

Home > Games > Magic > Magicthegathering.com > Columns

The Way of the Melee

Brian David-Marshall
The Week That Was
Friday, August 10, 2007



Old Favorites Week means I actually get to be on-theme for once in a long time. Gen Con starts next week and a handful of on-theme formats will be trotted out for attendees, including one that has a special place in the heart of an old favorite from here at Magicthegathering.com.

There is an exciting array of **Magic** events taking place at Gen Con, starting with Thursday's *Time Spiral* Block Championships, featuring a foil playset of the entire block as the top prize, to Sunday's *Urza's Saga* Limited tournament, featuring hard-to-find Urza's product. In between there is a plethora of iPod tournaments, \$1,000 tournaments, and Eternal Championships to keep any **Magic** player going from start to finish at the long-running gaming convention. For me there was one tournament in particular that really stood out... the return of the Grand Melee.

On Saturday, August 18 at 6 p.m., there will be a Standard format Grand Melee tournament with every player who signs up receiving a special playmat. The last player standing will win a foil set of *Tenth Edition* and the next seven players still standing will all win a box of *Tenth*. On top of that players will win a booster pack every time they kill another player, meaning that players can win prizes even if they are not among the last players standing.

Back when I started running tournaments in 1994, one of the highlights of the monthly tournaments was a late-night Grand Melee that would often feature more than 100 players vying for a variety of prizes that were awarded for first kill, most kills, last player standing, and a variety of bounties placed on players by judges, spectators, and the recently killed.

Keep in mind that these tournaments were back before the advent of Standard, when there was just one format that had not yet been rebranded to Type 1 (and eventually Vintage). After a couple of tournaments there were players capable of generating infinite mana, which was then funneled through **Fireballs** that were split to kill everyone at the table.

What is a Grand Melee?

Grand Melee is a multi-player format in which multiple players take turns at the same time. While there are many intricacies, it can be summed up with a simple phrase: *Attack to the left, defend to the right*. For complete rules, check out [Rule 608 in the Comprehensive Rules](#) document.

For more information about the Grand Melee plus other Magic events at Gen Con, [click here](#).

PRODUCTS

MAGIC ONLINE

MESSAGE BOARDS

Magic General Forum
magicthegathering.com Forum

RULES



The format was refined after that and players were given a limited range to either side of them that they could affect. Enter **Brothers of the Fire** with **Spirit Link**. Now the same players would use their infinite mana to just kill the players on either side of them, collapse the circle so that new players came into range, then rinse and repeat. Further refinement was clearly needed and then tombstone markers were introduced, which meant once a player was killed, their space remained occupied and the circle would not collapse until the current turn was over.

"I remember everyone being dead in a flash but not much else," said Zvi Mowshowitz, one of the players standing on the sidelines of those fledgling Melees. By the time Zvi started actually participating in the Melees, they had become a weekly tournament at Neutral Ground that attracted 40 or 50 players each time—not to mention a weekly exercise in keeping players like Zvi, Matt Blank, and Noah Melnik in check. "The tombstone counter was

part of the format as I knew it, not that it slowed things down all that much for those who were dedicated to their craft."

One of the appeals of the format for Zvi was the diversity of player goals within the tournament, because there were a variety of prizes awarded (including bounties on players and a special prize for the first kill of the tournament). It was also in those tournaments that Zvi began to demonstrate his mad scientist techniques that would later be used to transform cards like **Exploration**, **Dream Halls**, and **Battlefield Scrounger** into tournament-playable cards.

"Each player came to the table trying to do something different," Zvi explained. "You'd have the hyper-aggressive decks out for the first kill. You'd have solid decks out there to build up and have staying power, the decks full of friendly cards to try and have everyone get along. There were the standard decks people were playing without too much thought. Then there were the combination players, out to go off and be the last one standing, hopefully with the most kills along the way. Then there were the ever-growing lists of banned cards that forced those players to keep making their engines more and more obscure."

While there were some predictable inclusions on the Neutral Ground banned list back then (such as **Necropotence**), there were also some surprising cards—including more than a few that Zvi had a hand in personally escorting out of the format.



