



# How I Play

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 Limited Information  
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Given infinite time, the meaty topic of this week would have been broken down into smaller, digestible bites. Alas time is the enemy, and mine is near done. As such, I thought I'd throw everything together and talk about how my style of play has honed itself since I began playing an astonishing fourteen years ago. While this week merely scratches the surface, a sampling seems better than nothing at all. This is how I play.

Please keep in mind, this style is simply what worked for me. While I've done pretty well with the game over the years (18 Pro Tours, some Grand Prix and Nationals, occasional FNM door prize), there are tons of quality players out there who view things in a vastly different light. And that's okay. It's not a question of "how to play better," but rather "How can I use my natural inclinations to lead to better results?" Actually it's more about the process than the results, but we'll get there in a bit.

I've broken this into a few different sections, based on different points in an event. Although this article (and this column) is nominally for the tournament-going crowd, I hope casual or semi-competitive readers will also be able to get something out of this. Clearly "tournament mentality" won't apply to your kitchen table event, but then I suppose it's up to you to translate the material how you wish. Of course a lot of this has to do with what you get out of the game, but that's more for next week. Shall we get started?

## Pre-Tournament

Despite the introduction, I expect some people to be surprised a strategy article is discussing points wholly unrelated to shuffling and playing **Magic**. Yet competitive **Magic** is a holistic process. While technically one could do everything wrong between the match and still play perfectly to win the tournament, in reality it doesn't go down like that. This is your investment time, where you put in effort now to get a good return later. There's no "correct" amount of effort to put into this time, it's simply a function of what you want to accomplish. This phase can be broken into two parts:

### Know what you're doing.

Aside from [Prereleases](#), you should not be heading to an event unsure of what you'll see. For Limited, that means a strong familiarity with the cards you'll be using. Are there tricks or nuance to the format? Are there pitfalls? Do you have any secret info to give you an edge? Can you go looking?

I've written before on the joy of experimentation. I am a big fan of trying out new cards, new archetypes, even new formats. There are two advantages to these forays. One, it keeps things fresh. When you're doing all this reading and testing for the upcoming event, sometimes the process becomes tedious. This is an issue. Tedium ≠ Fun, and if you're only half-motivated, you are not going to gain as much from the practice. Going through the motions, autopilot, is awful for every aspect of this game, satisfaction included. Mixing things up keeps up the dynamic process, and keeps *you* involved.

Further, these experiments will make you a stronger, more rounded player. This also comes about from two, slightly paradoxical sources. The first is that **Magic** sets across time have a lot of overlap. Creatures and removal are going to be great, sure, but also mana bases, tempo, etc. If playing the totality of old and new formats allowed you to construct the perfect tempo theory, then you'd be a force both present and future. Mastering the fundamentals give you skills to tackle bizarre Sealed pools, new sets, etc.

Second to mastering the basics is mastering the minutia of Set X. Despite the fundamentals being in place everywhere, each format shakes out in a unique way. Examples are the usefulness of bounce, fear, reach, speed, control... the list goes on. These facets exist everywhere, but their ratios are unique to the expansion symbol. The more you play, especially practicing with new cards and archetypes, the more you'll be able to read the "lay" of a set and apply the lessons



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accordingly.

Pre-tournament, at least a tournament I care about, I'm going to get in games. If I'm always drafting the same deck, I will make *conscious efforts* to try something new, just to get a balanced feel. You can't always play what you want, but you can be set up to handle whatever is thrown at you. To me, the cardinal sin of going to a tournament (aside from the Prerelease) is being surprised. If I come across a situation I hadn't seen before, or at least something analogous, I dropped the ball somewhere. You can bet if I'm not able to play with the cards as much as I'd like, I'm certainly reading the info out there. People are certainly opinionated on what they think is strong and what they don't (you're welcome to disagree of course) But when the clock's ticking on those Sealed builds, or the judge is counting down a pick in the Top 8 draft, I don't want to be holding any card I haven't played with before. I don't want to wonder how it will play with I've built so far. I want to *know*.

### Know why you're doing it.

The "why" of **Magic** is next week's topic, but there is plenty of relevance to this one as well. Essentially, before you commit the time and money to a major (or minor) tournament, ask yourself why you want to play. Have fun? Test yourself? See friends? Win a trip to some exciting foreign locale? Combinations thereof?

