

Dredging the PTQ Experience Search

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I began working on last week's column two weeks ago with my editor when we were discussing the various players who had won PTQs as potential interview subjects before deciding to audible and getting on board for the Rogue Theme week. There were a couple of names that leapt out at me, including Jason Imperiale.

Jason is a solid local player who had apparently won the Connecticut PTQ over the Grand Prix-Vancouver weekend with a Dredge list featuring four copies of Bitterblossom in the sideboard. I reached out to the two-time Grand Prix Top 8 competitor to set up an interview. I got a pretty dejected response from Jay, who explained that he actually finished second to an Ideal deck after going undefeated in the Swiss (an error reporting the decklists had led to the confusion over results).

Jason Imperiale



Main Deck

60 cards

- 1 Breeding Pool
- 4 Cephalid Coliseum
- 2 Flooded Strand
- 1 Island
- 4 Polluted Delta
- 3 Watery Grave

15 lands

- 1 Akroma, Angel of Wrath
- 1 Cephalid Sage
- 1 Flame-Kin Zealot
- 4 Gulgari Grave-Troll
- 1 Gulgari Thug
- 3 Ichorid
- 4 Narcomoeba
- 4 Putrid Imp
- 4 Stinkweed Imp

23 creatures

- 4 Breakthrough
- 4 Bridge from Below
- 3 Cabal Therapy
- 4 Careful Study
- 2 Darkblast
- 3 Dread Return
- 2 Tolarian Winds

22 other spells

Sideboard

- 4 Bitterblossom
- 4 Chain of Vapor
- 1 Crippling Fatigue
- 3 Leyline of the Void
- 3 Pithing Needle

15 sideboard cards

A week passed and I attended the Pro Tour Qualifier here in New York City looking for some drafts in the afternoon. I ran into Jay and we shared a laugh about the misunderstanding. "Hey, I am 3-0 now," he said. "Maybe I will win this one and you can interview me for next weekend."

I agreed, thinking that would make for an interesting story, and I checked in with him throughout the afternoon from my draft table. The wins kept stacking up and pretty soon it was a foregone conclusion that Jason would be making the Top 8 once again. I had to head home before the cut to the Top 8 but I kept tabs on the event via a variety of instant messenger interfaces, text messages, and phone calls with people as Jason quickly dredged his way through the Top 8 bracket to await a finals opponent.

Robert Seder



Main Deck

60 cards

- 1 Academy Ruins
- 2 Breeding Pool
- 4 Flooded Strand
- 10 Island
- 1 Miren, the Moaning Well
- 4 Polluted Delta
- 1 Steam Vents
- 1 Watery Grave

24 lands

4 Tarmogoyf

4 creatures

- 4 Ancestral Vision
- 4 Counterspell
- 4 Cryptic Command
- 3 Force Spike
- 2 Repeal
- 1 Rude Awakening
- 3 Sensei's Divining Top
- 4 Spell Snare
- 3 Threads of Disloyalty
- 4 Vedalken Shackles

32 other spells

Sideboard

- 3 Ancient Grudge
- 3 Sower of Temptation
- 4 Tormod's Crypt
- 3 Tsabo's Decree
- 2 Yixlid Jailer

15 sideboard cards

Jaroslav Nachtigall



Main Deck

60 cards

- 1 Academy Ruins
- 2 Breeding Pool
- 4 Flooded Strand
- 1 Hallowed Fountain
- 1 Miren, the Moaning Well
- 3 Polluted Delta
- 1 Seat of the Synod
- 5 Snow-Covered Island
- 1 Steam Vents
- 1 Tree of Tales
- 1 Watery Grave

- 4 Chrome Mox
- 3 Counterbalance
- 4 Counterspell
- 2 Cryptic Command
- 1 Engineered Explosives
- 3 Force Spike
- 3 Living Wish
- 3 Sensei's Divining Top
- 1 Spell Snare
- 3 Thirst for Knowledge
- 1 Tormod's Crypt
- 3 Vedalken Shackles

