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# Back in Black(Blue/Red)

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Limited Information  
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*"Competitiveness had led to recognition and pleasure for many of us... it was an old and rewarding habit."*  
—Scott Turow, 1L

I admit, this is not the assignment I was expecting to see six months ago. Is a recap in order? [When we last spoke](#), I had relinquished the LI reins to professional card slinger Quentin Martin, who did an excellent job with a difficult position. If you haven't yet thanked Q for his hard work these past months, I'm sure he would appreciate hearing from you. Really, it's a tough gig!

I was moving on because of a cherry development internship spot in **Magic** R&D. While the internship went well, at its expiration no developer position was available. An unfortunate reality to these internships is that a position is not guaranteed, and in this case, the appropriate factors did not materialize. I am happy to report the rest of the crop of GDS hirees did receive full-time contracts either with R&D or in the Digital Games department. As I understand, each of them continues to work with **Magic** in various degrees. As for me, I accepted admission to the Seattle University School of Law. Things are fine all around.

The column itself is in an interesting position. Although I am once again allowed to participate in sanctioned events (see sidebar), school and work will eventually be too time-intensive to continue writing, probably around final exam time in the late spring / early summer. As such, my role is interim columnist while Scott Johns and Kelly Digges determine the next long-term author to fill the role. The situation is a bit unusual, but everyone involved wants Limited Information to continue uninterrupted. Incidentally, there will be the occasional guest author filling in. Some of these will be audition pieces, so if you like what they're saying, be sure to say so. They may become your next LI author. That is a ways away though, and details are still being finalized.

Wizards of the Coast requires former employees to refrain from sanctioned events for three months after their final day. In addition, former employees are banned from participating in any Prerelease on any set they worked on. For yours truly, that means exclusion from *Morningtide*, *Shadowmoor*, "Doughnut," and "Rock" Prereleases. Look out, "Paper" Prerelease attendees!

As for me, **Magic** fervor had cooled some in the past year. While I continue to enjoy the game, the competitive fire had diminished. School, the challenges and opportunities therein, will do that. Sure, I continued to draft online and play the occasional in-store event; **Magic** is still fun, remember? But there was no late night practice sessions or strategy article blitz. Extraneous time, and there wasn't much, would as likely be spent playing Elder Dragon Highlander or Winston drafting (more on this another time) as any kind of previous "Spiky" activity. Competition just wasn't the draw it used to be, I supposed. This was hammered home when I played in a local Kuala Lumpur PTQ. My skills were rusty (and is that hard to open a *Nameless Inversion*? C'mon Carta Mundii!), but more apparent was a lack of *focus* in the tournament. This would have been unheard of just a couple short years ago. Were looming exams a distraction? Who can say? But the disappointing finish, and a disappointing lack of disappointment in the finish, made it clear that any former competitive pursuits had entered their twilight years.

Well, that was the theory anyway. One final PTQ of the season was taking place on December 29th. It was in Rockville, Maryland, yea far from this Seattleite's stomping grounds. But praise be, I was actually going to be in Maryland that week, visiting with my girlfriend's family. Arrangements were made to get to the tournament site that morning, and as the tournament got closer, I became more excited to play. Excited! As a surprise to possibly no one, the competitive spirit seems to run deep, education / occupation / location notwithstanding. It was a remarkable shift, or perhaps resurgence, to the days when there was just the tournament, and nothing else mattered. Honestly, it felt good. I was ready to get back in it.

The tournament was held in the Dream Wizards store in Rockville. I liked this store, which was remarkably large for a gamer space. To my pleasant surprise, a Ms. Pac-Man machine lingered in the back. The Ms. and I had a bit of a history, and I was looking forward to getting reacquainted. I won't go into details but besides Ms. Pac-Man there was a good chance Sue, and perhaps Inky, would be joining the party. I also caught up with Hall of Fame candidate Mike Pustilnik, and we shot the breeze while the staff continued to fill play space. Plenty of tables were being set up, numbered for shoulder to shoulder play, and being filled with competitors swapping limited strategy or holiday tales. In a scene that made me smile, a couple of people were practicing Extended using Vs. System proxies. And people continued to enter the building. Despite the healthy square footage, space was getting tight as more and more players queued up to register. I had arrived halfway into the registration window, already into triple digits. The last qualifier of the season, in a widely-acknowledged superb format, was perhaps a larger draw than the organizers were expecting. Could the space hold all these PT aspirants?

As it turned out, no. Over *fifty* players were turned away, being told the arena had reached total saturation. What does saturation look like? 173 (I have no idea why an odd number) were allowed to clash through eight rounds. I was definitely ready to rumble. After some minor delays, here's the card pool I received:



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# Noah Weil's PTQ Kuala Lumpur Sealed Deck Pool

December 29, 2007 - Rockville, Maryland



## Cardpool

74 cards

1 Avian Changeling	1 Boggart Harbinger	1 Battlewand Oak
1 Kinsbaile Skirmisher	1 Dreamspoiler Witches	1 Changeling Titan
1 Oaken Brawler	1 Exiled Boggart	1 Elvish Branchbender
1 Springjack Knight	1 Fodder Launch	1 Elvish Handservant
1 Surge of Thoughtweft	1 Ghostly Changeling	1 Elvish Harbinger
1 Triclopean Sight	1 Liliana Vess	2 Fistful of Force
1 Veteran of the Depths	1 Nath's Buffoon	1 Heal the Scars
7 white cards	1 Peppersmoke	1 Hunt Down
	1 Prowess of the Fair	1 Incremental Growth
2 Aethersnipe	1 Quill-Slinger Boggart	2 Kithkin Daggerdare
1 Benthicore	1 Scarred Vinebreeder	2 Lace with Moonglove
1 Broken Ambitions	1 Shriekmaw	1 Lys Alana Huntmaster
1 Cryptic Command	1 Spiderwig Boggart	1 Rootgrapple
1 Deepthread Merrow	2 Warren Pilferers	1 Woodland Changeling
1 Ego Erasure	1 Weed Strangle	1 Woodland Guidance
1 Mulldrifter	16 black cards	18 green cards
1 Pestermite		
1 Ponder	1 Blind-Spot Giant	2 Herbal Poultice
1 Scattering Stroke	1 Caterwauling Boggart	1 Thousand Year Elixir
1 Spellstutter Sprite	1 Crush Underfoot	3 colorless cards
1 Surgespanner	1 Flamekin Brawler	
2 Tideshaper Mystic	2 Hurly-Burly	
15 blue cards	1 Lash Out	
	2 Lowland Oaf	
1 Island	1 Mudbutton Torchrunner	
1 Secluded Glen	1 Stinkdrinker Devil	
2 land cards	1 Tar Pitcher	
	1 Thundercloud Shaman	
	13 red cards	
	0 multicolor cards	