The "why" may seem superfluous, but it relates to everything else. While in my youth I would play anything **Sicken** and everything, these days my time is a little more precious. In addition, while I used to play whenever the opportunity presented, oftentimes it was a mistake—for example, when I was sick. I am the world's worst ill **Magic** player. I mean, it's embarrassing how poorly I play when I've got the sniffles. God only knows how much time and cash I've thrown away by forcing myself to play when I wasn't feeling healthy. An expensive lesson, but I think it's (finally) taken. If you can play quality **Magic** on your sickbed you're a stronger person than me. For the rest of us, when you're sneezing and hacking, do yourself and everyone else a favor and sit this one out.

But the ill thing doesn't happen that often. More common, at least with the people I talk to, is not feeling "it." That drive, that excitement...Whatever "it" is, things don't go well without it. Here's why you need to figure out why you're going to a tournament: because if your goals can't be met, you shouldn't go. Let's see, you were going to an event to see your buddies, but they all said they weren't going to make it? And you went anyway, your heart wasn't in it, you did bad and had a bad time? That'll happen.

If there's a tournament I'm interested in, I'm going to ask why I'm interested in it. If it seems plausible those goals will be met by playing, I'll start preparing. But I'm going to keep checking in and seeing if I'm still interested in playing. Sometimes my testing goes nowhere, or there's a conflicting event on the day of, or I just don't feel excited or energized. Especially the night before, I'll take an honest examination and determine if I still want to play the next day. If not, I'll skip it and do something else, no problem. Sometimes it's annoying to flush all that testing away, but what good is format skill if you don't want to be there? Sunk costs are sunk costs, and there's no reason to punish yourself. If I don't want to play a tournament, for any reason or none, I'm not going to play. That one took me about a decade to figure out. You're welcome.

### Pre-Game

But let's say there's a Pro Tour Qualifier coming up that I really want to play. I like the format, I like the venue, I like my chances. I've put in the work and I'm ready to hit the scene. What's next?

The morning of, I'm going to try to get up early enough to shower and *eat a good breakfast*. Actually the "good" part is gravy (sometimes literally gravy!). Eat something nonruinous if possible, but *anything* is better than nothing. Doughnuts are not recommended for daily consumption, but if there's a pinch, so be it. Coffee and water will fit in somewhere.

Besides giving the body some energy, I'll also try to wake up the brain. Be it casual games online, a newspaper, solitaire; whatever will remove the cobwebs. Ideally I'd get a few games in with a buddy before the event proper starts. Zen is ideal for this, but even some Vintage will lubricate your tapping muscles. So we're awake, we're active, and we're ready to win some games. Registration goes without a hitch, and just like that, pairings for Round 1. Exciting! What is going on in your head?

## The Tournament Mentality

### Confidence

Confidence and **Magic** are a match made in heaven. All you need is a couple tourney wins under your belt or a **magicthegathering.com** column to think you're God's gift to cardboard. Confidence is one thing, but I do my best not to cross the line to arrogance. There's a problem with arrogance and the labels and that come with it. When you call yourself the best, you're calling everyone else, well, not the best. I don't like labels.

This isn't really something I think about consciously, but whenever I go to a tournament (or school or sporting event or job or opera or whatever) I will never, ever think "I don't belong here." This is a far cry from "I'm the best, learn at my feet." Rather it's "I have something to contribute and something to learn." I may be the "best" or the "worst" but either way there's always an area to improve on. Everyone should think of themselves as worthy of competing and let the chips fall where they may. The winner will be revealed as the day goes on; there's a system in place for that kind of thing. Calling yourself #1 cuts out that potential for growth, which means even if you are the "best," it won't last forever. This flows nicely into...

### Respect

I have a lot of respect for my opponents. They'll kill you, man! Respect for your opponents means respect for their capabilities, in both teaching something and the more pedantic winning the match. Just a small number of these opponents is all that stands between you and that sweet trophy.

But it's easy right? Look at the size of that deck, or their gender, or their age! Someone from [arbitrary classification] couldn't really win the game, right? It's funny, but stereotypes don't give you a very reliable picture. If you *want* to assume you're unstoppable you can do so, but I fail to see how that actually helps you win games.

When I sit down across from someone, I greet them and from there on out they have my full attention. I hope I win, but I don't expect my opponent to make it easy for me. As far as I'm concerned, I'm about to play the most important and difficult match of the day. Sometimes I'm wrong and the match wasn't that difficult. But that's okay, that's a happy mistake. How bad are things when they fall the other way? I'd much rather think things were going to be hard and be wrong than think things would be easy and be wrong and lose. A little respect now saves some heartache later.



