



Kithkin Militia: Strategy Session (Part 2 of 2)

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Building on a Budget
Wednesday, January 2, 2008



I like having variety in my column. I never want Building on a Budget to become a predictable, formulaic entity where people know exactly what to expect each week. Yes, I'll always be talking about building decks. Yes, those decks will always be on a budget. However, there are a lot of aspects of deck building that are not just "put together a pile of 60 cards, play them a few times, makes some changes, and repeat." There's actually a lot of room for discussion of theory and understanding of the rules in Building on a Budget—without knowing how to play a deck, or what the cards are capable of under the rules, you'll never get the most out of any given deck / card pool.

Part 2 of my Kithkin Militia theme deck evolution was an article that I'm extremely proud of. I always subscribe to the "teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime" way of writing / teaching, and this particular article was a very in-depth primer on how aggressive weenie decks work and why. Rather than just add another card or two to the deck from the previous week (Pacifism or Neck Snap, for instance, for those who want to know how to handle Giants!), I looked at the forum feedback and decided to take a ground-up approach at explaining low-curve aggressive decks.

People either loved or hated this article, which is a great sign. There are so many different aspects to this column (30 tickets or less, Standard, Extended, Theme Deck evolutions, theory, budgetizing current competitive decks, casual room decks, competitive room decks, Prismatic, Singleton, pauper, theory, rules discussion, deck building challenges, etc.) that not everyone will be satisfied with every week I write. However, I can tell when I have a really good column by the presence of highly polarized feedback in both directions. It means that the column really, really, really meant a lot to the people who liked it, and that's what I'm aiming for. I'd love to please all of the people all of the time, but given the range and depth of topics I can cover in any given week for Building on a Budget, I consider it successful if four different types of players each come away with a column they truly enjoyed within a month's time.

This article originally ran November 14, 2007

hello everyone, and welcome back to Building on a Budget. Last week, we evolved the Kithkin Militia deck to a mainly Kithkin-based White Weenie deck with a respectable 10-4 record. However, there were multiple cries from the forums and my email that went along these lines:

"Hey! Anyone can build a White Weenie Deck! There's no skill involved in playing or building that deck—why did you waste your time?"

And my response? There's a remarkable amount of depth involved in selecting the right sixty cards for any Magic deck, no matter how straightforward the deck might seem on the surface. In particular, there are four advanced principles of Magic strategy that I'm going to explain today. These concepts are curve, synergy, threat density and threat selection.



These four cornerstones of an aggressive strategy are all interrelated—you cannot take one into account without the others. Curve refers to the mana cost of your cards, and making sure that you are able to maximize the use of your mana each turn. Synergy is having your cards work well together. Threat density means having enough threats to kill your opponent with, and threat selection is making sure you have the right threats. Let's take a look at each of these one-by-one using last week's final deck, and then see why it is so important to a winning aggressive deck to have these four concepts work in harmony.

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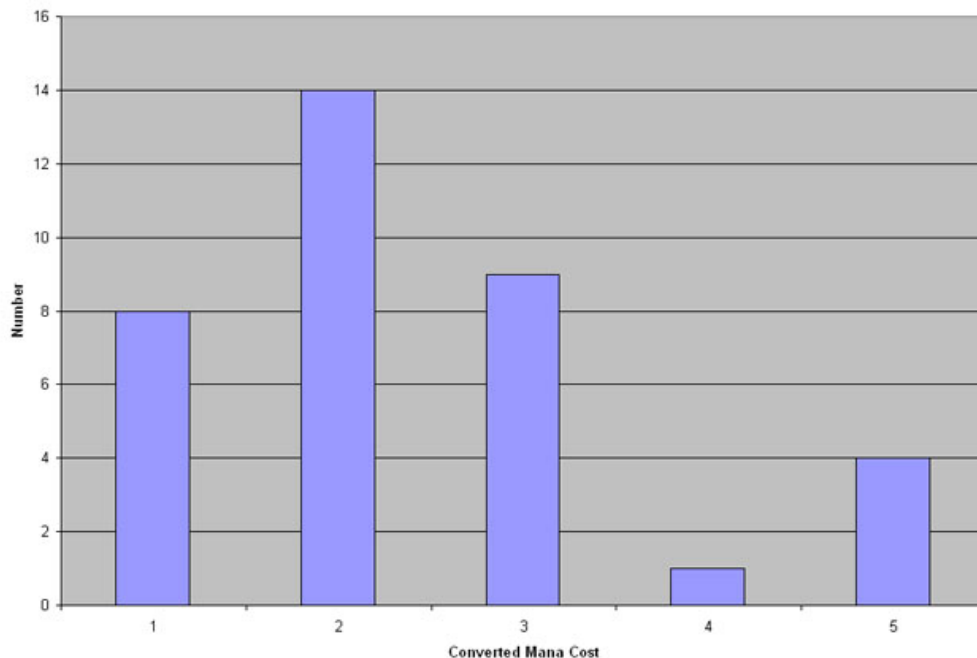
RULES

