go check out the picks."

One of the biggest hurdles Thomas faced was the timing of a draft. He was not used to the time constraints. For his very first pick he found himself up against the clock and immediately mispicked **Sedge Sliver** over **Call of the Herd**.

"I am just used to MTGO drafting or drafting at the local shop and being able to look at your cards in between picks. You only have 10 seconds to make your pick. I picked **Sedge Sliver** and immediately wanted to undo it. Since there was some other green in the pack I decided to avoid green and hope that everyone else ended up green. I had a very mediocre deck and managed to tempo people out and got a little lucky."

He may have considered himself lucky for the first draft but he took that experience and built on it for Day Two. He called his good friend Andrew Pacifico and asked for advice. Andrew felt that blue-black madness was a good archetype and gave Thomas some coaching overnight.

"It was a cool experience though because by the next draft I completely owned that pod. It was ridiculous," Thomas recalled. "I was ready with a plan. I wasn't going to let the timing influence me and I made the right picks immediately. My deck was literally nuts with a first pick **Nightshade Assassin** followed by Looter, Looter, and another **Nightshade Assassin**. They were all close matches because there were some great players at that table."

Andrew Pacifico also had given Thomas some advice for the Constructed portion. "Even thinking about what deck to play, the reason I thought about Blink was because Andrew told me, 'You have to play this deck.' He was a big help to me and I was calling him all tournament long."

Thomas wanted to make sure no one thought he was getting a big head: "I am still just a lucky scrub who Top 4'd at Nationals. I don't think I am awesome or anything. I was pretty intimidated playing against Luis because he is such a solid **Magic** player and the match-up was god awful. Constructed is not really my forte but when I sit down at the draft table with someone I am never scared. I draft all day long on MTGO."

Despite his assessment of himself as a 'lucky scrub' everyone who followed his progress saw that he acquitted himself admirably throughout the event, playing well, learning, and most importantly never forgetting he was there to have fun.

Michael Jacob, on the other hand, was there to do work. Mike is a professional gamer who has essentially found himself laid-off as the game he did the bulk of his work in rolled back their prize money and sent him looking elsewhere for some new streams of revenue. Not that **Magic** is anything new to the Michigan based player.

"I have been playing **Magic** pretty much since *Revised* and playing on the PTQ level for three and half years or so," said Jacob. "My only real success has been making the Top 8 of Grand Prix Austin. I flew down there to be with my cousins and I made Top 8. I played in Worlds two years ago and I have played in a bunch of Pro Tours just from winning PTQs. Funnily enough all the PTQs I won, I won with **Troll Ascetic**. So that is why I love the card so much and that's why I played it today."

In two separate Extended PTQs Michael Jacob played MaceyRock builds to invites and liked the card as a key element in defeating Gabe Walls' Blink from the Kentucky Open.



I was very aware of that deck and I just wanted to play a deck that beat that," he said as he explained his metagame philosophy. "I know I have been in this position before and I look at whoever won the last big event and I want to beat that deck. I almost Top 8'd Nationals two years ago with a blue-green deck – which also had **Troll Ascetic** in it. I lost in the last round and finished 13th."

"Against the Blink decks I have 16 untargetable creatures for them; the **Ledgewalker**, **Troll Ascetic**, **Scryb Ranger**, and **Giant Solifuge**. When they have these **Riftwing Cloudskates** and **Vensers** with their **Blinks** all they are doing is bouncing my **Treetop Villages** or my elves, which doesn't accomplish anything. They don't have any way to sweep the board so you can just overextend as much as you want. Just play all your cards, empty your hand out. They don't have any board control either so if you have a 6/5 untargetable attacking them every turn they are eventually going to fold to it."

"**Scryb Ranger** was really good because – well...**Lightning Angel** is blue," he grinned at the memory of his innocuous green flier holding off the timeshifted gold card. "He blocked that guy all day. I was 5-1-1 in the Constructed portion and I think four of my wins were against Blink."

His one loss came against a SnowWhite deck that featured **Story Circle**, **Martyr of Sands**, and **Cover of Winter**.

"I couldn't possibly win. I had all these 1/1s in play and he played **Cover of Winter** and I was like, "yeah... I can't do anything". I actually beat him one game with **Timbermare** because he had no idea I could come out of nowhere and just win. He tapped out for **Wrath of God** – for no real reason – and that was why I was able to kill him. **Timbermare**, **Might of Old Kroasa**, and **Treetop Village** were able to kill him."

Much like Luis said earlier of his own OmniChord deck, Michael did not love his deck in aggro match-ups but feels with a little tuning the deck could handle anything the metagame has to offer.

"If I had done the sideboard correctly – with **Tarmogoyfs** and **Spectral Forces** – I would probably have a really good match-up against the aggro decks. You side out some of your late game cards like **Giant Solifuge**, which doesn't really do anything against the aggro decks, and they still can't beat a **Troll** or a **Ledgewalker** with a **Cloak** on it so it should be a really good deck to play in the field."

Michael's presence on the team came down to his quarterfinal match-up in Game 5 – a game he had resigned himself to losing on the final play – and had Conrad Kolos played his **Last Gasp** first and then his **Tendrils of Corruption** the team would have a different roster today.

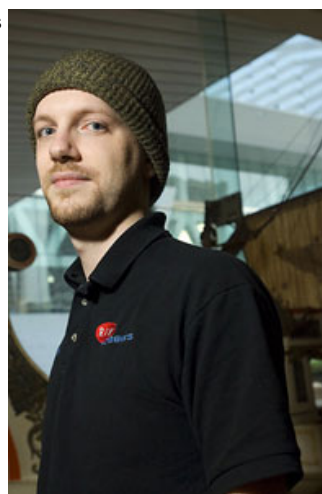
"There is no way," replied Jacob when asked if he thought he could make the team with a different sequence of plays on that final turn. "In fact I was very close, when I attacked him with the two **Treetop Villages**, to just conceding because I thought I lost. Then he said, "I guess I am one life point short" and I was like "Right, right, you're at two and I am trampling for two! All right, I won!"