As always, the first thing to do was go through the cards and check them against the sheet. While mistakes are rare, a two minute check is a small price to pay for insuring against random deck errors down the road. Besides, it's a good first step to examining your pool in total, giving the deck a chance to leap out. In fact, I did find an error on the registration sheet: *Tarfire* instead of the received *Tarpitcher*. This is a fairly common error. Unlike the other standard mistake, *Woodland Guidance* v. *Woodland Changeling*, it's a close call which TarX is preferable.

The colors separated themselves fairly easily. The white in this pool was some of the worst I'd ever seen. *Seven* white cards in total, compared to the next lowest at thirteen. That alone prevented white from seeing the light of day, but the fact that each card could only be defined as serviceable at best made any discussion with white academic. It hit the bench fast and I never looked back.

Green got a touch more attention, but it was destined for a similar fate. The creatures were solid enough, with a good curve and appropriate tribal synergies. The issue I had with green was twofold. First, practically every spell required a creature in play to be functional. I've got no problem with a couple *Fistful of Force*, but adding *Incremental Growth* and *Daggerdare* and *Elvish Branchbender* and *Lace with Moonglove*? It was just too much. I don't always draw creatures when I want them, and I really hate it when cards are stuck in my hand. Green tricks in this format are strong enough, but there is an upper limit. After you hit it, more pump spells add very little to the deck as a whole. Savvy opponents can play around growth when needed. Besides that, on an intrinsic level green just didn't offer the raw power of the remaining three colors. I like cards that make my opponents blanch. Except for *Incremental Growth* and perhaps *Changeling Titan*, I just didn't see any progression that ended in a wide-eyed and sweating opponent. The creatures, while fine, were just par for course. The other three colors offered something extra.

It would be difficult to rank red, black, and blue against each other, and meaningless besides. The question for this builder was what were the two main colors going to be, and by extension, what was the splash. This was a tough puzzle, because each build both offered and was lacking something of importance. On the one hand, no matter how the deck was built it was going to be powerful. Each color had a game winner (*Cryptic Command*, *Liliana Vess*, *Thundercloud Shaman*) and good backup besides. Of course we weren't looking for "good enough." This build wanted to be the best. But that label is tougher to figure out than you might think.

The simplest definition is that the best build is the deck that gives its pilot the highest chance of winning. Fair enough, but when you add winning into the equation, you naturally proceed to foresight and guesswork. Take

**Deeptread Merrow.** Against a blue deck, he's a fine little threat. Against an opponent playing green-white, he's completely awful. The card's worth is directly related to the opponent's color decisions, and we won't know that until the moment of. You need to guess, but how are you going to figure it out? Looking at past Sealed Decks is too tiny a sampling size to be worth anything. Let's say you determined the most common Sealed configuration was green-white, except all the best players were building blue-black. Do you build your deck to beat your likely opponents, or to beat the most dangerous ones? There are no obvious answers here, which does make the deckbuilding process rather thrilling. I had no real sense of color preferences for *Lorwyn* Sealed, so I wasn't even going to try to tackle that one. The big question for me was how fast I expected my opponents to be, with some small issues on top. With these unknowns swimming around, I built each of the three decks. Hopefully one would stand out as "best."



### Deck A: Blue-Black splashing red

**Main Deck**  
40 cards

7 Island	2 Aethersnipe	1 Broken Ambitions
2 Mountain	1 Amoeboid Changeling	1 Cryptic Command
1 Secluded Glen	1 Boggart Harbinger	1 Fodder Launch
7 Swamp	1 Deeptread Merrow	1 Lash Out
17 lands	1 Dreamspoiler Witches	1 Lilliana Vess
	1 Ghostly Changeling	1 Peppersmoke
	1 Mudbutton Torchrunner	1 Ponder
	1 Mulldrifter	1 Weed Strangle
	1 Pestermite	8 other spells
	1 Shriekmaw	
	1 Spiderwig Boggart	
	1 Surgespanner	
	2 Warren Pilferers	
	15 creatures	

For a Sealed Deck, this build is perfectly serviceable. If someone showed me this deck, I'd like their chances for making the Top 8. However, there are some weaknesses. Notably, that's a hefty top end on the mana curve. But it's even worse than that. *Cryptic Command*, nominally a four mana card, is unlikely to be played on turn four. The mana there is just too unreliable. Our early game defenses consist of average creatures and the useful red spells. Unfortunately those red cards are splashes, and thus are unlikely to be consistently available on the early turns. If the deck leads with *Broken Ambitions*, or an early *Shriekmaw* to evoke and bring back later, things will probably end well. But this build is a deck that would really hate to mana stumble, and I foresaw a lot of two-landers that would simply be unkeepable. There's also a disturbing lack of *Thundercloud Shaman* in this version. Deck A is a legitimate build, but I felt there were stronger options.

