

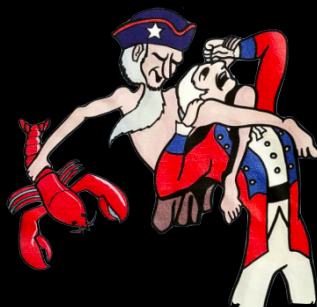


# Another Classic From THE Dojo

The Magic Community

Welcome to my annual Old School *Magic: The Gathering* Year in Review for 2023! If you are looking for past editions, they can be [found here](#).

This is going to be a pretty dense strategy article/tournament report of my recollections of the past year. I competed in the New England Old School (NEOS) league, and the X-Point Tolaria league. These events consistently draw about 50-60 people per month. My goal was to try out some new decks and tune some old ones. In the end, I had my most successful year of playing *Magic* in two decades. I won both leagues - but more importantly I built upon friendships, extended my network of contacts, and overall had a blast slinging old cardboard. Here's the story of how it all played out.

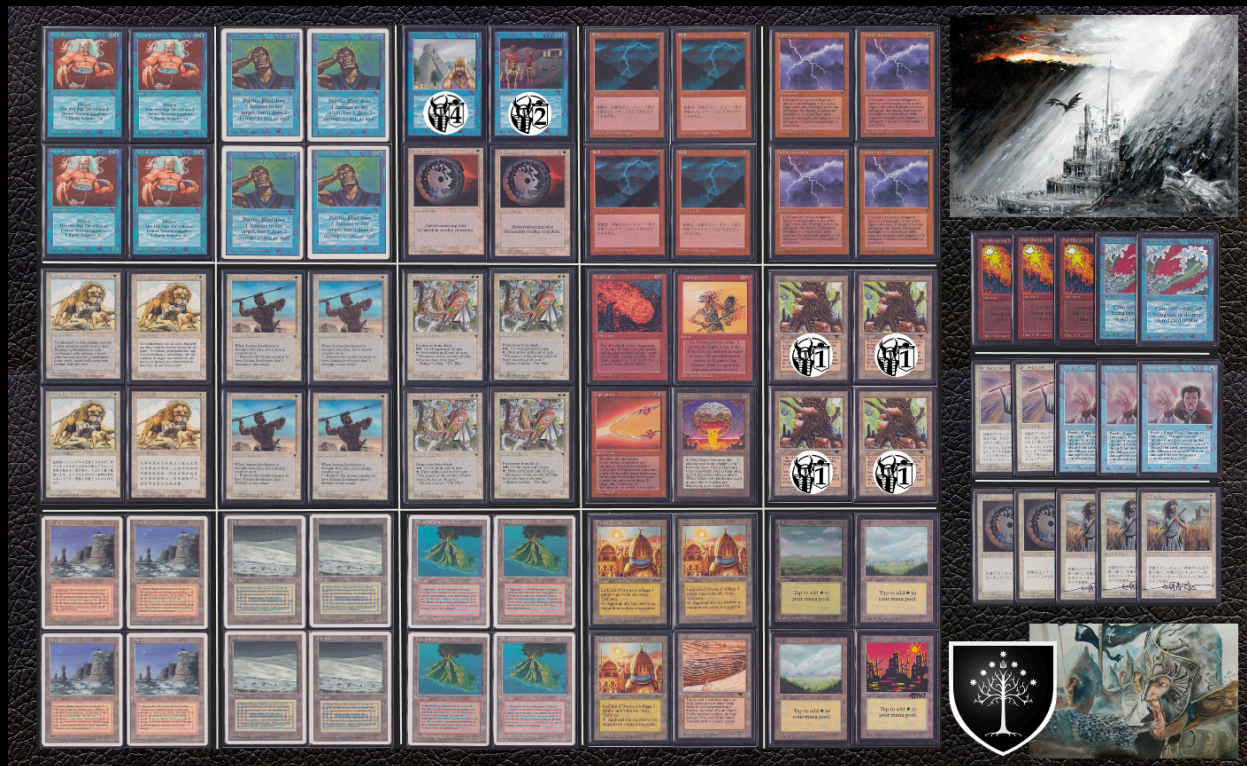


## NEOS Season 10

Huge thanks go out to the tournament organizers. In this case NEOS Season 10 marked Jared Doucette's fiftieth (!) time running the monthly online tournament hosted by our local club, a remarkable feat that deserves acclamation. During this time, Jared also was in the process of planning for his wedding, which I was overjoyed to attend this December. Busy man! NEOS years are divided into two five-month seasons, bisected by the Summer and Winter Derbies. Each month has a special rules twist to it, and I love the challenge of reacting to the curveballs Jared throws our way. [I won Season 9](#) the first half of 2023, and while I wasn't going to go "above-and-beyond" to win Season 10, I wasn't going to give it away, either. I played a variety of strong strategies and came from behind in the point chase by winning the last two months to defend my title.

## August: X-Point

●●● “Jeskai Lions” (4-2)



Season 10 kicked off with X-Point, one of my favorite formats. For the uninitiated, X-Point is like traditional Atlantic Old School, but with a major caveat: [there's a point restriction list that holds your deck to under 10 value points](#). This requires decision-making and encourages experimentation. It makes things lively because if any deck or strategy seems to be too dominant, the tournament organizers can always buff up or down the point values to force a reset. I play the X-Point monthlies consistently, and was glad to see Jared chose to dabble in this space for a NEOS tournament.