Sideboard

- 2 Engineered Plague
- 1 Gaddock Teeg
- 1 Indrik Stomphowler
- 1 Katakai, War's Wage
- 2 Krosan Grip
- 2 Loxodon Hierarch
- 1 Meddling Mage
- 1 Sower of Temptation
- 2 Threads of Disloyalty
- 1 Tormod's Crypt
- 1 Yixlid Jailer

15 sideboard cards

21 lands

31 other spells

4 Tarmogoyf

3 Trinket Mage

1 Venser, Shaper Savant

8 creatures

Meanwhile, the other bracket bogged down in for a grueling semifinal match that took almost all the allotted time. Robert Seder was playing Previous Level Blue while Jaroslav Nachtigall was playing a Goyf-less version of Next Level Blue. Finally, I was informed via a text, Jason was settling in to avenge his loss the last weekend against Seder's Previous Level Blue. Confident that Jason was going to win, I began composing some questions and waited for a quick text/IM/phone call to tell me he had it locked up.

As the time dragged on with no word I began to assume the worst—and eventually received the bad news. Not to take anything away from Rob, a good man who has won his share of Neutral Ground PTQs, but I really felt pained for Jason. I still sting over every PTQ Top 8 loss I have ever taken. It is not easy to make the Top 8—much less to win an event—and back-to-back losses in the finals had to be tough...especially when you consider that Jason had already finished ninth in another Hollywood PTQ this season.

I had really been looking forward to telling the story of the near-miss and then the vindication a week later, but as I thought more about it I realized there was still a story to be told. If you play **Magic** you are going to spend a lot of time losing—even Jon Finkel loses 37 percent of the time. At each stage of the game, be it starting out at Friday Night **Magic**, playing at the PTQ level, or playing on the Pro Tour, players have to learn how to move past their losses, come back for the next event, and continue to improve their results. I gave Jason a couple of days to walk it off and reached out once again to set up an interview—although not for the reasons either of us had originally hoped.

Jason, a 21-year old Long Island, New York student and manager of a confections store, has two Grand Prix Top 8 finishes under his belt and has played on the Pro Tour multiple times. Despite his willingness to conduct the interview, he was still stinging from the losses over the past two weekends. Finishing ninth in a PTQ is nothing compared to second, according to Jason.

"The first PTQ that I lost in the finals I didn't have a single game loss going into the finals," he sighed. "It's just frustrating being so close."

Jason's weapon of choice for this PTQ season has been Dredge, although he did play a version of Bob-Goyf-Counterbalance for his ninth-place finish. Despite all the talk about sideboard hate for the extremely powerful Dredge deck, Jason felt that not all hate cards were created equal. If people were trying to multitask their sideboard cards, they were setting themselves up for a disappointing Dredge matchup.

"I think a lot of the hate is hard to play around," he admitted. "At first I had trouble beating almost any hate card. After playing with the deck for a couple of weeks, cards like Tormod's Crypt, Mogg Fanatic and Gaddock Teeg are all fairly easy to beat when playing well."

"The deck is really great because a lot of the traditional 'combo' hate like discard and counterspells are severely worse off against a deck like Dredge," he continued. "I think it's hard for people to bring in a lot of hate against a deck like Dredge going into the Grand Prix. There are so few people playing the deck that dedicating 4-7 hard sideboard slots like Leyline of the Void and Yixlid Jailer is hard for people to do. So it seems like a lot of people are bringing in cross-functional hate like Gaddock Teeg that is also good against Tron and Ideal, or Meddling Mage that has uses against plenty of decks."

These cards are troublesome for Dredge but certainly aren't as rough as a turn-zero Leyline."

I was still curious about the now-missing Bitterblossoms from his Connecticut finish and asked about his approach to games two and three when playing Dredge.

"I think sideboarding is probably the hardest part about playing this deck," said Jason. "When a deck has black, like Death Cloud for example, they could be boarding Leylines, Crypts, or the



Extirpate/Offalsnout/Deed package. The Dredge player is often forced to board three Chains (of Vapor) and three Pithing Needles to be able to combat any strategy. A deck like Affinity is a lot easier because you know they bring in four Crypts 99 percent of the time. The Bitterblossom was just an idea, as it seemed like a good card to bring in against Leyline because it gave you an alternate kill and also powered up the Dread Returns. I think they were OK at best and never really did what I was hoping they would. This week I added a bunch of one-ofs. I was really happy with the additional Darkblast, but a lot of the one-ofs never got touched. The Tolarian Winds are really good against Leyline as it's your best post-Chain play, because it is an instant and does the discarding for you."