Kithkin Militia 4
Main Deck
60 cards

24 Plains	1 Cenn's Heir	2 Crib Swap
24 lands	4 Cloudgoat Ranger	3 Glorious Anthem
	4 Goldmeadow Harrier	4 Oblivion Ring
	4 Goldmeadow Stalwart	3 Surge of Thoughtweft
	2 Kithkin Greatheart	12 other spells
	4 Knight of Meadowgrain	
	1 Thoughtweft Trio	
	4 Wizeden Cenn	
24 creatures		

Curve

Also known as mana curve. For the sake of an aggressive deck, your curve is the mana costs of the cards in your deck.



If you take a look at the cost of the cards in the deck at last week, you'll see that there's a density of cards at one, two and three mana cost, with just a few at a higher cost than that. When building an aggressive weenie deck, you want to make sure that you have a low curve and that you have a good amount of cards at each early mana cost. If you miss a drop on the first turn, that's potentially one-fifth to one-sixth of your game down the drain! Likewise, you don't want to be stuck with a hand full of three-drop creatures—if so, you're giving your opponent plenty of time to get into the game.

How many of my games last week went like this?

Turn One: *Goldmeadow Stalwart* or *Goldmeadow Harrier*

Turn Two: *Wizened Cenn*, *Knight of Meadowgrain*, or *Kithkin Greatheart*

Turn Three: Both a one- and a two-drop, or *Glorious Anthem* / *Oblivion Ring*

Turn Four: Two two-drops

The answer is that multiple games went like this. I constructed my deck so that I would be able to, if I wanted, tap out each of my first few turns to get the maximum number of creatures/threats onto the board. By ensuring that I had some significant amount of cards at each of the early mana costs, I could play threats to the board each turn, allowing me to attack my opponent without relent.

It also meant that I could scale my threats. If I had a deck that had forty one-drops, I could easily play a creature turn one, two on turn two, and three on turn three—and then be out of cards. Chances are, if my opponent had anything larger than a one-drop, my team would be stopped. Imagine I got down a *Goldmeadow Harrier* on turn one, *Icatian Javelineers* and *Goldmeadow Stalwart* on turn two, and then one of each of these on turn three. My opponent drops *Llanowar Elves* turn one, *Imperious Perfect* turn two, and *Wren's Run Vanquisher* plus *Elvish Warrior* on turn three. That would leave me with a 2/2, a 2/2, two 1/1s that can deal a point of damage once each, and two 1/1s that can tap creatures. It would leave my opponent with a 2/2 that can tap for \blackspade , a 2/2 that can make more 2/2 creatures, a 4/4 with deathtouch, and a 3/4. Will I, as the white player with all one-drops, be able to win? Chances are no—I will keep drawing small threats or utility creatures, while my opponent gets bigger guys, or guys that maximize use of his mana each turn.

This brings me straight to threat density and threat selection.

Threat Density

Threat density is making sure that you have enough threats in your deck to keep pressure on your opponent. In my Kithkin deck, I had twenty-four cards that could deal damage to my opponent (all of which, in this case, happened to be creatures). Threats can be anything that kills your opponent. Direct damage



(Disintegrate, Incinerate), milling (Millstone, Ambassador Laquatus), creatures (Goldmeadow Stalwart, Cloudgoat Ranger)—as long as it is actively allowing you to win the game, it's a threat. Imagine the following Kithkin deck:

Threat Density		
Main Deck 60 cards		
20 Plains	4 Celestial Crusader	4 Crib Swap
4 Windbrisk Heights	4 Wizened Cenn	4 Dolmen Gate
24 lands	8 creatures	4 Glorious Anthem
		4 Loxodon Warhammer
		4 Militia's Pride
		4 Oblivion Ring
		4 Surge of Thoughtweft
		28 other spells