I opted for a straightforward Lion-Dib-Bolt deck that Rich Shay and I developed two years ago. I had won two monthlies with it in X-Point, and also placed third at the Lobstercon X-Point event in June. Within my NEOS group, I faced off against the mirror match three times, unfortunately winding up with the short end of the stick (1-2 in those matches, 4-2 overall). Shown here is my photo of the Pete Simpson list that won our group (he of the much-maligned deck photo). The only differences were he played a copy of Fork in the maindeck over my third Disenchant, and 1 Fireball/1 Disintegrate where I played 2 Disintegrates. I stand by Disintegrate given the preponderance of Sedge Trolls, which can pose a brick wall to this deck's offense. I do agree that playing Ancestral and so much burn warrants Fork. Nothing wrong with Disenchant, either, but Fork is more aggressive and far more fun. It got me thinking more about Fork as an underutilized card in

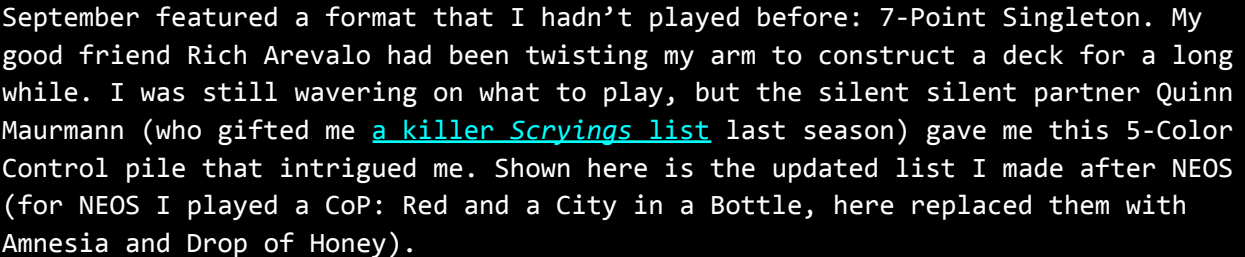


Old School, and I'd later employ it in a Grixis control strategy to win X-Point #32.

I had some sideboard differences from Pete's list, too. Desert is a heavily-played card in control builds (usually alongside Maze of Ith), and this certainly has a lot of glass-jaws that get stopped in their tracks by those lands. For this reason I sport two Icy Manipulators and an odd Copper Tablet in the sideboard; I think many control players shave Disenchant effects after boarding to bring in more creature control and lifegain. It's truly remarkable what an unchecked Icy Manipulator is capable of doing - from tapping blockers to City of Brasses to Mazes and Deserts, or holding someone off countermagic to get through a big spell. Once I experimented with three Stone Rains, but found having a few copies of Stone Rain was underwhelming whereas Icy always impacted the boardstate. For example if the problem you are trying to solve with Stone Rain is Desert/Maze, a single Manipulator is capable of tapping one end of turn and another on your main phase to get a larger attack through. It also brutally punishes them for tapping out for Serra Angel expecting to be able to block or gain 4 off a Swords. And there are many black-heavy decks that are ill-equipped to address Icy Manipulator - especially post-board. This would include black decks with red splashes for Sedge Trolls, against which Icy is another good weapon to neutralize. My other previous experiment was Crusade out of the board to address Desert and potentially grow my team against non-white creature-based decks, this was also when Triskelion was being heavily played and Crusade is a decent option there. I moved away from Crusade because it too often served to make an opposing Serra a 5/5, and I also didn't love casting Crusade into a deck with Wrath of Gods. Crusade flatly doesn't do anything about Maze of Ith, either. Seemed like it wasn't doing enough. As for this deck and its place in the metagame, I think it is very consistent and powerful, but there's some weaknesses.

#### September: 7-Point Singleton

 "5-Color Control" (7-1) \*Top 8\*



I took some heat for playing a “kold-dinner” deck with very few win conditions (Mirror Universe, Mishra’s Factory, and The Hive). But this suits my playstyle, and frankly strong control has to exist for any format to be rounded-out. I apologize to my opponents if things ran long, but I will say that I tried to play as speedily as possible. Still, I think my matches averaged between 50-60 minutes. They got faster as I got a handle on the play patterns. Sequencing of lands and spells is very crucial in 7 Point Singleton. Going creatureless was great, particularly with no sideboards. The nature of Singleton formats leads many to gravitate towards strategies that are decidedly midrange. In those matchups, an uber-control deck shines the most. While both players are trying to

assert control, this can simply go over the top with more impactful spells and fewer dead cards.

I went undefeated in the group stage (dropping just 1 game), including a win over Matthew Messa on Mono Black who went on to win the event. After blazing a trail into the playoffs, I had an amazing control-on-control rematch against Eureka Shivan. We played twice this month, and in one of our decisive games, I was on the right side of an interaction between my Pendelhaven and his Island of Wak-Wak. If he activated Wak-Wak and I responded with a pump, the +1/+2 layer stayed on the creature until the end of turn. If I activated first he could Wak-Wak in response to fizzle my Pendelhaven. But I was attacking for just enough to kill him before I decked myself. Great game.

I lost to Ty Thomason in the Top 8 on RG Aggro splashing Howl from Beyond. There's times when 5-Color Control stumbles out of the gate or just draws the wrong colored mana. I mulliganed as much as I could and still ran into dead hands. I think aggressive decks like Ty's are the absolute best approach for trying to topple this 5-Color monstrosity, just keep deploying threats and hope they draw the wrong answers.

Wanting to try out some changes, I played in my first proper 7-Point League in November, making the playoffs but being dispatched by Beastie Bas on Mono Black. I felt good about the matchup, but again, mismatched mana and spell colors - plus some fruitless mulligans - equaled an unanswered Nightmare trampling me in both games. It was glorious to see the 'Mare fly over the Moat, though. 7 Point is the best format for these kinds of jaunty interactions. Tellingly, I also lost to RG Aggro in the group stage, this time piloted by Craig Winzer. Confirmation that the hyper-aggro decks can be a problem. Then again, I did overcome two White Weenie decks in the event, too. I don't really have any other thoughts or modifications I'd make, I truly believe it has what it takes to win in 7-Point, but you need a little luck on your side, and patience. *"I'll be back."*

#### October: 4x Wastelands

 "Blue-Red Atog" (4-2)





This month's NEOS was a return to an inventive Old School "solution" - which is Wastelands are legal in place of Strip Mines, and you can play four copies. This helps correct for the power level of non basics such as Mishra's Factory, Library of Alexandria, and Maze of Ith. It prioritizes playing basic lands, and punishes those who jam more duals for splashes. Last time around I played [Factory-less Mono Blue Merfolk](#) (a "pet" deck of mine), but afterwards felt 16 Islands and 4 Wastelands was "too-cute-by-half," as opposed to playing more colors and non basics.