"**Hallowed Ground** was banned, likely due to combinations involving **Fastbond**, but my favorite ban was on the **Ice Age Talismans**," he recalled fondly. "Back then players would use them together with **Crown of the Ages**, untapping **Candelabra of Tawnos** as the most popular of the infinite mana engines."

Zvi's credo was "unity of vision and a tool for every purpose" when it came to building a deck for a Melee tournament. He was not distracted by the lure of the first-kill prize. "I wasn't all that interested in doing a 'normal' kind of kill either, although that was far more interesting than a quick one. What I really loved was getting together critical mass, then wiping out everyone as they came into range."

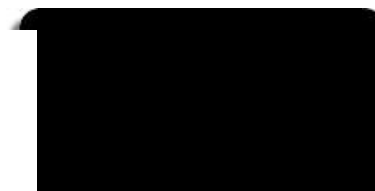
The tension between preparation for every eventuality and deck efficiency was something Zvi struggled with when assembling his contraptions, but despite his best planning could not always cover all his bases. "You know that every card you put in to deal with other players is one more card that gets in the way while you're building up. You need to be able to go through what they have and keep on ticking. So you'd come into range with **Deathgrips** with **Sleight of Mind** to counter any possible spell, a **Circle of Despair** for yourself, a **Spectral Cloaked/Spirit Linked Brothers of Fire** for the kill, a **Soldevi Digger** to reclaim anything you lost, an infinite mana engine, and about ten other cards that covered your other bases. Then you'd react in horror as you ran into a **Goblin Tinkerer** that blew up your **Candelabra of Tawnos**, disrupting your engine!"

One of the advantages that Zvi found in being a combo player was that many of the foundations of his decks would be cards that led the players around him to forge alliances early on in the tournament. With cards like **Howling Mine** and **Mana Flare** affecting everyone within range of those cards, players on either side of Zvi were not in a hurry to draw a normal amount of cards or halve the mana available to them.

"As a combo player, all you need from the guys next to you is the time you'll need to make those players irrelevant, and I found bribery by far the best way to do that. Support them as best you can, help them take on those outside your range, and make sure they can see how you could strike back. Offense they can't see is useless. It's also important not to ask directly for someone to let you win—instead ask for something that they don't realize implies that, since after that they'll have little say in the matter."

With **Howling Mine** still available and the potentially breakable **Rites of Flourishing** looming over the format, I asked Zvi if he felt there was a degenerate Standard deck waiting in the wings of the new Melee format.

"Players now will likely be less blinded by the free mana/cards and more suspicious of what that other player wants to do with them," he replied—not without sadness in his voice. "Players without Melee experience will



probably underestimate the role of diplomacy in the format, so I'd expect less than in the glory days but still there should be a lot of them. To me these cards are a double-edged sword. They're great for my game since only some players around me get the benefits, but they also send off alarm bells: I know that you had a reason to do that, and while I'm hoping that reason is good relations I'm going to keep a close eye on you."

If you are going to Gen Con, consider packing your [Rites of Flourishing](#), [Crucible of Worlds](#), and [Walk the Aeons](#).

Anaconda Melee

If you are looking for something completely different to try playing with your local group, consider this old favorite from the old Neutral Ground schedule... Sealed Deck [Anaconda](#) Draft Melee. Each player would come to the table with any Tournament Pack of their choice (back then they were called Starter Decks) and they would [Anaconda](#) Draft the decks around the table.

The basic idea behind the format was that you drafted but you could shuffle back any number of your picks each time as long, as you took one more card than you started with each time a deck was passed. Pretend you opened an [Ice Age](#) starter and took a [Swords to Plowshares](#) as your first pick. The player to your right hands you a deck minus one card that somehow still has [Stormbind](#) and [Incinerate](#). You could put the Swords into his card pool and take the two red cards.

There was an added wrinkle to this format... you had to draft your lands as well and no extra land was provided.