### Deck B: Blue-Red splashing black

**Main Deck**  
40 cards

7 Island	2 Aethersnipe	1 Broken Ambitions
7 Mountain	1 Amoeboid Changeling	1 Crush Underfoot
1 Secluded Glen	1 Blind-Spot Giant	1 Cryptic Command
2 Swamp	1 Caterwauling Boggart	1 Lash Out
17 lands	1 Deeptread Merrow	1 Ponder
	1 Ghostly Changeling	5 other spells
	2 Lowland Oaf	
	1 Mudbutton Torchrunner	
	1 Mulldrifter	
	1 Pestermite	
	1 Shriekmaw	
	1 Stinkdrinker Daredevil	
	1 Surgespanner	
	1 Tar Pitcher	
	1 Thundercloud Shaman	
	1 Warren Pilferers	
	18 creatures	

This was a little more pleasing. A more compact curve, a slightly stronger creature base, and Chunder Lips himself. **Ghostly Changeling** may look odd compared to Dreamspoiler Witch or the second Pilferers, but the changeling status played quite well in the deck, as well as keeping mana costs reasonable. And if you can play him, he's at least 3/3able, which is great. Why, if there were ever a set that contained a 3/3 changeling creature, I would totally attend its [Prerelease](#) January 19th-20th.

I liked this deck, it seemed more focused than Deck A, with only the smallest dip in power level. I also felt it was able to take advantage of a mana-screwed opponent better, but that may have been overly optimistic. The biggest deal was a smoother mana base, with fewer 5+ spells and a higher likelihood of both wanting to and being able to play the creatures at the four-mana zone. How did Deck C stack up?

Deck C: Red-Black splashing blue		
<b>Main Deck</b> 40 cards		
1 Island	1 Aethersnipe	1 Crush Underfoot
8 Mountain	1 Blind-Spot Giant	1 Fodder Launch
1 Secluded Glen	1 Boggart Harbinger	1 Lash Out
7 Swamp	1 Caterwauling Boggart	1 Liliana Vess
17 lands	1 Dreamspoiler Witches	1 Peppersmoke
	1 Ghostly Changeling	1 Weed Strangle
	2 Lowland Oaf	6 other spells
	1 Mudbutton Torchrunner	
	1 Mulldrifter	
	1 Shriekmaw	
	1 Spiderwig Boggart	
	1 Stinkdrinker Daredevil	
	1 Tar Pitcher	
	1 Thundercloud Shaman	
	2 Warren Pilferers	
	17 creatures	

You could argue **Pestermite** instead of **Aethersnipe** there, but the Snipe and **Liliana Vess** is a meaty combination. There were a number of advantages of Deck C. The color requirements were the best of any deck, and arguably it had the highest percentage of card advantage cards, with its **Wrath** effect, twin Pilferers, and the almighty Vess. Yet this version was no runaway either. There was exactly one reliable defensive spell at the one to two mana slot, **Lash Out**. After that it was a nice progression of creatures, with some more removal thrown in. The late game, as noted, was a hot tamale.

So we come back to the original issue. How fast are these *Lorwyn* Sealed Decks going to be? If we're talking controllish-removal heavy affairs, sign me up for Deck C. Pilferers and Liliana make all sorts of attrition wars fall in our favor, with some aggro capacities thrown in. But if the format was all about a speedy mana curve and coming out of the gates with bears and 3/3 fellas, than Deck B was where it was at. True, it still couldn't withstand a concentrated **Vanquisher-Battlewand-Briarhorn** opening, but since no build could, I wasn't going to sweat it. What Deck B could do was slow things down better than any other version, so that hopefully there was enough time to find and play Thundercloud or Snipe chains. I thought the power levels between B and C were relatively consistent; Vess is comparable to **Cryptic Command**. It just came back to what my opponents were planning on doing. If I was feeling lucky, that is my opponents would stumble or be generally full of slowness, Deck C was the choice. If I was feeling pessimistic, feeling that a small dip in power was worth stemming their obvious killer openings, then Deck B was the choice. While a player immersed in the format may have made a more informed choice, I had feel to rely on. I registered Deck B.

Interestingly, it turned out my decision making was both right and wrong. I'd say in a vacuum, Deck B is the best choice. It's got general strength against the widest variety of decks. But that vacuum scenario only exists once, Round One to be precise. After that I start to play people with like records, which I hope are winning records. What consistently wins in Sealed Deck? Speedy rushes sometimes, but removal-heavy armadas much more often. Thus, the more I would win, the more Deck C's attributes come to the forefront. Of course whether Deck C's weaknesses would prevent me from ever hitting these winning players is anyone's guess. It's a fun puzzle, but the short answer for this tournament was starting with red-blue splashing black, and then regularly siding into red-black splashing blue. This was the distillation of many hours of play though. First there were rounds to play. And considering the player density, these were going to take a while.



## Round 1: Jason Tian – Blue-Black-White

Game 1: For this very first round, I was already paired up at table 1. While the ego boost of this high seating assignment was minor (although inexplicably present), the real advantage of the seat was more elbow room than the average pairing. Space was tight; the bottom tables were playing on what appeared to be a system of ropes and pulleys.

Jason was a friendly sort, and we spent a few minutes chatting it up. Jason seemed completely at ease as we waited for the go-ahead, a credit to his experience or fortitude. I wasn't nervous, unlike some of the gentlemen surrounding us. The stakes were fairly high I suppose, but I was just eager to get dueling. Soon enough we got our wish, and the tournament was officially underway.

Things went south when the first two cards picked up were **Cryptic Command** and **Thundercloud Shaman**. "Uh oh...", I remember thinking. Sure enough, the rest of the hand went nowhere and I had to throw it back in. The next six were acceptable; some red stuff, **Mulldrifter**, and a pair of **Islands**. Perhaps I wasn't thinking big enough, but the only card I really wanted in my opening hand all day was **Secluded Glen**, followed closely by **Mountain**. **Cryptic Command**, **Thundercloud Shaman**, **Shriekmaw**? They're just really good topdecks. (Really good.)

Speaking of quality, Jason started off well with a **Goldmeadow Harrier**, **Marsh Flitter**, then a rather sick follow-up in **Ajani Goldmane**. Jason graciously spent time to appropriately show his tokens with counters, but I waived him off. Still stuck on those same two lands, I was already done. I was able to see his colors, while not showing him anything other than blue. Would it matter? Who knows, but little edges can add up. I didn't even think about a deck swap at this point, but were I to consider it, I doubt I would have gone with the big change. Jason's deck seemed fast enough that **Pilferer** advantage wasn't how the match was going to be won. **Hurly-Burly** did come in for **Caterwauling Boggart**, a fairly popular sideboard switch in the tournament.