I was very confident in this Blue-Red Atog list, as it allows you to harness the power of low-curve aggression and use the classic Black Vise/Ankh of Mishra/land destruction trio. I think Library of Alexandria is too limited by Wasteland to maindeck, especially when removing it clears space for another valuable basic. LoA poses a strong sideboard card against slower control decks, or when you know you are on the draw and it's not against a Black Vise opponent. I also tried out Sage of Lat Nam for the first time - some have dubbed him a "fifth Atog" which seems strong. Still, I saw the value of being able to cash in Moxen or Vises that have outlived their usefulness, or Factories that are on their way to the grave. It did feel a little reactive in an otherwise highly-aggressive deck, and it isn't like I have a hostful of Robots that I want to leverage against Disenchants

and Swords. Another body was good - it might be better as Ironclaw Orcs or something nifty like Granite Gargoyle.

I was also trying out the Copy Artifact/Su Chi sideboard plan against Robots. I was showing heavy respect with Hurkyl's Recall, too. This emulated a sideboard I ran in [previous 4 Strip Mine events](#), based on Svante Landgraf's winning Fae-Tog deck, but now with a few of my own Su Chi targets for Copy, as well. I think Workshops is still the class of the format in 4 Wastelands, even more so because The Deck (which is usually Workshops' nemesis) is very crippled by opposing Wastelands, whereas a Workshop deck can simply cast a threat and if they blow up your land afterwards, they are still under big pressure.

The tournament went fairly well (4-2), I suffered both losses to Hymn to Tourach lists. I was kicking myself for not running Psychic Purges in the sideboard. One loss was to Dane Knudsen on I believe a new set of Juzams (nice!). He really deked me out by showing no Scrublands or other white duals, and then hitting on a huge Balance after I'd expended two burn spells on a Juzam, killing an Atog and Serendib. I just didn't put him on running Balance based on the lands I saw. Oops. Still, I went into the final group stage match with a chance to make 5-1 and advance, but was defeated by Ian Gustafson with what he later told me was an X-Point legal (!) Mono Black deck. Again Hymn did the damage. I lost a super-frustrating game 3 where Ian had Ritual-Hippie on the draw, and my hand featured Library of Alexandria and two Bolts...but no red source. I drew and drew for a few turns, but by the time the red mana showed up, the Hippie and its Tourach overlord had already depleted me beyond recovery. This loss knocked me out of the tournament.

Disappointing, but I still think this Atog deck has what it takes to win in 4x Wasteland World. It was a major oversight by me to not play Purges and, boy, I paid the price for it. This relates to my general belief about any *Fallen Empires*-legal format - especially the ones such as X-Point or Gentlemen's rules where you will see more Weenie decks around (Goblins, Green, Aggro Tax-Edge, RGW Zoo, straight White Weenie). The Purge is often a straight-up removal spell against these decks, with the upside of surprising an opponent's Balance or Wheel of Fortune. And against Mono Black it not only punishes their discard effects, but it also finds bonafide hardcast targets in Order of the Ebon Hand and the occasional Royal Assassin (more likely, even, after sideboarding). I am also a major proponent of Hurkyl's Recall in this sort of deck - there's obvious synergies with Black Vise and Draw 7's, but on top of that this deck can have its offense stymied by Su Chi, Triskelion, and Tetravus - Hurkyl's can be just the thing you need to clear the path for a big Atog swing. The key to both of these cards (Purge and Hurkyl's) is that they are being employed in an aggressive shell. Neither would make much difference if your deck's strategy is to control the board and deal with threats permanently. But if the deck is tempo-based and trying to deal 20 as fast as possible, I try not to leave home without them.



## November: Swedish

●●● "Bruder Bots" (9-0) \*1st\*



November was traditional Swedish with American reprints, kind of an early dry run for the Winter Derby this December-January. A deck that got a lot of well-deserved attention this year was Leo Bruder's Robots, which put up major results at Winc0n (3rd place) and Uthden Troll Cup (1st place). The most striking thing about this deck was playing the full complement of robots (4 Su Chi, 4 Triskelion), but not a copy of Swedish-restricted Mishra's Workshop. Intriguing first by the fact that it seemed like an "auto-include" in such a deck, but also because I don't own Workshop and had given up on ever being able to play a brown archetype.

I reached out to Leo - whom I had never talked to before - with some questions and for any advice he had about playing the deck. I credit the Old School community at large for being so willing to engage in conversations with me about decks when I have attempted to ask for guidance. I've networked with the leading experts in the field on such decks as Lion-Dib, Twiddle-Vault, Tax-Edge, The Deck, and Troll-Burn, just to name a few. Every time, these community members have been gracious with their time, forthcoming with their expertise, and supportive of my endeavors. Leo was no exception. I conversed with him throughout the tournament and updated him on my progress, learning the ins and outs of his Robots list.



The construction and nuances of this deck are delightful. The interactions between Triskelion, Copy Artifact, Sage of Lat Nam, Su Chi, Atog, Animate Dead, and Dance of Many are just delicious. That's literally the whole deck, right? The rest is broken restricted cards and a mix of staples. I think this is the truth behind the no-Workshops Robots deck: it relies more on interactivity, synergies, and colored midrange spells in the sideboard than the brute force of "Shop-Mox-Su Chi." You don't play Icy Manipulator or Tetravus, so there's less payoff to having Workshop. You're looking for a bigger splash from sideboard cards like Blood Moon and The Abyss, you can play Mana Drain (and even Counterspell). I can also see the other side of the argument, simply put: why not play a miser's Workshop and hope to luck out? Seems powerful. Who am I to say? Leo's results speak for themselves, and after playing the deck for a month I certainly grasp the logic.

I also did not own Leo's sideboard copy of Chains of Mephistopheles and substituted a Braingeyser for it - which was fine. I sided it in a decent amount and had no trouble casting it for big value. It helped me immensely against Andrés Hojman's Land Tax-based UW Control deck in the group stage. I played against a decent amount of Arabian/RUG aggro also and struck sparks with City in a Bottle. The difference between having no City in a Bottle in the maindeck and one City in a Bottle is huge. It means not only do you have a live card to draw, you have the Tutor for it, and in theory are building a deck that wouldn't get wrecked by it. It's another LoA answer, too, which we all know can run away with games sometimes. If you think about the expression "format-warping," City in a Bottle does that. Whenever building any deck or manabase, the underlying questions are: "Can I support Bottle? Do I lose to Bottle?" It's one of the necessary evils to keep things in balance, but it is one of the fundamental pillars of deckbuilding in Old School. The value goes up further in Swedish; without *Fallen Empires* it's a narrower pool of creatures (and simply cards overall), therefore Bottle is more likely to hit. It was a feature of the [Serra Angel/Mahamoti Djinn version of The Deck](#) that made Hot Moti Summer 2022 happen.