Jason is looking forward to seeing more and more people playing red-green-x Loam decks in the future and is always happy to see a Countryside Crusher or Tarmogoyf across from his at the table.

"These decks play Burning Wish and try and play a really long game," said Jason as he explained why Loam was the best matchup for a Dredge player. "Essentially any deck that's really trying to play a 'fair' **Magic** game with non-sac'ing creatures like Tarmogoyf or Countryside Crusher is pretty easy. The worst matchups are usually determined by who sideboards the most hate. Dredge is probably the best deck so whoever has the most utility against it will probably be whom you want to play the least. In the first PTQ I lost in the finals to Enduring Ideal and they tend to bring in four Leyline of the Void and three Tormod's Crypt, so that matchup looks a lot less appealing after a pretty easy Game 1."

Despite Dredge remaining a popular target of many a sideboard's hatred, Jason expects that he will continue to play this deck throughout the remainder of the season. "I definitely will be playing this deck in Philly. I have pretty high hopes and hopefully will leave qualified to Hollywood. I'm already betting one friend that I will have no losses in the Swiss—ties are OK and losing in the mirror will call off the bet. Hopefully if you guys feature-match me, I can show everyone the best four-turn match ever."

Jason has qualified for just over half-a-dozen Pro Tours since he began playing **Magic**—winning one PTQ, attending a couple on his rating, and two via his Grand Prix finishes. He has yet to post a result at the Pro Tour that allows him to double dip but knows that he can do better with more preparation.

"My best finish was 73rd in Pro Tour—Geneva this past year," said Jason, who has to squeeze in his playing time between school and work. "I think playing more often would help me

"Essentially any deck

achieve more on the Pro Tour. I don't play **Magic Online** like a lot of the really successful players do and tend to only play formats I enjoy. I usually really like Block and Limited formats. Block's usually a lot of fun because it is so much slower and more interactive—like Limited is. Extended is a lot less fun to practice because a deck like Dredge—especially Game 1 which doesn't have a lot of variation or interaction."

Over my many years of involvement with the game I have certainly seen players walk away over less crushing blows than back-to-back losses in the finals of a PTQ. I was curious how Jason could already be looking forward to his next tournament and still remaining positive about qualifying for the Pro Tour.

"I really like the Pro Tour experience a lot," said Jason quite simply. "The competition is a lot of fun as well as the traveling and new experiences. I was pretty happy with the results (in those two PTQs). Looking at individual matches I only had two single game losses -- both in finals – in Stratford and only four single game losses in New York. It seemed pretty good for a deck that is supposed to just cold lose to single cards. I was happy with how I had been playing and think I learned a little something extra on a match-match basis."


Of course, Jason was also secure in the knowledge that some of the recent Players Club changes—while understandably unpopular at some of the higher levels of the club—mean that as a Level 3 player for this season, he has an invite for any one event this season securely tucked in his back pocket.

"I already can go to Hollywood with my Level 3 Pro Club status but my goal is to not have to use my one-time Level 3 ticket and be able to qualify otherwise," said Jason of his aspirations for the Grand Prix. "So my goal for the GP is to achieve an invite to Hollywood, either a Top 16 or securing a DCI rating high enough."

In light of Mark Rosewater's recent article about player acquisition I was curious how Jason—an in the trenches PTQ/Regionals/Nationals competitor—got his start. I asked him how long he had been playing **Magic** and what was the first tournament he remember going to.