Besides, you two are in the same boat. You like games, you play **Magic**, you're both human. A little courtesy never hurt anyone, and a lot makes the experience that much better. If you really want a pragmatic reason to be respectful of an opponent, wouldn't you want the easier opponent to keep coming back for more? But really, why make enemies when you can make friends? I'm as much fan of repartee as the next guy, but that doesn't cross into random insults. I wish I were more surprised to even be writing this (looking at you, Internet).

### Pessimism

I am exceedingly, humorously, pessimistic on whatever deck I'm playing. If we should ever meet an event and you ask how my deck is, I will tell you it's terrible to awful to horrendous to "0-1, drop." There is no card pool out there that will make me happy. The best you'll get is maybe a "I've seen worse. But not much worse."

Is this my Minnesota upbringing? Do I have the worst luck ever? Am I horrid judge of card quality? Possibly, but it really relates to the respect point above. Confidence is one thing, but complacency is quite another. That fine line between confidence and arrogance spills over to deck construction. I don't want to be lazy and I don't want to think my deck is so good it plays itself. I want some unruly beast of a deck that needs a firm hold to keep it contained. I want a deck where even the slightest slip of concentration means death. Now obviously some decks are less difficult than others, but since I want to play at 100% no matter what, I try to treat each one the same. This is pessimism, mind you, not fatalism or defeatism. I don't count half-empty glasses before they hatch, and I really don't like to give up (below). This is more a trick than anything substantive but it works for me; back against the wall mentality and all that. Do you do anything to maintain your level of concentration?

## Game Time

Did you think "How I Play" meant we'd be talking about playing **Magic**? Not without a 2,000 word preamble, mister! Is it poor writing, maybe even unprofessional? Thank you, confidence!

Games are tough and fun. Games intersect with luck, but you might be surprised how rarely luck *determines* a game. So when you're playing a game

### Fight

You fight and you fight and you don't stop fighting until the other person is done. You never stop scrapping, trying to take some edge and slip into some nook. You exploit what's given to you and you scramble for the rest. You fight as hard as you can, refusing to give up ground and inch towards victory. This is not the time to be lazy.

If you want to win, and it's okay if you don't, you need to work. And the tough part isn't playing a *turn* correctly, it's playing every turn correctly. Despite numerous [Magic: The Puzzling](#) episodes, most games are not won when the board gets laughably complex and you pull out the key sequence to take the gold. Oh, those do happen of course, and they're quite memorable. But most games are won simply by playing the correct turn, every turn. You look at your situation, you execute your best play, and then you do it again. And again and again, until oops, you've won. Simple, no?

Simple yes, but things go awry. One thing you cannot do is stop trying your hardest, every turn, to play the best turn possible. Note I did not say actually executing the best turn possible—that comes later. Effort though, that's controllable now. Why wouldn't anyone put their best effort forward?



So many reasons—that arrogance / complacency again. I played a guy the other day, pretty solid player. We split the first two, and in the third game I got mana screwed. I was trying to hold on but things were slipping fast. But my opponent had a Banneret in play, forgot about it, and ended up mana burning for 1. Guess what happened?

Nothing. I mean I lost, and badly. Decisively. He ended that game at 19 life and positive eight packs. Why am I telling you this story? Is it my Minnesota upbringing? Do I have the wor—

The reason is, he screwed up. His mistake didn't cost him anything, but it could have. He got lazy cause he thought the game was in the bag, and started playing sloppy. I'm certain if that fellow was playing in the finals of a

Pro Tour, he would not have burned for one there. You may ask why he should play so hard in the finals of an 8-man, but I'd ask you, why not? It didn't happen this time, but plenty of times I've gotten back in a game because my opponent started playing on autopilot as soon as he pulled ahead. I've lost way more games than I've won after missing three land drops, but we're not talking 100% here. My opponent starts missing land drops, I may make sympathetic noises, but I'm going to be fighting as hard as possible until one of us is gone. As annoyed as I am at myself when I screw up (work in progress), I get downright depressed when I start playing lazy. Luckily there are tricks to keep your attention up, like the pessimism above. Others:

## Stop-Think-Breathe

As soon as I hit autopilot, it's time to pull back. I've got a goal I'm working towards, be it slipping in a few points or generating card advantage or what have you. But I'll abandon it in a second if it's the right thing to do. How does their play affect things? Their lack of play? What could go really wrong here? Are there any opportunities to take advantage of? As soon as I stop asking those questions it's time to pull it together.