The above deck has a ton of ways to keep creatures from dying, enhance creatures, make creatures larger, remove threats, and make additional creatures... as long as it draws one of its eight threats! Yes, **Wizened Cenn** might be a 6/4 lifelink trampling creature that cannot be damaged on the attack and makes 3/3 Kithkin when it attacks thanks to double **Glorious Anthem** and **Militia's Pride**. It's also possible that your opponent might draw two **Terrors**, kill the only two threats you draw in any given game (with only eight threats in sixty cards, that's not a push—drawing two in a game), and have you lose.

Remember, **Magic** is an interactive game. You aren't just sitting there goldfishing (a term that means playing by yourself, without interaction) all the time—you are playing against a living, breathing person who has as much as investment in winning as you do. Your opponent will be doing what they can to either win first or stop you from winning first (depending if they are aggro or control), and if you do not have backup plans for any hiccups that come in the road, you *will* lose! These backup plans can be in the form of your own removal, additional creatures, and, as we'll see next, having the right threat selection.

Threat Selection

Threat selection is exactly as it sounds—picking the right threats for your deck. Every offensive card in **Magic** is a potential threat, it's just that some are better than others. Keep in mind when I say better, no one card is 100% better than any other. Yes, some look objectively better (**Shock** versus **Lightning Bolt**), but if you're killing a two-drop creature, which would you rather be playing if your opponent answers with **Honorable Passage**? (This is an extreme case, but we'll address it more in synergy.)

Imagine the following two decks, for the sake of argument:

The Squire Deck		
Main Deck 60 cards		
20 Plains	40 Squire	0 other spells
20 lands	40 creatures	

The Terror Deck		
Main Deck 60 cards		
20 Swamp	40 Terror	0 other spells
20 lands	40 creatures	

One deck has forty **Squires**, and the other deck forty **Terrors**. Aside from being terribly boring-looking decks, these two decks are pretty evenly matched. In some games, the **Squire** player will draw more **Squires** than the **Terror** player draws **Terrors**, and will be able to swarm for the win. In other games, the **Terror** player will draw fewer lands than the **Squire** player and will have more early **Terrors**, and the game will come down to a decking. Either way, both decks are as generic as can possibly be, and neither player has a clear advantage over the other.





Let's see what happens when we apply the principle of threat selection to break this stalemate:

Squire Player: "Hmm, I keep losing to **Terror**. Well, how can I beat my opponent? How about I add in four **Paladin en-Vec** in place of four **Squire**? They can't be **Terrored**, so if I draw one, I should win."

Terror Player: "Wow, my deck isn't equipped to handle **Paladin en-Vec**! But if I swap out four **Terror** for four **Quicksand**, I'll be able to kill the Paladin without a problem."

Squire Player: "**Quicksand** makes my Paladins a little less effective. How about I try out **Cloudgoat Ranger** instead of some **Squires**? My opponent's **Terrors** and **Quicksands** can only kill creatures one-at-a-time, so I'll end up ahead by three creatures each time I get a Ranger down!"

Terror Player: "**Cloudgoat Ranger**—what a beating! Thankfully, I've got these **Damnations** sitting around. Not only will I be able to wipe the board clean, but if my opponent drops two creatures to the board at once, I can trade my **Damnation** for both of his guys, and still end up a **Terror**."

Squire Player: "I don't like losing my entire team to **Damnation**! That's why I'm going to add in four **Whitemane Lion** and four **Stonecloaker**—I can recur my better threats that he has limited ways to deal with and let him kill my Lion or **Stonecloaker** in their place!"

Terror Player: "It sure is annoying to try to **Damnation** away his **Cloudgoat Ranger** posse, only to have him return it to hand with **Whitemane Lion**. I'm going to put four **Coercion** and four **Thoughtseize** in my deck to proactively stop this from happening, to knock threats out of his hand early, and to completely break the budget of my deck!"

Squire Player: "Yikes! Well, if my opponent is going to kill my creatures or make me discard them, I'm going to run **Chronosavant**. I can keep skipping my turn to replay him, and eventually my opponent will draw lands rather than creature-kill cards, allowing me to inevitably win the game or deck him."