Game 2: Again a mulligan, although at least this time Jason had the courtesy to follow me down to six. This game was actually more frustrating than the previous, as things began well. I had all the colors early, and had been sitting on a **Lash Out** for a while with a couple of guys out, even with Jason's **Harrier** stemming the beats. Eventually Jason tried to block one of my fellows with **Harrier** plus **Wings of Velis Vel**, and **Lash Out** went clutch. Yet I couldn't follow the advantage up with anything. The deck kept coughing up land. Jason was in a similar boat, but I wasn't able to put the pressure on to take advantage of it. Eventually Jason found some removal for the guys pecking away, and then began to draw very well. **Cloudgoat Ranger** hit the table, and all I could muster was an **Æthersnipe** on a token. The Snipe went turncoat to Jason's **Sower of Temptation**, which got enchanted by **Runed Stalactite** to power up **Cloudgoat Ranger** and fly over **Mudbutton Torchrunner**. That **Torchrunner** was a key creature, allowing me some semblance of defense to what would otherwise be a rough beating. **Pestermite** tapped and eventually chumped **Cloudgoat Ranger**. All I needed was **Thundercloud Shaman** to get back in the game, as he would kill off the little dudes and allow **Mudbutton** to take down the **Sower**.

A late **Ponder** created an interesting spot. I thought with the amount of lands already drawn I'd see some goodness, but sadly the first two cards were **Islands**. The last one was **Æthersnipe** though, and it raised an issue. I could **Æthersnipe** my stolen **Æthersnipe**, then play it to remove a **Kithkin** token. Ideally, this would keep **Cloudgoat** grounded. Unfortunately, there was some interrelated problem. The play would keep **Cloudgoat** on the ground, assuming Jason didn't draw anything. That was well and good, but there was still a 3/3 **Sower** in play ready to bash face. Technically, with the double **Snipe** board and **Mudbutton** on the ground, I would be able to win the race. Those two **Islands** though... Not only did Jason have to draw nothing for multiple turns, but I knew I *would* have nothing to follow up with. I gave it some serious thought, but it seemed like too big a gamble. **Ponder** gave the deck a shuffle, and off the top, another land. Tragic. Jason, perhaps wising up to the threat of the giant shaman, began to get more aggressive. I had one more turn to draw the big fellow. **Blind-Spot** didn't quite do the job. Jason spent his last turn casting **Ajani** again, and that was that. Inauspicious!

0-1

That first round loss took a bit of the wind out of the sails. The thrill of playing wasn't gone per se, but I was having dark thoughts of the deck being far less potent than I had first thought. The idea of not winning the tournament wasn't troubling, but the thought of not being able to play at all was a real irritant. But I shook it off. What else could I do? Mana problems do not bespeak a deck's quality, and Jason's build looked strong anyway. A refreshing walk outside and we were back in focus's good graces. A round with Ms. Pac-Man never hurts either.



## Round 2: David Edelstein – Red-Blue-White

Game 1: David was a fun, if excitable, young guy with what appeared to be an above average deck size. We shuffled and presented. David gave it a tap and handed it back. I sighed.

Friends, always shuffle your opponent's deck. Every time. It doesn't matter if it comes across as cold or mistrusting, or your opponent is an unfairly good-looking internet columnist. You have full authority to give their deck a shuffle before each game. Do so. More shuffling never hurt anyone, and it may just give you a fighting chance.

David led with some little guys: **Adder-Staff Boggart**, **Tideshaper Mystic**, and **Flamekin Brawler**. I see **Tideshaper Mystic** in play a lot, and I don't know why. **Tideshaper Mystic** is very good at what it does, but if its sole use is a mana-fixer, you can do better. Turning off permission or turning on your islandwalkers are all fine additional uses

for the Mystic; you really need something extra. David got some use out of the Mystic with the Brawler, but it was hardly game-breaking. Despite playing three colors, I had two **Tideshaper Mystics** in my board that were never seriously considered. 1/1s need to do something substantial to earn precious deck space.

David's **Flamekin Brawler** took on a **Battle Mastery**, which put me in a tough spot. (I stayed hit. Twice.) There was this **Thundercloud Shaman** that would take out the **Tideshaper Mystic** and trade with the **Flamekin Brawler**, but it seemed like such a waste. One more giant would be a huge **Wrath** on the board, or just a **Shriekmaw** or **Lash Out**. There was even a Stinky-Drinky out to allow the sick one-two giant Thunder action. No luck on any of it, and after I took some moderate hits, Thundercloud came and did his thing. I had by this point managed to do some damage as well, but at 9 life to his 7, I once again hit a pocket of land. David turned things around with **Æthersnipe**, then **Chandra Nalaar**! Oh my is that lady tough. I held on as long as possible, and David was a bit cautious with his cards, but the planeswalker and eventual fatties were too much to overcome. Why did everyone get a planeswalker but me?

Game 2: David managed to get a few hits in with a powered up **Adder-Staff Boggart**, but I stabilized quickly enough. I had set up a very pretty **Thundercloud Shaman** when David tapped a white for **Shields of Velis Vel**! An excellent response, but his creatures were just too small compared to mine. A sequence of **Lash Out** and **Crush Underfoot** negated any double blocking action, and soon enough we moved onto Game 3.

Game 3: David pondered his opener and decided to stick with it. This turned out to be a mistake, as David's strained mana base finally caught up. A pair of **Islands** and some discards against an unusually robust curve of creatures meant David's chances wound to zero. No lies, coming back from the 0-2 precipice felt pretty good.

1-1

### Round 3: Adrian NESTico – Blue-Black-White

Game 1: Good name. Adrian was another quiet but friendly guy who, like Jason in round one, seemed very comfortable in the tournament seat. Adrian was with the classic Faerie build, leading **Skeletal Changeling** and **Silvergill Douser** into **Runed Stalactite** and **Scion of Oona**. The Scion was an interesting card to play with. Although it made the equipped Douser all but invincible, with my **Amoeboid Changeling** out, it also prevented that same equipment from getting onto any other creature. Due to **Lowland Oaf** and **Ghostly Changeling** and **Caterwauling Boggart**, Adrian's offense was limited to the 1/1 Scion, although I wasn't able to trade damage back. I took a few plinks while setting up the board, but in the end I couldn't let the Scion's bonuses prevent actions later on. **Caterwauling Boggart** took a trip upstairs and traded with the faerie lord. We continued to build up our boards until I found **Cryptic Command**.