The key word up there is "goal." I do not like plans. Models, schemes, aspirations are fine. Scripts are not. The game simply changes too fast to allow blind adherence to take you anywhere. People like plans because they're safe and easy. No matter what, the plan gives you a clear direction. I think you know where this is headed.

I try, and this is tough so I don't always succeed, but I try to look at every turn with fresh eyes. As if I were sitting down to a game for the first time, sometimes even reading the cards for the first time. In fact, actually reading a card in your hand is an excellent stop-and-think move. If things are moving too fast and you want to slow it down, start reading cards as if you had never seen them before. Although you should be comfortable with every card you're playing with, scrutinizing cards can lead to interesting revelations. For example, *Lorwyn* block has an odd disconnect between token makers and the tokens they produce. Sometimes there's a shared subtype and sometimes there's not. For example, *Lys Alana Huntmaster*, an Elf Warrior, makes 1/1 Elf Warriors. *Boggart Mob* makes 1/1 Goblin Rogues, but is itself a Goblin Warrior. Little things, but you look for those nooks. You don't need to make assumptions when the cards are in front of you.

This point was really hammered home at an old Grand Prix in Atlanta. The format was *Urza's Saga* and I was up against a Mr. Nate Clarke. He was hitting me hard but I had managed to untap with my *Witch Engine* in play. Ready to clear the board and take massive card advantage, I played *Pestilence*, then tapped the Engine for the black mana needed to power it up. Nate paused, read *Witch Engine*, and then responded to the ability by *Disenchanted Pestilence!* Shocked, I read it too and sure enough it said "Play this ability as an instant." Where you at, mana source? I called a judge, asking for a better interpretation, or barring that insta-errata, but he wasn't biting. Obviously I lost the next turn. Amusingly, I could have added the mana then played *Pestilence* and fired it up. Whoops.

But we're getting a little sidetracked here. The point is to take those steps to avoid falling into mindless patterns. Stay active in the game. After that little *Pestilence* debacle I like to read cards, but taking a deep breath, or calling over a judge for a rules question, or whatever else you need to do is okay too. Don't start stalling, of course, just take a moment to collect yourself, if you feel you've lost your focus. Sometimes taking a moment and looking at things at a new light provides a way out. For example, this mini-version of a game I saw a month ago:



Oh, that engine

## OPPONENT: 4 LIFE



## YOU: 2 LIFE



## YOUR HAND:



You're in the last game of a very tense match. You know from a clash that your next draw is a land, although you don't know the top card of their library. You were all set to double-block the **Faultgrinder** and win with **Titan's Revenge**, but on the end of your turn your opponent played **Makeshift Mannequin** on a **Mulldrifter**, and now here they come. You know from the first two games your opponent has three **Smokebraiders** and two **Consuming Bonfire** left in their deck. What's your best move this turn?

Click [here](#).

Your best move is to double block the **Faultgrinder** and activate the **Daggerdare** targeting the **Mannequined Mulldrifter**. While it's not often that you **Daggerdare** their attacking creatures, once in a great while it's the move. You're not guaranteed to win, of course, but this gives you your best chance. Any automatic thinking here (e.g., Need life → **Lammastide Weave** might give life) is just going to cost you opportunity. Fresh eyes may provide the answer, especially with scenarios more complex than this.

### Fight (2)

I like aggressive decks. No matter what else, they'll give you extra time for lunch. I didn't used to play them though. Many years ago, when I was more terrible and everyone else was way more terrible, I adored controlling strategies. Why? Well, the longer the game went on, the more opportunity they had to screw up. Each turn was just another chance for them to hand the game over.

While this did work, it was a flawed paradigm. Presuming intelligent, learning opponents, *reliance* on their mistakes is a shrinking resource. Sure they may make a mistake, but what happens the second time? Besides, sometimes they don't make any mistakes at all. And sometimes they'll screw up, but their deck is so good that just hanging out lets them outclass you. It's not *that* difficult to win with **Silvos** or **Rolling Thunder** or **Frankie Peanuts** or whatever. Respect again.

So I go the opposite way. I want the game over fast. I want to be an avalanche, pushing them into a canyon of defeat. Yes, I may be preventing them from making bad plays, but I'm also try to prevent them from making good ones. Or playing good cards. You know, doing their thing.