I played Rob Hackney in the November Finals on a Lion-Dib UWb midrange deck, of the Alban Lauter school. If you're interested, you can see the finals replay [here](#). I lucked out that he did not draw enough white mana, and I was able to stick a significant Blood Moon game 3 that locked it up. He had an enormous amount of artifact destruction, I was hoping to get Sages to counteract them. In the end I had some Sages that absorbed Swords to Plowshares, and timely Mana Drains in all 3 games that stopped big spells like Balance and Mind Twist. Makes me consider running Counterspell over Dance of Many, just to have some more disruption. I was a journeyman thrill-seeker free-rolling an archetype I never had played before, and in the end I won the month of November. This also came together at the same time as there was a NEOS lodge gathering weekend to

celebrate Jared's impending matrimony. Great times seeing some familiar faces and playing *MtG*. Great month all around.

### December: Gentleman's Monocle Atlantic

●●● "Lion's Edge" (9-0) \*1st\*



And so, right after I played Rob in the November finals, I immediately contacted him about December's format: Gentleman's "Monocle" Atlantic (no Mind Twist, Library of Alexandria, or Ancestral Recall). Another great deck that I'd been itching to try was Rob's patented Lion-Edge aggro deck. It's a brilliant mix of 1 and 2 casting cost spells and Land Tax. Attacking with Factories poses a devil's dilemma about whether to take 2 or block and turn on Land Tax. With the Tax/Winds of Change you get an Ancestral-like effect in a format with no Ancestral. Though I hunt Land Tax by mulliganing aggressively, you can keep "honest" Pink Weenie hands and still have a good chance to win, and might even backdoor into the Tax package. Icatian Javelineers are great. I think the achilles' heel of this deck in regular Atlantic is Mind Twist, which can break your combo chain of Tax/Winds by discarding your lands. Even in Gentleman's Monocle you still need to look out for Wheel of Fortune and Balance for the same reason - you have no way to fight them on the stack, and if you get caught with all your basics in hand when they resolve, you won't be able to restart the Winds of Change engine. This means Land Taxing strategically, not always going for max value. Be sure to avoid wasting resources along the way (i.e. do not over-Tax to the point of discarding lands).

Another piece of advice Rob gave me was to get comfortable sideboarding into more than 60 cards, which I had never done before. If they are all good cards to draw, it improves the quality of the “broth” you have to Winds for after you have Taxed. It’s also done to ensure there’s enough threat density to actually kill the opponent. In stalemated games you could conceivably have used up too many burn spells to punch through for the knockout, particularly if they have ways to counter your Land’s Edge. So it’s wise to keep the number of creature threats and burn left in your deck at a higher quantity as opposed to taking out too many offensive weapons for defensive cards. This sideboard strategy was an angle of attack that I had not utilized before, and it worked out very well (and took some of the minutia out of making strict 1-for-1 sideboard swaps).

I streaked to the Finals, only losing two games all tournament. One to Christian Reinhard in the group stage (he had UBr Counterburn with some eccentric choices such as Cyclopean Mummy), and one to Daniel Anschutz’ Goblins in the Top 8, who caught me with a timely Blood Moon when my white mana was tapped, and I found no Plains. Other than that I drew well and felt very much in control throughout the month. I had a climactic showdown against Jared Miller on Workshops in the Semifinals, which was a *de facto* NEOS Season 10 Championship match (Jared was the last person within striking distance). Game 1, he did not have a Disenchant for my Land Tax and I was able to fuel up. Game 2 he mulliganed and I drew somewhere in the neighborhood of five Disenchant effects to back up a decent pressure draw. I played Pete Simpson, another Rocky Mountain Yeti, on Faetog in the Finals. It was a very close first game in which I drew just enough burn pieces to finish him off when I was facing down a lethal Serendib Efreet. Game 2 I managed to grind out a win in what turned out to be a topdeck war. I had Ivory Tower and a CoP: Red, he neutralized them with a Black Vise and a Chaos Orb. He got an Erhnam, and I had a Chaos Orb. Finally I drew into a Lions and a Factory to outlast Pete. This secured my third Old Man of the Sea trophy for being NEOS Season 10 Champion!



X-Point 2023



The other league I competed in was X-Point through [Tolaria.app](#). Huge thanks to Joe Scherer, Louis de Nijs, Joe Becica, and Tim Atwood for their stewardship and leadership of the format. Without them there could be none of this. I was coming off [a successful 2022 League Championship](#) and defending my crown here as well. And again, I took the same approach as I always do: play some new decks, continue tinkering with some of my established decks. If you want to call this “spiking,” then so be it. I play with good cards. But I do embrace variety and have a genuine desire to perfect the decks I continue to play year over year. And built into X-Point is an ever-evolving metagame brought on by the point adjustments. 2023 saw the consistent [point schedule found here](#)...but there is also a [new point table for 2024 found here](#). I’ll comment on what I did in 2023 and how I would adapt each of these decks to the 2024 point values.

### ●●● “Dark Heart Erhnamgeddon”

Tournament #24 (4-2) \*Top 16\*



Ah, the original “Cold Dinner” deck innovated by David Lilleøren that was a menace two seasons ago - before Land Tax was upped to 2 points. It basically has the normal Erhnam-Geddon components but then features the broken (but grindy) engine of Land Tax, Dark Heart of the Wood, and Sylvan Library. These enchantments are basically fine independent of one another, but as you stack them together they turn into an engine of card drawing, card selection, and life gain that is tough to beat. I return to this deck from time to time, and early this

year I tried a new approach of 'Geddons and more one drops to induce the opponent's land play, and to make it a bit sleeker. The prior version had 4 Angels and More Winter Orb/Icy Manipulator action, plus a Mox Pearl (instead of Geddons #2 and 3). I also packed more low-curve creatures into the sideboard to further try this experiment. It was a fairly successful month, I made the playoffs but ended up losing to Tim Atwood's tuned White Weenie deck. The turning point was when he pummeled me with an unexpected Holy Light to annihilate my board of Elves and Birds! Sometimes 1-drop mania can backfire.