Now that card is a pounding. A random Faerie got countered, along with the big tap of Adrian's team. Douser, Skeletal, etc. all got out of the way from whatever creatures I had left, good for an even dozen points of damage. Although this wasn't enough to kill Adrian, it put him in an incredibly precarious situation. Although Adrian had gotten me to 10 life by this point, he was now in complete defense mode. **Mulldrifter** off the top gave even more options, and eventually Adrian just packed it in.

Game 2: The short version is that Adrian got pretty flooded and I took the match. But there was this one play...

We had both built up our mana for the first few turns, Adrian also getting a **Silvergill Douser** into play. I've got all the colors and am just biding time with the spells in hand. On Adrian's fifth turn, he taps out to play **Changeling Hero**, hoping to upgrade his lone creature.

Now against a red-black-blue player with a full grip of cards, this play seems, at best, desperate. Adrian's all but turned his hand face-up; his cards are terrible. This guy knows there's very little chance of the Hero actually sticking around, but his hand is so awful that Adrian felt he needed to take a chance. That's pretty valuable information, but the question remains, what's the response? There are two relevant cards in hand, **Broken Ambitions** and **Lash Out**. One needs to get played. Theoretically **Lash Out** is the right move—it's an easy 2:1 and that Douser has to die sometime, right? Perhaps, but there's yet another relevant card in hand, a sideboarded **Hurly-Burly**. Adrian, you may remember, has nothing in his hand; certainly nothing with one toughness. I could **Lash Out** the Douser, gaining card advantage, but at the same time I strand the **Hurly-Burly**, bringing things back to equity. This isn't a problem normally, Adrian's card disadvantage is real, while mine is transient at best. And **Changeling Hero** is worth putting some effort into stopping. But in this case **Broken Ambitions** is the stronger play. We get to keep **Lash Out**, we get to kill Douser with **Burly** magic, and with the counterspell gone, our mode shifts from reactive to proactive. It required some consideration at the time, but the **Ambitions** is the right call in this particular situation.



Ironically the **Tremor** never found its mark; Adrian spent his next turn playing and equipping **Deathrender**. But Adrian's hand was still devoid of creatures, and while the Douser survived for a little while, it eventually did take the **Lash Out**, with no replacement creature in sight. At that point there was enough offense to quickly take the game and match.

2-1

## Round 4: Zach Jesse – Blue-Black-White

Game 1: Zach was another remarkably amiable opponent, an acting student surrounded by his travelling comrades. Zach projected a lot of friendly confidence before we began, although whether it was because we were playing at a table flanked by his buddies, I was a complete unknown, Zach's deck was awesome, or he was just a fine actor, there were lots of confidence vibes coming off Mr. Jesse. It wasn't the "you're going down" type, but rather "looking forward to a fun, victorious match. Also your deck is plenty shuffled." Sigh.

A **Deeptread Merrow** and Stinkdrinker Devil went deep. I don't recall if I was mana light or just full of spells, but those two fellows were all the offense in play for a lot of turns. It wasn't a big deal though; Zach wasn't playing out much of anything. Those creatures did at least 8 points before things got serious. Douser hit for Zach, reasonably negated by **Amoeboid Changeling**. A random clash showed a **Neck Snap** on top for Zach, which he decided to keep. Probably necessary, but **Neck Snap** is one card you don't want your opponents to know about. It's not like I stopped played auras on my guys, I stopped attacking completely. That sounds nice for Zach until you realize my turns were spent putting more creatures into play, with Zach being forced to keep four mana open. Zach wised up pretty quickly and began deploying his own people, allowing me to get in a few stings with that same **Deeptread Merrow**. **Æthersnipe** from Zach brought things around enough so that he could begin to attack me, although I had been at 20 the entire match. I respected the instinct though. I replayed the bounced creature, as well as **Surgespanner**. Mr. Jesse didn't look happy at that one, but he got real sad when **Caterwauling Boggart** came down after and **Surgespanner** gained all creature types. Between the bouncing and damage, Zach needed a **Wrath** to escape. None was at the top of the deck, and we moved onto Game 2.



Game 2: This was the first match I gave the Deck C option serious consideration, but ultimately decided against it. The second **Pilferers** and **Hurly-Burly** did get swapped in, however.

This was probably the strangest game I played all day. Zach led with **Thoughtseize**, wresting **Shriekmaw** away, but nobody had much follow-up. We traded **Æthersnipe** bounces for multiple turns, which of course led nowhere, but did give us time to get our mana in order. It was an interesting standoff, since the first person to get a non-**Æthersnipe** threat on the board would have a lot of authority behind to push it through. In practice, we both got threats out, trading **Æthersnipe** swings, but eventually trading 4/4 bodies and removal for whatever was left. Later in the game, Zach had a few cards out, including a **Goblin**, versus a few of my creatures, including **Amoeboid Changeling**. Zach played **Boggart Mob**, reinforcing the notion that I did *not* want to play a third game against this guy. Zach paused and asked if I had a response. I did of course, I wanted to remove all creature types from Zach's lone **Goblin**. Yet this seemed so obvious, Zach's question seemed so... inviting, I fully expected a trap about to spring. What that trap was I had no idea, I just knew I'd feel silly for tapping the **Changeling** when Zach *clearly* had some grand scheme in mind. His demeanor actually gave me pause; he somehow delayed me from tapping a creature to kill a 5/5. But what else could I do? Zach blinked for a second, and placed his **Boggart Mob** gently in the trash, muttering that he "always forgets about that guy." Whew.