Aggression covers a lot of holes. It lets you exploit their poor mana draw or mana base skills, it lets you cover for any pricey or undrawn bombs they may own, it often prevents them from attacking *you*, and it's disruptive. Constant attacks won't faze the top tier players, because they're used to the same. But middle-of-the-road folk are often put off by the sheer assault a well tuned aggressive deck, or player, can administer. When you're attacking for 1 and they could attack you back for 2, but are too frightened to risk it, you're in fine shape. My favorite rule: **The first person to stop attacking loses**. That's overly simplistic, but it forms a key tenet of my style. A lot of good things happen when you're attacking, and vice versa. Obviously if it's foolish to attack, don't. The goal is still to play every turn correctly. It simply turns out attacking often goes hand in hand with a well played turn.



So how does control fit into this? While I've got my preferences, they're hardly binding. First-pick **Sygg**, second-pick **Drowner of Secrets**, and some **Summon the School**, sure we're probably rolling out a control build. Control simply means I think I have a better chance of winning than them the longer the game goes on. Since I don't have

their list in front of me I'm pessimistic about a long game. But if you have an understanding that your deck wants to play that role, go for it. In reality most decks can and should go either direction. I'm as disinterested in playing with a deck that needs to win by turn seven as I am in playing a deck that prays an opponent won't play anything until turn four. Your draws and theirs determine the correct course.

But presuming my deck can go aggressive, and presuming it's correct to, I'm going to deal damage. Whenever it's possible to sneak a point in I'm going to. I'm going to attack if I represent an obvious trick (reinforce is grand for this), and I'm going to attack if I think by doing so I can dissuade them from attacking back. Most people, sadly, are fearful about your potential. I like to represent I have the potential for doing 5-7 points out of nowhere. I love to exchange my life points for something substantial. Years ago I had that big "ah ha" moment. My **Karmic Guide** had returned an **Expendable Troops** to play a couple of turns ago. The opponent had out a blue flying 2/1 and a green nonflying 2/2 and in they came, with me at a scant 3 life. My initial instinct was to block both and preserve my life total, but then that epiphany. "Who cares about life points? I'll go down to 1 life for the card advantage." And I did. I don't remember if I won that game, but I sure know it was the right play. With our modern thinking I'm sure that seems obvious, and obviously the opponent should have attacked with just one of his creatures, etc. All true, but we have to start somewhere.



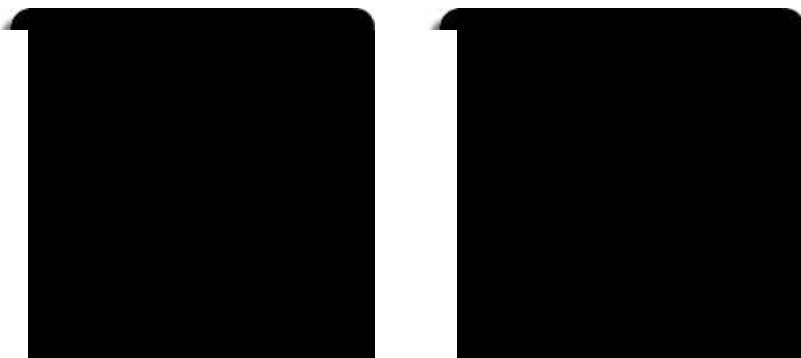
These days if anything I'm probably too reckless with my life points. I hate throwing them away, but perhaps the exchange isn't as strong as it could be. So I guess don't do that. But I'd much rather be erring on too aggressive than too passive, and I'll take a lot of opportunities to keep the pressure on. Keep *them* reacting, keep them off their game, and you'll see those wins flowing.

### Concessions

Two parts here. I don't often concede, and I'm happy when they concede. Let's start with the latter.

A lot of good things happen when your opponent concedes. You've won, for one thing. That's good. Another is you cannot lose. Also a good thing. While that may seem obvious, the fact is every turn is another chance for you to lose, even from insanely one-sided positions. It's a humid day and some cards stick together when you try to draw them, and if someone gets the wrong idea you may lose that game. Or you may just drop your hand and pick up a warning. Or forget about a Pact, or mana burn under **Gaddock Teeg**, or any number of ways a game can slip out of your grasp. Concessions negate all that, which is why I'm very happy when that win gets resolved.