I think the deck continues to be a reasonable one to play, especially given the new points changes. This deck loses nothing but benefits from the additional point added to Hymn to Tourach and Wrath of God. In the past Blue-White Control had been a real problem for this deck (mainly why I went with the 3 Armageddons). If the metagame shifts to more aggressive decks with fewer angry Gods being cast, then this deck could make a resurgence. It's fun to play, but slow. Another avenue is cutting an Armageddon and Regrowth to get back Mox Pearl? I definitely don't think I've perfected the mix yet.

# ●●●● "UWr Control"

Tournament #25 (9-0) \*1st\*, #28 (8-1) \*1st\*, #30 (3-2), #35 (8-2) \*1st\*



I continued to bang away at the UW Skies archetype, pioneered by such X-Point innovators as Raymond Mitchell and Jorgo Vanhees. I finally hit paydirt with it in 2023, winning three of the four Tournaments I played it in (#25, #28, and

#35). Shown is the deck I won #25 with, which I enjoyed the most because I toyed with using an “honest Basalt Monolith” for value. This deck has direct ways to utilize it: Fireballs, Braingeyser, Recall. But more frequently, being able to cast Serra Angel with Counterspell backup, or Jayemdae Tome with activation mana. Often it generated the fear factor out of my opponents - thinking there might be a Power Artifact/Fireball coming - and it soaked up a valuable Disenchant. I like having a unique card like this in the maindeck that I can easily sideboard out, it makes those decisions simpler. That said, in subsequent editions of the deck I simply played an Ivory Tower over it, which seems like a better (albeit less interesting) card to have.

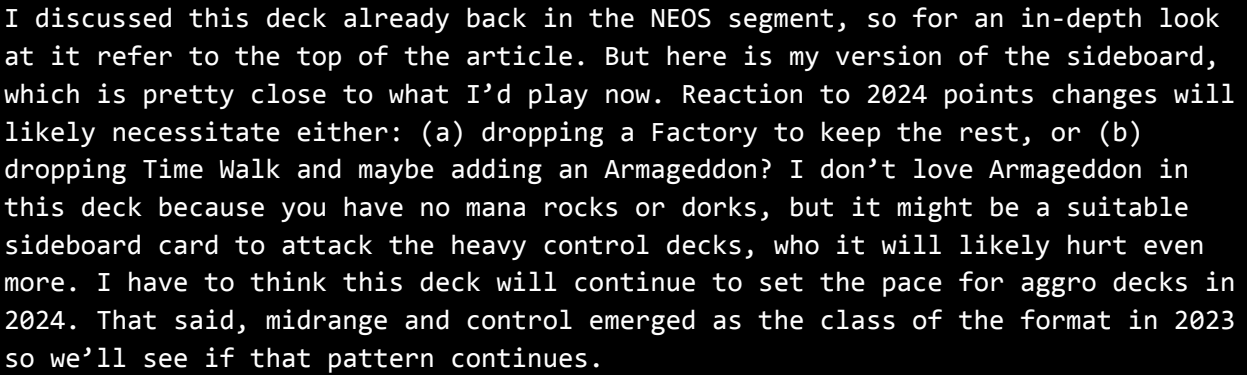
The 2024 changes really blasted this deck, adding a point to Ancestral and pointing each Wrath of God for the first time. I did suffer several losses to Monoblack Hymn with this deck, so I suppose Hymn’s increase to 2 helps with that problem a bit. But I wonder how much, since I think Hymn decks are still gonna Hymn. The mana in this UWr deck is sneaky-bad, and not at all because of the red splash. That has never given me issues. It’s the basic tension between wanting UU, WW, *and* running 4 Deserts that creates a hangup. You have 4 Fellwars, but those are far less reliable at getting you colors in X-Point than in regular Old School. No doubt this is still a powerful deck, but with the existing issues it has and the new points announcement, you might need to look elsewhere. If staying UW, it might be time to abandon Ancestral Recall to keep Wraths, and maybe pick up Mana Drain. Another approach will be dropping blue altogether to play a White Red control deck, relying on Tomes, spot removal, and Fireballs. We’ll see!

If you’re looking for video content, the Tournament #25 Finals can be found [here](#). There’s some hot Basalt Monolith action game 1, if you're into that sort of thing!

 “Jeskai Lions”

Tournament #26 (10-0) \*1st\*





## Tournament #27 (1-5)



In 2022 [I won X-Point #18 with this](#), emulating Felix Widrig's deck that won two previous months. However 2023 was different; I was roughed up and finished 1-5 this month. Hands just didn't come together, especially due to mana issues. Birds of Paradise were always killed on sight, and without them the mana is hard. On the bright side, this deck lost nothing to the points recalibration. If looking to see where the Ponza archetype went next, Disco-Troll veteran [Jason Seaman](#) played a [Stone Rain, Sinkhole, Hymn, Hippie, Troll deck](#) to a second place finish in X-Point #33, which looks promising. He even sported the spicy Demonic Hordes to add to the land destruction!

### "RUG Atog"

Tournament #29 (3-3)

4 Atog 4 Kird Ape 4 Serendib Efreet 1 Argothian Pixies  4 Chain Lightning 4 Lightning Bolt 4 Psionic Blast 1 Giant Growth 1 Shatter  4 Ankh of Mishra 4 Black Vise	4 Mishra's Factory (*4*) 4 Taiga 4 Tropical Island 4 Volcanic Island 2 City of Brass 1 Hammerheim 1 Island 1 Strip Mine	<u>Sideboard:</u> 2 Blue Elemental Blast 2 Falling Star 2 Psychic Purge 2 Red Elemental Blast 2 Shatter 1 Artifact Blast 1 Control Magic 1 Copper Tablet 1 Flashfires 1 Tranquility
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1 Chaos Orb 1 Mox Emerald (*2*) 1 Mox Ruby (*2*) 1 Mox Sapphire (*2*)		
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I had chatted briefly with Bryan Manolakos at Lobstercon, and at some point I inquired about his winning [RUG Atog deck from a 2022 NEOS X-Point monthly](#). Though the points had shifted slightly, Mano stood by his belief that the core of Black Vise, Ankh of Mishra, burn, and aggressive creatures must be good given the usual pace of X-Point gameplay and the midrange metagame that was unfolding. I was interested in finding out, so to start the summer I ran a version of his list in tournament #29 with changes to reflect the point modifications (subbed in a third Mox for Sol Ring, which was raised to 3 in 2023).