That play was probably the turning point. A late **Pilferer** got back that early-discarded **Shriekmaw**, and the gap widened. Zach had one more trick though, a mighty but random **Colfenor's Plans**. With just a couple of cards in hand, the Plans had the potential to shift things right back to Zach. Although I had some good creatures on the board, by this point my hand was completely dry. Zach examined his seven cards, although of course he had already played his spell for the turn. Untap, draw off the top? **Broken Ambitions**. With that sweet safety blanket in hand, in came the entire team. Zach tried a flashing **Faerie**, but it was happily countered and Zach extended the hand. Zach explained after the match he had made another error: he had forgot the effect of not playing any of the cards in his hand before running out the **Colfenor's**. Lucky me.

3-1

What does one do in between rounds? In the homestead, I'd probably catch up with the crew, commiserate or listen to bragging as required. Here I knew far fewer people, and Ms. Pac-Man deserved a rest. Guess that leaves watching matches. The crowds were thinning out by this point, giving viewers enough space to observe. I wandered over to a player who looked very familiar, but I couldn't quite place. He had a solid deck, although so did his opponent. Said opponent made some big mistakes, and unknown known person took the match just as time was called. Who is that guy?

## Round 5: Marc Aquino – Green-Black splashing red

Of course, it was Marc from Wisconsin. Wayyyyyy back when we used to see each other at events, but it's probably been over a decade since we had actually faced off. Marc was another friendly face, just happy to be there I imagine. Marc gave some implication this PTQ was also his Pre-release.

Me: "Well Marc, I guess that puts me in good shape. Unless you have **Oona's Prowler**, **Mournwhelk**, double **Lash Out**, and **Jagged-Scar Archers**, I like my chances!"

Marc: "Looks like you've been scouting..."

Me: "Oh, and **Fertile Ground**. I can't beat a deck with **Fertile Ground**."

Marc: "..."

Game 1: This wasn't just the most absurd game I played at the tournament, it was the most absurd game I've played in years. Things start poor with a double mulligan into basically an awful draw of five. **Ponder** puts me a little back into it, along with the fact that Marc's applying zero pressure. Through major fortune, I actually began to scramble out of a gigantic hole, at least until the first **Mournwhelk** hits. Then a second. Yech, but there was still some action left. Things are still going okay; in fact I'd somehow been able to deal damage to Marc a bit. Nath of the Gilt Leaf makes an appearance, and cards rapidly start getting binned. But lo, a **Mulldrifter** off the top to restore cards and create a threat. **Mulldrifter's** great.

Frustratingly, I mistap and leave **Secluded Glen** untapped instead of **Mountain**. **Mulldrifter** provides **Island** and **Lash Out**, both of which I'd love to play, but no **Mountain's** around. It's a big mistake, and Nath scrapes off the red instant. Mully dealt some damage, which Nath and the elves retort back. Nath gets through a couple of times, although all the little elves die. Next off the top, **Shriekmaw**. Great card, except when all you have out is **Lowland Oaf** and **Mulldrifter**. Into the bin it goes. Next draw? **Thundercloud Shaman**. Grrrr, my deck is giving me great cards at the worst possible time. Is a 4/4 Giant better than a 2/2 flier? I think it is. Marc's now at 7 life, and a **Cryptic Command** would steal the game. At the very least it'll get Nath to stop attacking. Unfortunately it doesn't; Nath continues to hit. I'm still at a fairly healthy life total, and want to give myself the chance to draw the key blue rare. Another hit goes by and I have to put **Thundercloud** in front of Nath. Well, I put both there, hoping to quash any **Fistful of Force** / **Briarhorn** shenanigans. But no, Marc isn't packing pump, he runs out **Heal the Scars**! My best creature dead, and Marc plus 4 life, brought the game back to unwinnable status. That...took a long time to finish.



Game 2: A double mulligan, plus a double **Mournwhelk**, plus Nath, and I was still in the game for far too long. Whatever else, Marc's deck was not speedy. No offense and plenty of discard effects meant it was time to bring in the black-red configuration. I considered bringing in **Ego Erasure** as a general trick / **Jagged-Scar Archers** killer, but it just didn't offer enough. At the first sign of discard, **Ego Erasure** would almost certainly be the card to go. Nope, the way to win the match was to out card advantage the opponent.

That's pretty much what happened. Marc does a little early damage, but most of his time is spent developing his own board. I'm happy to play defense, because soon enough, out comes the master herself, **Liliana Vess**. Now this one knows how to play discard. I don't quite get her up to ultimate levels, but she steals some cards and provides a fresh **Warren Pilferer** for later drawing. **Warren Pilferer** brings back a lost **Mulldrifter**. The card advantage quantity is actually sick, but I'm having trouble doing more than trickling damage to Marc. I am in literally no danger, but Marc has his removal, and not even the **Aethersnipe** / **Thundercloud** breakers can push through. I'm happy enough to keep building up Vess; **Aethersnipe** and **Liliana** play well together. Finally, after achieving an absurd creature advantage, two quick rushes lay Marc out.

Game 3: Unfortunately, neither game was particularly timely, nor are our decks in hyper-fast mode. Marc leads slow, and I again get **Liliana** and start adding counters. This time I'm all about the Ultimate. It's the only way to get enough creatures in play fast enough, as we can both see the clock rapidly clicking down. One odd situation comes up when **Liliana** is at seven loyalty. Marc plays **Cloudthresher**, but being somewhat unfamiliar with **planeswalker subtleties**, has no idea whether the Thresher can be used to remove loyalty. Marc intelligently calls a judge (if he had asked me, I would have told him to call a judge as well.) The judge comes over, and Marc frames his question in a weird way, at least according to the judge. I'm not precisely sure how Marc put it, but what he *didn't* ask was "how do non-combat sources of damage work with planeswalkers?" Instead, it was something like "Can I use this **Cloudthresher's** effect to remove counters from **Liliana**?" The judge chose not to answer that version of the question, citing "not being allowed to tell the a player what to do." It was a little rough, since Marc's intent was pretty clear. Should intent be paramount in these kinds of situations, or should the player be required to frame his or her question in a neutral manner? I can see both sides here, and if someone has a strong opinion on the subject I hope they share it in the forums. From my end, if the judge wasn't going to give Marc the info, I certainly wasn't going to help him take me down. Marc played his **Cloudthresher** and looked up.