Jacob had found himself in a two game hole in the quarters but used the experience of Game 2 to help him win that crucial fifth game. "What really happened was that in Game 2 he wrecked me in a very similar situation where I had a **Solifuge** in play that was smashing him and he had no answer until I played an **Elf**. He was able to **Seize the Soul** the **Elf** and block my **Solifuge**. In the fifth game I learned my lesson. I had six mana and two **Treetops** and I was not even doing that. I played like he had it in his hand and he did and I won the game because of it."

There was a ton of banter in that match and, having seen him get into verbal jousts with other opponents, I asked Jacob how much of that sparring was a game within the game.

"I play a ton of mental games," he confirmed. "I try to make my opponent feel incredibly comfortable with their position and with how I have a terrible hand. I actually won two games in this tournament that way. Against a Blink deck my opponent had two **Blinks** and two **Hierarchs** and he was at 11 life. I kept talking about how lucky he was to have a turn three **Hierarchy**. So he tapped out to suspend **Chronicler** for some amount and I untapped and played **Timbermare**, untapped my **Troll Ascetic** with **Moldevine Cloak**, cast **Might of Old Kroasa** and killed him. If he had just been playing correctly – if he hadn't listened to me – and just played **Blink**, **Blink on Hierarchy**, he wins the game."

The fourth member of the team was Michael Bennett, who played more **Magic** than anyone this weekend having to grind into the tournament the night before. Bennett came to the tournament in the same car as Thomas Drake but was not expecting to play in the main event.



"I was not qualified at all," smiled Michael, who had enough previous experience to appreciate how hard it would be to make it into the tournament much less make the team. "I had gone to JSS at Nationals once like three years ago and tried to grind into Nationals and scrubbed out and then scrubbed out of the JSS. I came up here and did not expect anything. I decided I would play in two grinders but I didn't want to spend all day grinding just to be disappointed at the end of the day."

Michael had his block deck in tow, had circled the Legacy tournament and Seafood tournament on the event schedule and was planning to play some **Magic**, see from friends, and root for his qualified car mates after taking a quick loss in the weekend's first grinder.

"I was done for awhile, went and had some lunch, hung out with some friends, did a draft, and came back in time for the last grinder," he recalled. "I got a bye in the first round and won out from there. I was so stoked going into Nationals round one."

He played the same deck in the grinders that he played in the main event – Project X.

"Sometimes you just need infinite life," he grinned. "I beat somebody by the life total rule in the grinder. There was nothing he could do. It was the third game and he went to **Lightning Helix** my **Dark Confidant**. I cast **Chord of Calling** in response and won the game. I really like Project X. A lot of people are unfamiliar with it and people don't understand that you just need one combo piece, that one piece can be in the graveyard, that you can do it at instant speed with **Chord of Calling**, or they miscount mana because they don't remember that **Wall of Roots** counts as two mana for Chord. Even in my Top 8 match my opponent went end of turn **Seal of Fire** on my Saffi and I won in response."

While Bennett was confident in his deck choice he was surprised by his 6-12 record in the draft portion of the tournament. "I am scared to play in 8-4s. I know I am going to play and lose all my packs and ticks. In standard I went 4-1-2. Going into Day Two was scary because I was already X-2 and I had to win out my draft pod and go 2-0 in Constructed to double draw in."

"I used to live overseas," prefaced Bennett as he recounted his introduction to **Magic**. "My dad was in the military. We lived in Germany and we would pick up packs. My older brother started playing with some friends and one of our friends went to the **Magic** Summer camp. I remember wanting a **Shivan Dragon** and I kept on opening Ice Age packs that had a dragon on it but he wasn't even in that set."

"Years later I played some other games," he continued. "I went to the store to play those games and saw the **Magic** players and started playing with them. They taught me about the stack and I just went from there."

It was at his local store that he met Thomas Drake through some mutual friends. "We had just started to get to know each other about two months ago through knowing the same people at the store. We knew all the inside jokes and everything and hit it off immediately."

"It was like we had known each other for years," added Drake who was waiting nearby to draft with Bennett. The two friends were hoping their other car mate, John May, would be able to join then on the National team but he fell short in the closing rounds.

Two out of three was still not bad in Michael's book: "We were living the dream."

The two Virginia Beach players were looking forward to the Legacy portion of Worlds as they work closely on the format with their mutual pal – and last year's 9th place finisher at Worlds -- Shaheen Soorani. As for Standard Michael beamed: "I am really looking forward to Luis Scott-Vargas shipping us deck lists...there were a lot of players wearing the same t-shirt as him sitting on the top tables."



2007 Magic Invitational: North American Ballot

For this second straight week the Invitational ballot came down to a photo finish with Willy Edel narrowly squeaking past Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa. [This week's ballot](#) concentrates on North America with four candidates likely grumbling about Luis Scott-Vargas' fortuitous timing winning the U.S. National Championships even though he was going to be on the ballot prior to the event.

Firestarter: Read any good books lately?

I had a chance to spend some time with my good friend Jon Becker this past weekend and he left me with a book he had been reading. *Conversations with Wilder* is a prolonged interview of film legend Billy Wilder by Cameron Crowe and I have been thoroughly enjoying the unexpected treat. This leads me to ask for some more reading recommendations for the remainder of the



summer. Head to the forums and tell me what you have been reading and why it should move to the top of my reading list.

*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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