I ended up with a breakeven 3-3 record, sustaining losses to a defensive Tax-Tower deck and getting Blood Mooned to high heaven once as well. I am just not so convinced of the value of Moxen in X-Point right now. If you aren't accelerating to/reloading with Draw 7's, I feel like whatever threat you rush out is just getting dealt with by the sea of Bolts, Swords, and Disenchants that are floating around. It felt like I was running out of gas, and topdecking a mid- to late-game Vise or Ankh wasn't helping the cause. Another main question is whether or not this deck should play Timetwister and/or Wheel of Fortune. Herein lies the tension; ideally you'd want to play the Draw 7 spells with Moxen, Sol Ring or Lotus - but X-Point is forcing a choice. You could lose Factories, but I'm not sure about that either. If I were to try this deck again, perhaps I'd play 2 Moxen, 2 Factories, Wheel, and Twister - at least as an experiment. Another approach would be to skip blue altogether and play a Red Green version, backed up by other creatures and maybe running the Berserk-Atog package. For that you could play 2 Moxen, Wheel, 4 Factory. The Atog deck is full of good cards and should be competitive, it just needs more fine-tuning.

### "Goblins"


Tournament #31 (2-4)

4 Ball Lightning 4 Goblin Balloon Brigade 4 Goblin King 4 Goblins of the Flarg 2 Goblin Artisans  4 Chain Lightning 4 Goblin Grenade 4 Lightning Bolt 2 Blood Moon 2 Fork 1 Wheel of Fortune (*2*)	1 Black Lotus (*3*) 2 Black Vise 1 Chaos Orb 1 Mox Ruby (*2*)  10 Mountain 4 Taiga 3 Mishra's Factory (*3*) 1 Hammerheim 1 Pendelhaven 1 Strip Mine	<u>Sideboard:</u> 2 Black Vise 2 City in a Bottle 2 Falling Star 2 Red Elemental Blast 2 Shatterstorm 2 Tranquility 1 Blood Moon 1 Nevinyrral's Disk 1 Pendelhaven
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I decided to continue my journey into some different decks and ran Red Green Goblins, trying a [successful list created by Tim Atwood](#), which had made Top 8 in a prior month. I thought the green splash was an inventive way to deal with Circle of Protection: Red and Moat, and get a little more value out of Pendelhaven. I liked Tim's numbers on Vises and points allocations.

What I found over the course of the month was great success in game 1's, but much more difficulty after sideboarding. It seemed like they were ready with whatever it was they needed, I lost to UW control being played by Antoine Rottiers when he had answers for my Blood Moon and could sit behind Deserts and Mazes, eventually landing a CoP: Red and handily countering my Tranquility. I was glad to have tried Goblins in X-Point but I think the search continues. The power level and fragility of the strategy make it somewhat of a glass cannon. Splashing white could be the other alternative, but there is a tension between cards that kill the opponent (i.e. Ball Lightning, Goblin Grenade) and cards that just interact with their permanents (i.e. Disenchant).

 **"Grixis Con-troll"**

Tournament #32 (9-1) \*1st\*, #33 (7-1) \*Top 4\*



This deck was crafted by Oliver Carlson, whom I have had the pleasure of getting to know through testing X-Point online. We also got to meet in person at Lobstercon in June, and I basically hung around with the Discord and Facebook “#Looking For Games” crew of Oliver, Rich Arevalo, Matt Cutbirth, and Jesus Mansilla all weekend. Oliver played back in the day, but really just entered the Old School scene over the last year through X-Point. He had a Blue-Red aggro deck (Flying Men, Serendib, Black Vise) that I played a lot of pickup games against. I also was playing a decent amount of Counterburn in Swedish and Atlantic through the Spring, as well as Troll-burn in the Summer Derby. When he pitched this X-Point deck to me over Lobstercon weekend, it seemed like the nexus of these different strategies that had been ruminating. I loved the idea of how Oliver was using the pointed cards - Ancestral Recall, Demonic Tutor, Braingeyser, and Recall all flow together beautifully. The running joke all weekend whenever our little club was discussing X-Point was “just draw Ancestral.” A strategy that served me well throughout 2023! This deck had the tools to really exploit that to max effect.

Oliver prevailed with this deck and won Tournament #31. I was impressed to see him take down Land Tax-Lions in the Finals because this deck has very few ways to

interact with Land Tax. I guess you just need to play your game, draw more cards, and control their threats. I still have some concerns with getting run over by weenies, but those types of strategies seemed to be held in check over the second half of 2023 by the ascendant midrange and control decks. With the right draws this deck can pose significant blockers in the form of Sedge Troll and Derelor. Derelor is really a tremendous Old School card, I've come to like it a lot in Atlantic Counterburn as well because it provides a way to get around Circle: Red, and cannot be Disenchanted like Su Chi (these formats also have mana burn, making Su Chi worse). Mahamoti is just a wonderful Old School card to run - I did push this idea when Oliver and I discussed the deck - because it gets around CoP and Moat, handles fliers like Serra, and closes out the game quickly. It can block everything - even Triskelion, Erhnam, Juzam. That said it does get sided out quite frequently if you anticipate Red Elemental Blast, but even then I don't hate keeping it in because Red Blast is just good against this deck, period. I definitely like it better than Shivan Dragon, though - you need the non-red source of damage.

The other interesting choice Oliver made was Icy Manipulator over Nevinyrral's Disk. This choice was primarily made as a response to Maze of Ith. It also is sensible because you rely on Fellwar Stones, and even blowing up 1 Stone of your own can really set you back. I have to say that Disk underwhelms me in general; it feels slow when trying to rebuff an attack, gives the opening to get Disenchanted and is therefore unreliable. I think the best way for a deck like this to look at Disk is a way to kill troublesome enchantments, probably out of the sideboard. Even then I chose not to run it, and instead focus on ways to get around these enchantments as opposed to relying on Disk to handle them. Icy did not disappoint.