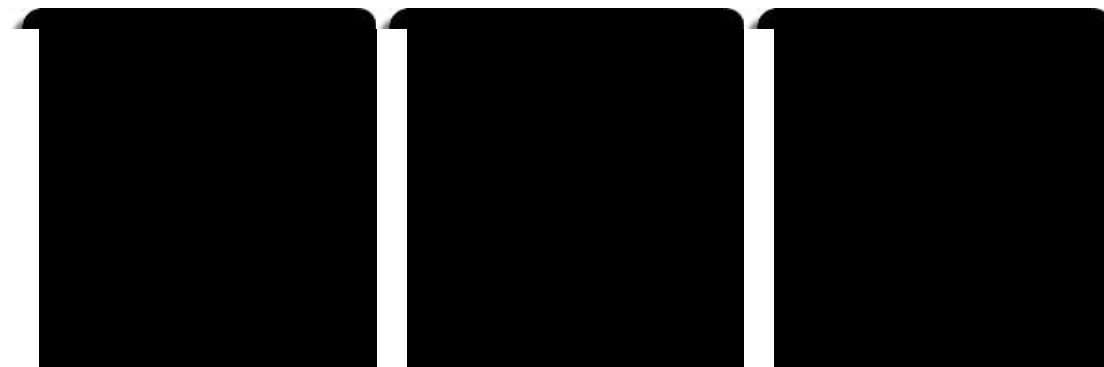
Terror Player: "Not so fast! I've decided to run **Extirpate** now!"

Squire Player: "Well, take **Pulmonic Sliver**!"

Terror Player: "Millstone!"

Squire Player: "Ok, now you're just being extreme. While you're busy drawing **Millstones**, **Extirpates**, and **Coercions**, I'll just beat you to death with my **Squires**."

That's a pretty extreme example, but see what happened there? As the **Squire** player changed up the threats in his deck, he forced the **Terror** mage to diversify his answers. In turn, this made the **Squire** player evolve his deck further, and there was a back-and-forth which eventually reached the point where the **Squire** player (playing the aggressive deck) ended up stretching the **Terror** player (playing the control deck) thin through threat selection. Instead of having an army of 1/2 creatures, the aggro mage ended up with 3/3s that can make three 1/1s, 2/2 first striking pro-black, pro-red guys, a 5/5 that can return from the graveyard each turn, a 3/3 that can return to the top of his deck each turn, and a 2/2 and a 3/2 flyer that can save other creatures. The control player ended up with **Terror**, **Extirpate**, **Damnation**, **Millstone**, and **Quicksand**.





This is no longer like the original 40 **Terror** / 40 **Squire** example, for the following reason: in the original example every question could be matched by every answer. In the new match up, every card the white deck draws is a threat...but not every card drawn by the black deck is an answer to that *particular* threat. Sometimes the control player will win the game after drawing the right answers at the right time, but the majority of the games at this point, with both players playing well, will be won by the aggro mage due to his threat selection.

Synergy

Synergy is a fancy way of saying "cards that work well together." At the most basic level, I can say that a **Plains** has synergy with a **Squire**. **Plains** allow me to play **Squire**. If I have one **Plains**, then a **Forest**, **Mountain**, **Island**, or **Swamp** will allow me to get the generic half of **Squire**'s cost—but if I don't have that initial **Plains**, I won't have that **Squire** at all. Therefore, **Plains** has a greater synergy with **Squire** than the other four basic land types.

Synergy is often a two-way street. **Wizened Cenn** has synergy with other Kithkin creatures—it gives them +1/+1. If I have two **Wizened Cenn** in play, they each boost each other. If I then play a **Celestial Crusader**, it has less synergy with each **Cenn** than the **Cenns** have with each other—the **Crusader** will give the **Cenns** each a bonus, but the **Cenns** will not give the **Crusader** the same +1/+1.