"I started playing **Magic** right when Mercadian Masques came out," said Jason, who had already racked up some card game gaming experience before that. "I was actually the top-rated Pokemon TCG player in the world at the time, so the transition to **Magic** was fairly easy and I began playing FNMs. I actually remember net-decking Kai's Covetous Dragon Worlds deck—that deck was really good."

that's really trying to play a 'fair' Magic game with non-sac'ing creatures like Tarmogoyf or Countryside Crusher is pretty easy [to beat with Dredge]. The worst matchups are usually determined by who sideboards the most hate. " – Jason Imperiale

Kai Budde		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
3 Ancient Tomb	4 Cursed Scroll	2 Boil
4 City of Traitors	4 Fire Diamond	3 Earthquake
13 Mountain	4 Grim Monolith	1 Mishra's Helix
_____	2 Mishra's Helix	1 Phyrexian Processor
20 lands	4 Temporal Aperture	2 Rack and Ruin
	4 Thran Dynamo	2 Shattering Pulse
	4 Voltaic Key	4 Spellshock

4 Covetous Dragon	4 Wildfire	15 sideboard cards
1 Karn, Silver Golem	2 Worn Powerstone	
3 Masticore		
8 creatures	32 other spells	

From there Jason moved on to the JSS, and when he ran out of eligibility made the jump to the next stage of competition. "PTQs were probably during the time I was getting out of the JSS and that was another pretty clean transition into more competitive **Magic**. I used the FNMs at my local store, Golden Memories, to really get a feel for the game. It's really nice to have stepping stones like that when becoming interested in more competitive arenas."

Since then Jason has become a fixture on the East Coast PTQ scene. He actually reached double digits in his attempts to qualify for one event last season.

"Last year for the PT in San Diego I traveled a lot to try and qualify but was ultimately unsuccessful," Jason said. "I probably played in 10 qualifiers in just that one season. San Diego is a really great city as I had been there for Nationals a few years prior and really wanted to go back."

As for the farthest he has traveled for a PTQ—aside from traveling to Grand Prix events—that also reached double digits.

"Probably a 2HG PTQ in West Virginia with Jim Davis," Jason guessed. "It was a ten-hour drive."

As someone who has come up through the ranks and seems poised to make the next step up in Players Club membership, I wanted to know if Jason had any advice to share with players starting out at the PTQ level.

"I think there are plenty of important things PTQ beginners should know when really starting to play the PTQ circuit," said Jason, who has some up-close experience in this area. "I've recently started attending PTQs with two good friends, Brian and 'Big Joe,' and this is their first PTQ season. The most important and relative advice I gave them is to play a deck they are very comfortable with. When a player can play a deck he knows really well, he can focus much easier on all sorts of interactions in the match as opposed to working extra hard to not make blatant errors with his own deck. Also to not be afraid of judges and use them as a tool to thoroughly understand the rules and make sure the game is being played fairly."

"The most important and relative advice ... is to play a deck [you] are very comfortable with. When a player can play a deck he knows really well, he can focus much easier on all sorts of interactions in the match as opposed to working extra hard to not make blatant errors with his own deck." –Jason Imperiale

Grand Prix Reading

I am looking forward to covering Jason next weekend in Philadelphia and hope he can build upon his last two weekends. If you can't wait until then for your Grand Prix fix, you should tune your web browser to the Tournament Center this weekend as Tim Willoughby explores the post-*Morningtide* Standard landscape with coverage from Grand Prix–Shizuoka. You may recall that I did an interview with Tim—and some other members of the coverage family—a few columns back. In that piece Tim expressed a desire to one day travel to Japan at least once a year. This weekend he got his wish and I can't wait to hear what he thinks of the new format and his new experiences in Japan.

Firestarter: Loss for Words

I remember going to a Sunday PTQ in Rochester, New York following a disappointing event in Boston the day before. The format in the Top 8 was *Mirage/Visions* Rochester Draft and I made it to the draft table. The deck I drafted seemed great with all the blue-black tempo cards that were in the best draft decks of that format, only to have to sit on a one-lander and a six-lander in two quarterfinal games before the advent of the current mulligan rules (back then you could only mulligan all-land or no-land hands). It remains one of the worst losses I can recall in all the years I have been playing **Magic**.

What is your worst memory of losing a game of **Magic**, and how did you get yourself past it? Head to the forums and share your tales of woe!

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