I ran the deck in Tournament #32 with a few sideboard tweaks, namely Amnesia and Jayemdae Tomes to help in the control matches. These paid dividends in a wonderful back-and-forth Finals against Felix Widrig you can see [here](#). Felix's control deck put up stiff resistance with a combination of The Abyss, Millstone, CoP: Red, and the usual blue and white interaction. I was fortunate to cast Ancestral (I did mulligan/Tutor to get there), and the Amnesia helped me pull ahead by forcing him to discard white spells to clear the way for my creatures and Icy's. I ran the deck back in #33, adding a City in a Bottle to the sideboard in place of Flashfires. I had another good run, but lost in the Top 4 to Jason Seaman's RBU version of the deck, using Hymns, Sinkholes, and Stone Rains instead of Counterspells/more blue that my deck featured. These games weren't close as he ravaged my mana with a string of land destruction, leaving me unable to kill his Hypnotic Specters. Again, seems like a deck worth looking at in the new year.

As for 2024 points changes, this deck will have to deal with Ancestral gaining a point. I think the most likely solution is to drop Recall and keep the deck intact, adding another Fellwar or perhaps a Jayemdae Tome to the maindeck. The



other approach would be to cut Demonic Tutor, and then get Mana Drain and a Maze of Ith. Not a bad alternative, I'll have to test to see which is better.

### 🟢🔴🟡 "Quicksilver"

Tournament #34 (6-3) \*Top 4\*



This was a callback to a Quicksilver/Arabian Aggro deck that Rich Shay and I worked on together in early 2022. We'd both put up some good results, but moved away from it to work on new projects. There was also more UW Maze control floating around that could challenge this deck's offense. What brought me back to it were some conversations I had with Josué López-Tercero, a Spanish player with a Pro Tour background, who was preparing for WinC0n and wanted to talk Old School. He had a great weekend, placing third in the main Old School Event, and winning the X-Point World Championships with this RUG deck. He used the same basic shell that Rich and I had last year, but subbed out Argothian Pixies for Erhnam Djinn. I guess I had been hesitant to do that because I feared getting totally wrecked by City in a Bottle, but truthfully, for whatever reason, Bottle seems to be underplayed in X-Point right now. Maybe it's as simple as being cost-prohibitive for some X-Pointers. But either way, seeing Josué cut through the X-Point event (his first time ever playing the format, by the way!) gave me the desire to try Quicksilver again. I did take out the 4th Factory for a Regrowth, which I wholeheartedly support. It's obviously insane with Ancestral, but also as good as having 4 Factories can be, the mana base trying to support 4 Counterspells doesn't hate adding another Island to the mix. This also is giving you more chances to work around or outright kill Blood Moon (with Blue Blast

after sideboarding), which had gotten me before. By December I was closing in on another X-Point league title, and I knew this deck could win some games.

Overall the deck performed as expected, I lost a couple of matches in the group stage to other aggro decks that just got too far ahead of me with Vise and Ankh damage, and made my Serendib too self-harming. I made the playoff rounds and advanced with strong draws, never seeing a Bottle along the way. I ended up getting bounced in the Top 4 by "Goblin King" Stephen Adams, who went on to win the event. Finally, Bottles showed up to bite me in Stephen's UW Artifact deck. It was a very close match that basically came down to me having two Bolts in hand, but only being able to cast one off one red source before he killed me with Triskelion and Rasputin Dreamweaver. I liked his deck a lot and might take it for a spin in 2024.

As for 2024 updates to Quicksilver, the point changes are fairly low impact here. From a creature standpoint it's good to know that Wrath is getting a point. I think you're still playing Ancestral, the likely move is to cut Time Walk and Island for a 4th Chains and Factory. I'm not sure about the sideboard; I don't think I used the Vises this tournament, but in theory it's a nice weapon to have against slower decks or Land Tax. I think I'd drop a Psychic Purge with Hymn going up to 2, and maybe look to add more artifact destruction. One thing to look out for, like with Goblins, is siding into too much interaction and preventive measures and making the threat base too watered down. Even though Chain Lightning isn't always the most exciting card to cast, it is helping to end the game quicker as opposed to sitting on some reactive card and letting them get back into the game. Maybe if you go to 4 Factory main you could have the extra Island in the board to address Blood Moon.

Nonetheless, four strong performances in a row between Tournaments #32-35, capping off five Tournament wins in the year, were enough to lock in the season point total championship for X-Point 2023. As much fun as I was having this year, I did get a little anxious in December as I was closing in on both this and the NEOS league championships. Even though I know it doesn't mean anything in the grand scheme, being so close to the double finish line put some weight on my shoulders. Hard work and prudent deck selection paid off in the end.



### **BONUS COVERAGE: Decks of Summer**

While the focus of this article was my path to victory in NEOS and X-Point, for completion's sake here's two more decks that I put some work into over the last 6 months. I'm a public school teacher so summer is a cherished time of year for me - Rich Arevalo aptly said I "live a child's dream" during these months, which isn't far off. I spend a lot of time with my 5-year old daughter, dividing it between the beach, parks, woods, zoos, vacations, and playing Old School MtG at night. Summer also affords me the opportunity to play in the Dutch ODOL league, which normally I cannot due to time zone differences. The ODOL players have been very welcoming and the vibe is more laid-back than in other leagues and events I've played. Over the summer these Tolaria leagues drew about 20 people each month, just enough for a fun little side event. I continued to play good decks but wasn't concerned with spiking so hard by using The Deck, which I was a little tired of after Lobstercon, anyways. This was also the time of the Summer Derby (Atlantic format), so let's throw that into the mix, too.

### **🔴🔵⚫ "Troll-Burn"**

Summer Derby (6-2) \*18th\*, ODOL August: Swaffel (5-1) \*1st\*, Pennsylvania  
Slugfest (3-0)





This deck came together from three different sources. First, as I mentioned before, I had been playing a lot of traditional Counterburn in Swedish and Atlantic over the Springtime. Second, my NEOS buddy Xanadude (Mr. Card of the Day) had been using this deck quite effectively over the past year to great success in NEOS events and by making the Top 16 of the 2023 Winter Derby. Third, Jeff White had also won a Derby with a similar deck in 2022, so I figured there must be something to this.