There are a ridiculous number of two-drop mono-white creatures in Standard. These include **Amrou Scout**, **Angelic Wall**, **Augur il-Vec**, **Auratog**, **Benalish Cavalry**, **Blade of the Sixth Pride**, **Cenn's Heir**, **Errant Doomsayers**, **Ghost Warden**, **Jötun Grunts**, **Judge of Currents**, **Kinsbaile Skirmisher**, **Kithkin Greatheart**, **Kjeldoran Outrider**, **Knight of Meadowgrain**, **Knight of the Holy Nimbus**, **Mistmeadow Skulk**, **Mycologist**, **Quilled Sliver**, **Revered Dead**, **Ronom Unicorn**, **Samite Healer**, **Serra Avenger**, **Sinew Sliver**, **Soltari Priest**, **Spirit Weaver**, **Squall Drifter**, **Squire**, **Starlight Invoker**, **Steadfast Guard**, **True Believer**, **Wall of Shards**, **White Shield Crusader**, **Whitemane Lion**, **Wizened Cenn**, and **Youthful Knight**.

My White Weenie deck contains eleven two-drop white creatures. There are thirty-six two-drop mono-white creatures currently in standard, meaning that if I played them each as a four-of, I'd have a 144-card deck, minimum! Choosing the right cards here is not just a matter of curve or threat selection, because objectively some of the cards on this list are better, taken in-and-of-themselves, than others.

Let's look at good ol' **Wizened Cenn** again. If there is a null board position, and I draw a **Wizened Cenn**, I have a 2/2 creature with no relevant abilities. There are no other Kithkin for it to pump up, and it cannot pump itself. Compare this to a draw and play of **Knight of the Holy Nimbus**. For the same **♦♦** mana cost, I get a 2/2 creature that has flanking and (limited) regeneration. If played to a blank board, **Knight of the Holy Nimbus** is clearly a better choice than **Wizened Cenn**.

No cards in a deck exist in a vacuum, though. Let's take a step back and apply synergy to this argument. I have a **Goldmeadow Stalwart** in my opening hand. I have one other creature—would I rather it be:

A) **Wizened Cenn**

Or

B) **Knight of the Holy Nimbus?**





Clearly I'd rather have the Cenn—it allows me to play a first turn Stalwart, whereas the Knight would not. On turn two, I'd still rather have the Cenn—it makes my Stalwart a 3/3 creature, whereas **Knight of the Holy Nimbus** does not help my Stalwart at all!

Tribal decks, by nature, must strive to have a lot of synergy, because their main advantage is having creatures and spells that interact beneficially with one another. The greatest example of this is Sliver decks. Each Sliver has a synergy with each other Sliver (except for **Plague Sliver**, which is actually an anti-Sliver card in disguise, and **Metallic Sliver** and **Venser's Sliver**, which are purely leeches). If you have a **Sinew Sliver**, it's a 2/2 creature. Add a **Blade Sliver**, and you have a 4/3 and a 3/2. Add a **Bonesplitter Sliver**, and you have a 6/3, a 6/3, and a 5/2. Add a **Might Sliver**, and you have an 8/5, an 8/5, an 8/5, and a 7/4. Add a **Fury Sliver**, and now all your guys double-strike, including your newly made 9/6 beater!

As I mentioned in the beginning, curve, synergy, threat density, and threat selection do not exist in a vacuum. Let's see how each of these intersect with one another!

Curve and Synergy

Curve is all about being able to have a good selection of mana costs early. Many White Weenie players have started playing **Windbrisk Heights** in their deck, since they will have three attacking creatures during the game, enabling a free spell. However, what happens if you draw the Heights as one of your only lands early on? You end up with a land that comes into play tapped, setting back your mana development for a turn. These two cards both have synergy (an early curve means that you will be more likely to have three attacking creatures early in the game) and anti-synergy (having to play **Windbrisk Heights** as one of your early drops will set your effective, on-board mana development back a turn, causing you to skip a drop you might have otherwise made).

If your curve is good, you can layer your drops so that they have maximum synergy. Kithkin Stalwart (revealing **Wizened Cenn**) into **Wizened Cenn** into **Glorious Anthem** is a perfect example of this—**Wizened Cenn** allows you to play a first-turn Stalwart, which in turn makes your Stalwart 3/3 on turn two, and the Anthem (on turn three) makes your guys 4/4 and 3/3. You've gotten the perfect curve, and each of your cards works to enhance the one before it.



Curve and Threat Density

White has a lot of two-drop offensive creatures, as I noted above. It would be easy to just drop the best of them into a deck and let the deck sort itself out. However, this would make your curve ineffective. In the forty **Squire** deck, you cannot play a threat turn one, and can only play a threat a turn on turns two and three. There are enough threats in the deck, but they are so stiff in mana cost that you cannot get ahead of your opponent on drops, if they have forty **Terrors**. If you had twenty one-drops and twenty two-drops, you would be able to play a threat on turn one (ahead of **Terror**), a threat on turn two, and two threats (a one-drop and a two-drop) on turn three, putting you ahead of the **Terror** player's curve.