Me: "I'm going to mark 2 life off my sheet."

Marc: "Well..."

Me: "Is there something else?"

Marc: "No..."

47 15

And soon after, **Liliana Vess** cast her big one. It wasn't an overwhelming creature advantage, and Marc's **Cloudthresher** was the by far the largest creature on the board. He had some other ground creatures too, and the

Elemental's reach ability was keeping Dreamspoiler Witch and Oona's Prowler at bay. Eventually Prowler plus Mudbutton Torchrunner plus Tar Pitcher took down the 7/7 monstrosity, but at this point time was called. We both agreed my win was inevitable, but Marc declined to concede the match. Understandable of course; we were both theoretically still in contention with a draw. This turned out to not be precisely true, but that comes up later.

3-1-1

## Round 6: John Biedron – Black-Blue

Game 1: John and I had a bit of friction this match, mostly over communication. It wasn't really anyone's fault, the room was incredibly loud and our table was in some kind of acoustic nexus. As such, an occasional "what?!" shouted back and forth. I may have been guilty of encouraging faster play than normal; the last round's result was sticking with me, and I was playing another fellow with a draw.

John deliberates a mulligan and decides to keep, where my hand is an easy toss. The second hand is suited for action. John is somewhat mana light, but has enough action to keep me off the heavy stuff. I'm still damaging him with Deepstread and Amoeboid, and his evoke on Mulldrifter and Mournwhelk lets me sneak Lowland Oaf into play. At four land to my five, John passes the turn back to me. I untap, draw, and have a decision to make. In hand I have four cards: land, Mudbutton Torchrunner, and two other cards of some value. I would really like to get Mudbutton Torchrunner on the table; it combos up real nice with Lowland Oaf. However, I also really don't want to lose any more cards to discard. If discard is inevitable, I'd rather toss a land than one of my gems. Keeping this in mind, the choice on my turn was simple. Play the land and nullify Broken Ambitions, or keep it in the grip and minimize Mournwhelk-2 and / or Makeshift Mannequin? Again, perhaps the last round's discard frenzy was stuck in my mind, but for some reason I was dead set against falling victim to more discard. I kept the land in hand and play Mudbutton. John calmly tapped all his mana to play Broken Ambitions for three. Damn it.

My annoyance doesn't last too long when I realize that my creature advantage is still significant. In come more guys to take off a sizeable chunk of John's life. Things are looking well, until John's Shrieky hits the table. Things are still decent, until a second Top of the World Maw hits for John.

This turns the tide a bit, and now John's on the attack. I get in a little damage when I can, throwing John all the way to 4 life before he stabilizes with only a Shriekmaw left in play. That one gets hit with a Lash Out, and suddenly John's at a scant 1 life. But what's this? Footbottom Feast targeting Mulldrifter and double Shriekmaw? Strong move! I can't break through it, and John takes the first game with a sliver of life. When I had Torchrunner? Should have played the land.

Game 2: This matchup is custom-made for configuration C. Sure enough, the switch proves decisive as Liliana Vess resolves. She takes a few cards, but her main function is to eventually search out a pair of Warren Pilferers. John can't contain the infinite creatures and the planeswalker front, and we move onto Game 3.

Game 3: In an unfortunate end to a rather intense match, John kept a particularly mana light hand. My hand was quite strong, and resulted in playing a creature turns three through six. John eventually drew out of his woes, but by that point Fodder Launch was there to seal the deal. We shook hands, but John was pretty morose as he checked the "drop" box. With that deck, I couldn't blame him.

4-1-1

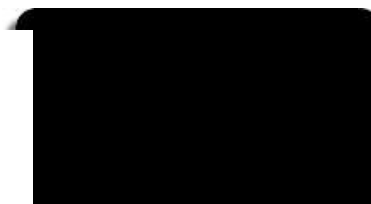
## Round 7: Shaheen – Blue-White-Black

Game 1: Surprise over surprise, Shaheen was yet another remarkably friendly opponent. He was wearing a PT-Kobe shirt though, and he remembered to shuffle the deck. Good man.

He started off adequately with a pair of Silvergill Douser, but didn't really have much follow up. I ran out Stinkdrinker and Tar Pitcher and things were looking well. Tar Pitcher started throwing guys right quick to take down Merrow Reejerey. The Dousers were joined later on by a couple of other creatures, but that just made Thundercloud Simooner all the more potent. The real all-star was that Tar Pitcher though; it allowed easy takedown of Steambed Aquitects, and a later blocking Sentinels of Glen Endra with minimal loss. Riding the card advantage and creature wave, Shaheen had to pack it in.

Game 2: Again came Deck C, along with the Hurly-Burly. The second one almost came in, but it seemed just a tad unreliable for dual wielding. Hurly Burly was in the hand when Shaheen threw out a speedy Spellstutter Sprite for quick beats. We traded spells for a bit while I got plinked away; against a deck with a pair of Douser, I just couldn't justify throwing away sky tremor and what seemed to be an exhausted 1/1. And yet...

Later on, still with the Sprite ticking away, I found the lovely Mulldrifter. Shaheen had tapped for something else in the turn, leaving up an Island and Vivid Creek. No sweat, I still had two mana to pay for any kind of Ambitions. But no, Shaheen tapped his land and played Familiar's Ruse! I was annoyed at myself. It was not a card I considered at all, and I should have. For one, that's a card in hand that explains a raw Spellstutter Sprite, even though by this point the little 1/1 had already more than Axed me a question. More than that, leaving open those two lands is really weird.



Shaheen had his colors by this point, why wouldn't he keep open a Vivid and **Swamp** for maximum potential? Yes, the clues were there. Now it's possible I would have considered the Ruse, and decided not to throw the Burly out there anyway, perhaps supposing a bluff or the **Tremor** being more important against a double Douser deck. That would have been acceptable, but not even considering the card... Just a straight up mistake. Oh well, one countered **Mulldrifter**.