It's an unusual deck that isn't quite Counterburn and isn't quite Disco Troll. Disks and Trolls are there, but you're opting for more burn spells instead of hard counters and Power Sinks. I noticed that European Serendib Efrete/Ironclaw Orc Counterburn decks were dropping more and more of their copies of Counterspell in favor of aggression and other types of interaction, so I was looking to see what would happen if you made a convergence between the two archetypes. This deck wasn't as slow as Counter-Troll or as fast as Counterburn, but you had more stable creatures and could run Bottle. I vacillated between 2 and 3 copies of Nevinyrral's Disk and Chain Lightning - note that there's fewer Moxen (just on-color ones) and you're basically playing Trolls and fast effects which aren't Disk-able permanents. Still, the Draw 7s are bad in this deck because you don't want to refuel either the aggressive burn decks or the slow control decks. You don't have all the fast mana to take advantage of them, either. I was a little unsure of this, but both Xanadude and Jeff held the same opinion and they knew what they spoke of.

The problems I encountered were the control decks that could go above you. My two losses in the Summer Derby were to traditional Counter Troll-Disco: Scott Bradley in a terrific hour-long Moogy's battle, and my last match to Jason Seaman. These are both Disco-Troll experts who knew what to do. They just had more Counterspells and Mazes and I didn't have the speed to go underneath them. After the Derby I played in ODOL: Swaffel month (Swedish plus Fallen Empires, but restricted Hymn), and decided I'd pack the Hymn copy in the sideboard for anti-control purposes. This got me thinking that in regular Atlantic siding in some Hymns for Troll-Disco or The Deck would be a smart move. There's people who run Hymn in usual Atlantic The Deck anyways, such as Koos Cramer's winning list from a few Derbies ago.

My results were pretty good: I lost a Summer Derby win-and-in to make Top 16 versus Jason (he ended up in 17th and I 18th, doh!), I won ODOL in August (had a great semifinal "mirror"-ish match vs Seb Celia), and went 3-0 in a live event in Pennsylvania that Will Parshall gave me a lift to when I was on a family vacation in the Poconos. I played a great match against The Deck where Greed got active game 3 and drew me a ton of burn and interaction. I had to drop after that to rejoin my wife and daughter on our log cabin trip, but it was cool to get some Old School games in and see some great players from the Northeast like Ty Thomason, Rich Bourque, and Jason Beaupre who all turned out to play at Dave Portal's store in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. My ride, Will Parshall, ended up winning the event with an [8-Lion Erhnamgeddon deck](#), of the Paul DeSilva school.

 "Erhnam & Burn 'Em"

ODOL July: Swedish (6-1) \*1st\*



And, of course, I'll end this report with one of my nearest and dearest decks of all, my take on traditional Erhnam & Burn 'Em. Not only was this one of the first decks I built when I began playing Old School, but it was one of the original *Magic* decks I had back in the mid-1990s. It's fair to say I have continued to tweak it quite a bit. It isn't the strongest deck by any stretch, but it can certainly be competitive with anything and can even sneak in a win versus the heavy hitters. It was very satisfying to beat The Deck in the ODOL event I played in July with a timely Blood Moon. This is a good deck for maximizing Blood Moon (pairs well with Llanowar Elves). Lately I've gotten Scavenger Folk into the deck and like them a lot, and I simply adore the eclectic 1-of's (Hurricane, Icy Manipulator, Granite Gargoyle). In the sideboard I think I am all done with Whirling Dervish - it never really does the thing for me where it grows into a monster, because black decks usually have something like Maze or Swords or Bolt to neutralize it. I also had Shivan Dragon in there as a Moat answer, but it isn't a very good one. Those decks will usually have Swords and CoP: Red to handle it. I think I'll be cutting these and 1 more card for 2 Tranquility and 2 Copper Tablets. It wasn't a large event, but I'd been trying to take this deck to the top at least one time, so winning ODOL in July checked that off my bucket list.

### 2023 Conclusions & 2024 Resolutions

Well that about sums it up. A full year of playing Old School *Magic: The Gathering* in the books. My work and family life keeps me close to home, and not having unlimited funds (or *Unlimited* edition cards!) keeps me from traveling



abroad to play Old School. I'm lucky to have these online leagues to keep me occupied and continue to expand my social network. I definitely made more friends this year, and cemented relationships by getting to see people in person at events like Lobstercon, Slugfest, Moogy's meetups, NEOS house parties at Xanadude's ranch, my summer backyard BBQs, or the Cape Cod bunkhouse brawl. I'm hoping to venture out into the paper world a little more this year; I hosted Rich Arevalo at my place this October, I plan on visiting him in New York City this April and hopefully meeting up with some Sisters of the Flame. I'm going to try to get to some events in New York and Connecticut this spring and summer. And of course I can't wait for the chance to defend my Lobstercon title in September when NEOS hosts its signature event again.

I'm going to keep doing what I do in Old School online leagues: steadily refining my decks and trying new ones that come along. I've always been workmanlike in my approach to *MtG*, with good results to show for it, but despite being business-like I don't know if anyone derives as much joy from the game as I do. That said I'll continue to strive towards a better balance of *Magic* games and more physical activity, less booze and more nutrition. Getting old sucks. For decks to try out, Mono Black and Mono White are on the top of my list for X-Point this year. I'll try to defend both of my titles in these leagues but also want to transition to taking on more of a contributor role, too. Jared and DFB are invaluable assets to our community, it's clear they have been indispensable in managing the tournament scene online and can probably use a bit of a break, or at least a helping hand. I have a dream of tournament organizing someday, and this would be a good place to start. Old School seems like it's going strong but looks can be deceiving; without inspired leadership it would be easy for things to start drifting apart. Certainly the end of the pandemic has coincided with online play falling off a bit - noticeably I've had less success finding pickup games consistently, which is partly why I've taken on more leagues to get reliable opponents. I'd like to be part of the solution that sustains the online scene - the true global space of Old School. So these are objectives I have in mind for the future. Succinctly, to be more of a contributor. A sustainer of the realm.

I wish everyone a prosperous and healthy 2024. If there's any way I can help with your Old School endeavors, feel free to reach out. My success in Old School is directly attributable to being able to learn from masters of different decks and formats. I hope this article can spread some of that insight and be a resource to you for your next deckbuilding project. Gratitude to all the collaborators, tournament organizers, and friendships this niche format has helped me forge. I aspire to pay it forward.