Curve and Threat Selection

Likewise, you wouldn't want to plaster **Angelic Wall** and **Wall of Shards** into a White Weenie deck. You want to have a good curve, but there's a difference between this:

One-Drops: 4x **Goldmeadow Stalwart**, 4x **Goldmeadow Harrier**

Two-Drops: 1x **Cenn's Heir**, 4x **Wizened Cenn**, 4x **Knight of Meadowgrain**, 2x **Kithkin Greatheart**

Three-Drops: 4x **Glorious Anthem**

And this:

One-Drops: 4x *Children of Korlis*, 4x *Goldmeadow Dodger*
Two-Drops: 1x *Mycologist*, 4x *Angelic Wall*, 4x *Wall of Shards*, 2x *Revered Dead*
Three-Drops: 4x *D'Avenant Healer*

Both decks have the same exact curve, but in one, you're going to have a chance to kill your opponent because you're playing cards that have great offensive capabilities. In the latter deck, most of your guys are extremely defensive, and will be overpowered by an extremely aggressive deck. In fact, if these two decks faced off, the former would almost always win, as eventually its creatures would be larger than the Walls, and *Goldmeadow Harrier* could always take out the largest blocker.

Curve and threat selection also meet because you don't want too many high-drops in your deck. You could run a deck with all five- and six-drop threats, but that gives your opponent four turns of development in which to take control of the game. An opening hand of *Purity*, *Crovax* (the white one), *Adarkar Valkyrie*, *Serra Angel*, and triple *Plains* is no good if your opponent has you dead before you play your first spell.

Synergy and Threat Density

In the "Threat Density" deck I posted above, a lot of the cards had great synergy. *Wizened Cenn* could attack and make 2/2 attacking Kithkin (since it pumps other Kithkin) with *Militia's Pride* out. However, without enough threats in the deck, that synergy doesn't matter—*Wizened Cenn* is no good if you don't have multiple other Kithkin in your deck. You have to make sure you have the sheer number of cards in your deck to make synergy matter, or else you're probably better off going with objectively more powerful but less synergistic deck choices.

This is also why *Hivestone* is a trap—all of your Slivers are designed to pump one another. If you start playing *Hivestone* and non-Sliver creatures, you're suddenly drawing guys that don't help the rest of your team. For each non-Sliver you draw, that makes your Sliver draws that much worse. You need a density of Slivers to make Slivers good, and having *Hivestone* (-4 Slivers) and, say, four *Squire* (-4 Slivers) makes your deck eight cards less synergistic than most other Sliver decks.

Synergy and Threat Selection

The example I made above of *Wizened Cenn* versus *Knight of the Holy Nimbus* is a perfect example of where synergy and threat selection meet. Sometimes you'll want to make concessions to synergy in order to have a better threat selection. For instance, let's say that there are a lot of nasty enchantments running around in the environment. You might want to run *Ronom Unicorn* in your deck instead of *Kithkin Greatheart*. Even though *Kithkin Greatheart* has more synergy with the other cards in your deck, *Ronom Unicorn* is a better card to have in your deck in that environment.

Threat Density and Threat Selection

This one is easy to explain: you want to have enough threats, and you want them to be the right threats. Threat density tells you that you want forty creatures and twenty lands. Threat Selection tells you that you want those threats to be something other than forty *Squires*.

As you can see, building a White Weenie deck might appear simple on the surface, but as with every deck-building exercise in *Magic*, it is surprisingly complex and multi-faceted. People have referred to my articles by the old adage:

"Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime."

Today's article was definitely a Teaching to Fish article. I've presented four concepts of deckbuilding that are essential to making an aggressive deck work (curve, synergy, threat density, threat selection) and shown how they can be applied to any aggro deck. Let me know if this column was useful to you or gave you more of an appreciation for building a White Weenie deck.

Next Week: The Joke's On You, Redux!

Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with Magic: The Gathering for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of Magic, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing Magic, writing about Magic, or thinking about Magic, Ben is employed by StarCityGames.com, where he works with Magic cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.



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