Now this isn't hypnosis or trash talking or anything like that. If I have 40 Elves to their tapped-out 1-lifeness, I'll tell them at the end of their turn "I'm going to kill you now. With these Elves." Maybe I'll accompany that with some "all-in" hand motion. And they'll probably agree, because it's true, and concede and that will be that. It's not disrespectful, it's the truth. And ideally it's a win sooner rather than later. This is a legitimate place for people to offer the hand in concession, and you have a right to ask for it (they're welcome to decline of course). This probably adds .001% edge, but why not? Wins are a good habit to get into. I'd probably concede here too, but if I had some untapped lands and a card in hand, they'd have to go through the motions.





When you concede you're giving up all possibility of learning more. I had a buddy in a real hurt locker a couple of months ago, but he wanted to "play it out." Along the way to his destruction, he saw the [Judge of Currents](#) / [Stonybrook Angler](#) on itself combo. He still lost, but had he conceded he'd be minus a cute little trick. There are valid reasons for conceding, just make sure they're in place before you pack it in.

A particularly bad time to concede is too early, such as when things get tough. You (yes you Steve!) would not believe how many people have scooped wayyyyyy before the game was locked up. It's bizarre. I've seen it go from a 1/1,000 chance of pulling it out to people *who were actually winning* giving up. There's no shame in conceding if your chances of winning are zero, to preserve deck information and/or the round clock. But make them earn it! If you have a sliver of a shot, definitely hit it. And you might be surprised how possible it really is to get out of a difficult spot. Stabilizing at 2 life and going on to win is hardly the realm of fantasy, but you only get your chance if you're still in the game, playing every turn correctly. I don't have the resources to tackle the math, but how many times do you need to hit that 1/100 chance before you score a win? Which goes into our last point:

### Taking Opportunities

The other reason I don't like plans, besides the possibility they may lead you to do something bad, is that they prevent you from doing something better. There are times when opportunity presents itself to do something exciting. Being aware of those chances is a great way to add some edge to your game and sneak in some extra wins.

I said above I don't like to rely on an opponent making a mistake, and that's true. However I have nothing against *hoping* an opponent makes an error. I want to box them into a corner and limit their choices to "correct, futile option" and "big error." Here's an easy example:



There would have to be a compelling reason for me not to attack here. Do I have the **Earthbrawn** or **Brighthearth Banneret** in my hand here? Irrelevant. I'm going to deal 2. This is a chance to deal a couple of free points, probably play some three-drop, and maybe put the fear of a trick in my opponent besides. If he blocks my Warrior, then very little bad happens. They bounce off each other, or I really do have the trick. There's hardly any loss, and solid gains available. Admittedly you're accepting their return strike, but for the reasons they don't want to block you, you don't want to block them. Sometimes they'll be so scared they keep their guys back, if not immediately then later in the game. Again, lots of upside, very little down. These kinds of scenarios are all over the place, if you consider the breadth of options available. Here's another classic I saw the other day. Getting this one right speaks very well of your instincts:

## OPPONENT: 7 LIFE



### YOUR HAND:



You've done some damage, most recently with a fatty-pants [Changeling Sentinel](#) (thanks, [Epic Proportions](#)). But your opponent has been accumulating Elves like crazy, and now his [Jagged-Scar Archers](#) are larger than your guy. This is a problem. You're interested in winning of course, but at the very least you want to cut down those Archers before things get silly. Lo, a freshly drawn [Weight of Conscience!](#) It's the beginning of your turn, and you're at a high enough life total that your opponent can't attack back for the win if you swing. [What's your play?](#)

Your best move is to play [Weight of Conscience](#) on [Jagged-Scar Archers](#) and attack. It's not guaranteed, but your opponent may think you screwed up and block solely with the Archers. If they do that's game, cause you're going to tap some guys, remove the Archers, and trample over for the win. Their best play is to block with a [Huntmaster](#), some elves and the Archers, in which case you'll RFG the Archers and kill stuff as normal. If they do that, you're in the same place you were as if you had played [Weight](#) and removed the Archers before the attack. By playing it this way, you give yourself an extra chance to win the game. And those opportunities add up.

### Post

I hope this has better explained how I approach the game. I try to show respect, I fight hard, and I generally have a good time. As long as I'm drinking water, hanging out with friends and learning stuff, things seem to go fine. Hopefully I didn't play too badly, but if so, there's always another tournament down the road. These topics were criminally under-explored, and we didn't even talk about mulligans! If there was something you'd like to see in more detail, I'm sure New Guy would love to hear about where I got it wrong. In the meantime, next week is the last column for this interim fellow. As always, thanks for reading.



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