"I loved [Anaconda](#)," laughed Zvi. "The key is that you did not get unlimited basic lands. Instead, you had to manage that part of your deck during the draft. Lands, of course, are mostly irrelevant until the point when you don't have enough, at which point they matter a great deal. Everyone constantly had to balance the need to build the deck itself with the need to get the mana—and at any point, they could return a whole slew of lands to pick up spells, or dump a bunch of spells to get their basic lands. You could also abandon a color all at once, often due to mana issues, snapping up everything worthwhile in the next few packs and leaving those down the line with an embarrassment of riches and making everything very interesting."

While Zvi loved the format, he urged caution among the weak at heart: "[Anaconda](#) is one of those formats that is a lot of fun as long you don't get too worried about balance. This format is about grand success, grand failure, openings, endings, gambits and having a grand time watching empires form and crumble. You need to be ok with the fact that some players will crash and burn—they got a grand time drafting and scrambling, and that's what's important."

The Eternal Struggle: Five Questions with Roland Chang

Each year the Eternal community turns its collective eye to Indianapolis and Gen Con for the Legacy and Vintage Championships. This year there will be additional scrutiny on the Legacy leg of the Championship weekend due to the inclusion of Legacy as a format at this year's World Championships. If any cards are going to be banned between now and Worlds, this is the event that is most likely to impact that decision.

It is impossible to look at the Gen Con Eternal Championships without thinking of Roland Chang. Two years ago Roland won the [Vintage Championship](#) and earned a painted reinterpretation of [Ancestral Recall](#) for his efforts. Last season Roland branched out and won the [Legacy Championship](#), this time netting a book full of dual lands. With back-to-back titles under his belt, it is not surprising that Roland is planning on being in Indy for a shot at a third title.



Chang, from his 2005 Vintage and 2006 Legacy championships.

1. Which event will you be looking forward to attempting a repeat performance of the most; Vintage or Legacy Championships?

RC: I will be looking forward to attempt a repeat performance in either event. I am a Vintage loyalist, but winning any title is a feeling that's hard to beat.

2. What happened to the two prizes you have won?



RC: My 2005 Vintage Champs **Ancestral Recall** painting hangs nicely in my apartment. As for the little binder of 40 duals from last year's winnings, I sold that off for a solid \$800 and put that towards recuperating from losing cards in the weeks leading up to Gen Con.

3. Are you excited to see Legacy getting supported at the premier event level with Grand Prix and World Championships both featuring the format?

RC: Absolutely! An Eternal format receiving this kind of attention and a helping hand in deck development from pros surely excites me. Viable and better strategies may be uncovered and popularized, effectively shifting everyone's perspective of the metagame. I prefer this kind of inconsistent environment where surprise rogue decks pop up.

4. What are the five most powerful non-restricted cards in Vintage at the moment?

RC: In no particular order: **Gush**, **Flash**, **Merchant Scroll**, **Bazaar of Baghdad**, **Mishra's Workshop**.

5. What are the five most powerful cards in Legacy?

RC: In no particular order: **Force of Will**, **Brainstorm**, **Goblin Lackey**, **Swords to Plowshares**, **Replenish**.

The 2007 Magic Invitational: The Storyteller Ballot

We're coming down to the last few spots at the 2007 Magic Invitational. Mark Herberholz won the [North American ballot](#) by a wide enough margin to justify the use of the word "landslide."

All of the geographic ballots had been moved up a week to allow for a more creative option on the [Storyteller ballot](#). Let me explain what happened—actually I don't need to do any talking here as everyone on this week's ballot has no trouble talking for themselves.



For more explanation about this week's ballot and one possible future of the Invitational, be sure to check out [Aaron Forsythe's column from today](#).

Friday Night Magic: August

Apologies for not debuting this last week, but here's August in all its goblin glory.



Firestarter: The Scrimmage In Indy

In his interview about Grand Melee, Zvi looked back to a time when the otherwise-unplayable Talismans from *Ice Age* were banned in Melees at Neutral Ground. What cards in the current Standard, if any, could turn out to be

degenerate for the Grand Melee at Gen Con? Head to the forums and share your thoughts on the topic.

*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.*



[Discuss](#) on the message boards



[Respond](#) via email



[Brian David-Marshall](#) archive

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