Things didn't end too badly though. That **Hurly-Burly** remained in hand, and it comboed up nicely with a Tundercloud Shaman later. I was pulling ahead at some point, and Shaheen seemed resigned to losing to the Shaman. Yet even if I played Shaman that turn, his troubling Aquitects would live, perhaps to do something dangerous later on. The **Hurly-Burly** follow-up though, that was a real backbreaker. Between the Giant and **Æthersnipe**, great chunks of life were taken out, enough for the win. Shaheen considered staying in for the last round; the Top 32 players got prizes. But he decided to drop from the tournament and go drafting with his buddies. Good man.

5-1-1

Well this was it. One more win would give me a serious shot at Top 8, 6-1-1 usually being a qualifying record to get in. Things were still plenty exciting, although the long day was beginning to wear. I had arrived in the building over ten hours ago. To keep the energy up, I hit on Ms. Pac-Man for the second time of the day. It was really interesting, because I was playing worse, and I could see it. My reaction time and anticipations were noticeably shorter than when I had played previously 5 hours ago. This is logical of course; it had already been a long day. But to see it crystallized, with some 80s litmus test, really drove the point home. Strangely I ended on a higher score than the first play through, although I chalked it up to way more bananas than the first time. Regardless, seeing my diminished capacity, I got some water and took a slow walk in the cool air to refresh myself. This was the important round...although there were strange rumors of particularly poor tiebreakers having already eliminated some of us 5-1-1s from competition. Probably wistful thinking, or maybe a mind trick.

## Round 8: Mark Kinney – Green-Black-Red

Mark was probably the friendliest player I played all day, in a sea of them. He was clearly happy to be there. Perhaps the fact we were the bottom two 16-point players on standings had something to do with it; why get overly serious if it was just an exhibition match? Mark had similar ideas, although on the chance Math was off that day, we did wish the winner luck in achieving Top 8.

Game 1: The play I was rather proud of was forgoing dropping **Amoeboid Changeling** on the second turn to **Broken Ambitions** whatever Mark's third-turn play was. Off triple **Forest**, that play was **Imperious Perfect**, quickly countered. Mark inexplicably kept a **Peppersmoke** on top of his deck; strange because Mark had no follow up mana. With basically free reign, I start throwing out creatures left and right. My draw in this game was probably the sickest of the day. Although Mark did eventually find his colors, I was starting to roll with **Pestermite**, **Surgespanner**, and later, **Lowland Oaf** with **Cryptic Command** backup. The **Dismiss** was enough for Mark to quickly pick up his cards and move to Game 2.

Game 2: I brought in the black package again. Although Mark's deck seemed faster than the average control decks I had run up against previous, his was still midrange at best. Certainly **Deeptread Merrow** was awful against him, and if I had to sacrifice my early game anyway, there may as well be an exchange with power.

Although last game's draw was tier 1, this one wasn't far behind. The MVP card was definitely **Stinkdrinker Daredevil**, allowing me to play **Lash Out** and **Lowland Oaf** on one turn, and **Ghostly Changeling** and **Crush Underfoot** on the next. That kind of tempo is very tough to beat, especially when you miss a land drop or two. Mark wasn't completely out of it though; Bog Strider Ash was a great body against the newly goblinized deck. The Ash taking on **Runed Stalactite** seemed effective, although my forces were present enough to prevent the 3/5 from attacking. But what's this? **Fodder Launch**? That's the perfect effect to take down a five-toughness Treefolk. After that a **Caterwauling Boggart** pushed even more damage through. Mark fought back with **Marsh Flitter** and a sacrificed Torchrunner to take out **Tar Pitcher**. It wasn't stabilization, but Mark was slowly bringing his defenses together. But again my deck felt generous. **Peppersmoke** was enough to take out a blocker, and with **Caterwauling Boggart** frog-waving with pride, the team was unblockable enough to come through for the final points. Mark of course remained good-natured about the skewed luck, and wished me well in the Top 8 (or wherever).

6-1-1

That felt good. A stumble early on, but the deck found its groove. Was it enough to make the Top 8? [Well...](#)



Final standings after round 8

Rank	Name	Points	<----- OMW%	Tiebreaker PGW%
1	Ripple, Chris A	21	58.3929	71.4286
2	Buck, Thomas H	20	68.8244	80.0000
3	Davis, John W	20	65.4018	80.0000
4	Cox, Benjamin	19	66.9494	86.6667
5	Parker, Brock R	19	65.1042	70.5882
6	Michel, Frederick J	19	61.6071	70.1754
7	Fabiano, Gerard	19	61.4583	63.4921
8	Eisenhard, Cory M	19	60.6250	80.0000
9	Pustilnik, Michael M	19	59.3750	72.2222
10	Weil, Noah E	19	49.8016	70.1754
11	Dierolf, Kyle P	18	61.5873	73.6842
12	King, Stephen N	18	58.4077	72.2222
13	Dobbertin, Ty W	18	57.8125	70.5882
14	Senneway, Bill	18	56.3988	68.4211
15	Cehak, Alex	18	49.8958	68.4211
16	Sachse, Christian	16	57.9464	66.6667
17	Donnelly, Thomas	16	57.7083	61.6667
18	Keulmann, Nicholas	16	55.2083	58.7302
19	Kinney, Mark J	16	54.5486	53.9683
20	Yam, Philip	16	53.2589	68.5185
21	Buranasiri, Thomas R	16	46.5774	60.6061
22	Bekowski, Timothy H	15	61.2054	60.0000

OH NOES!

In another time and place, 6-1 would be good for a Top 8 berth, but no dice here. Look at those tiebreakers. They are *awful*. A first-round loss does you no favors. But poor Mikey P got the worst of it. At 6-1 going into the final round, Mike thought he and his opponent could intentionally draw into the Top 8. Well they were half right. Congratulations to Chris Ripple, who ended up winning the whole thing.

I wasn't upset with the finish. I was eliminated after round five, and anyway, the tournament was incredibly fun. Meeting nice people, playing some good **Magic**; what more can you ask for? Competition with like-minded players is its own reward.

Enjoy the rest of the *Morningtide* previews, and come back next week for something special. Until then, thanks for reading.



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