General - WIP

Important Caveat

Ashes is a deeply strategic and dynamic game. As a result of Phoenixborn matchups, deck-building, and meta changes (from expansions or changes to chain rules) it is nigh possible to give any absolute advice that will apply in every situation. Therefore any strategy tips should be viewed as general guidelines that will lend themselves to improving your play over time. Assume any concrete statements are prefaced with "generally" or "usually".

Setting Yourself Up For Success

Play known good decks

Whether starting out as a new player, a fumbling amateur, or grizzled veteran, it's never too late to play known good decks. Good decks naturally bubble up over time, "qualifying" as good by repeated successful tournament performance. While they may not always be meta relevant, they will have strong and clear plans that are easy understand and straightforward to pilot. Playing good decks removes deck-building as a variable on your path to improving game-play; you can more easily assess mistakes in your in-game choices.

Use known decks as a base for deck-building

Deck-building from scratch can be very intimidating as a new player, especially as the card pool continues to grow and the meta shifts. Starting with a known good deck as a base for building will allow you to limit the number of choices you need to make while still allowing you to flex your own style and preference.

Play with a deck consistently

The deck building in Ashes is so open that it is incredibly fun to continuously brew new ideas and give them a try, and you should not be discouraged from doing so. However for the purposes of increasing your skill and success, playing with single deck consistently gives a lot of benefits:

- you will learn to identify the weaknesses of your deck, and thus be able to better strategize how to overcome them in specific matchups
- you will internalize certain sequencing that needs to be done to maximize your turns and avoid mistakes where you can't afford (either dice or main/side action) to do what you want or need in a round
- you'll remember the cards and better assess your options now and the probability of drawing them

- you'll understand the tempo of your deck and thus when is a good time to attack and defend, PB guard, and in general whether the current situation is helpful or hurtful to your win condition

Do the dice math

Ashes has a fixed resource system of 10 dice per round, and you always want a plan that enables you spend all 10 each round (you won't always need to, but you should be able to if necessary). As such, you want to ensure the dice types and amount ("spread") support the cost of your ready spells and some, or all, of your drawn cards.

At a basic level, each die can support between 3-5 costs of a given type. That means, for each type, adding up all the non-basic costs on the 25 cards in deck (exclude first five cost) and dividing by 3 will give you the number of dice of that type you need in your pool. (Use 3 as a more consistent/stable factor, or 5 for a less consistent/"tight" spread).

You also want to balance the costs between your spellboard and probable card draws. If your spellboard will cost 6 dice each round, then you want to have a very low (or 1) average cost of cards in deck as you won't be able to play them all.

For more details see steps 6-13 here: https://wiki.ashes.live/books/articles/page/ashes-normal-coaching

Watch game replays

A great way to learn is to watch other players and other PB/deck matchups, even if there's no active commentary. Jump in to a live game as spectator and see how players sequence their moves, observe what works and what doesn't. See whether there are cards that are particularly helpful in certain matchups that you could include in your deck.

There are also some great community members that record and publish their games with commentary. Sometimes watching is just as fun as (and less stressful than) playing. https://wiki.ashes.live/books/podcasts-and-videos?shelf=5

Also, record your own games and rewatch them. This one takes time, but it’s a great way to evaluate lines of play that you could’ve taken. Lines of play are much easier to see as an observer than in the heat of the moment.

Play against the good players (don't be afraid, ask questions)

Blow to the ego aside, you can learn a lot from playing against the best if you pay attention. Watching how and when they choose to play cards in their first five, when to attack, when to use a PB guard vs unit guard, when to block vs taking a hit...there are so many nuances and situational contexts to Ashes that can be hard to explain but much easier to soak in when playing good players. Even more so since the community is incredibly welcoming and virtually anybody is willing to answer questions or give pointers.

No shame in losing, and don't give yourself excuses

There is an element of luck/randomness to Ashes, true; but 9/10 the better player with the better deck will win. If you are serious about improving, set yourself up for success and don't make decisions that give you an excuse for your losses. That means doing all the above. That means registering a deck you know and believe in for a tournament rather than a last minute or "jank" idea that you can blame. There is no shame in losing; Ashes has a steep learning curve when it comes to decision-making. Play in earnest, learn from your mistakes, then come back and do it all again. You can and will improve your gameplay.

In Game

Play with patience - slow the aggression

It’s easy to want to remain on the offensive. However, in Ashes, each player has 10 dice every round. While there are times when you want to push aggression and control the tempo of the opponent, your first instinct should be patience. Oftentimes, throwing all of your units at the opposing Phoenixborn is not the correct play, and will leave you open to your opponent playing out their units with their remaining dice and systematically picking your board apart. It is important to remember that due to the round structure of Ashes, turning your units directly into damage on your opponent's Phoenixborn can backfire if the opponent instead uses their units to attack your exhausted units. That is because, next round, they will start with a board full of strong and healthy units that can quickly close the health differential created by your initial aggression.

Play your plan A and make sure your best FF plan demands a response

The best decks in Ashes come out of the gate hard. That doesn’t always mean super aggressively, but it does mean that they know what they want to do and how they want to execute it. It’s easy to get caught up in counter-playing your opponent in Round 1 when choosing your first five, but generally you want your opening to be the one that demands an answer from the opponent. When deckbuilding or when looking at the strong decks, try to choose a first five that presents a threat that, if left unchecked, will setup your game plan and put your opponent on the back foot. Test out that open against cards you feel would be difficult to deal with, so you know how to respond to them when you run into them in-game.

Test with intention, especially sequencing in round 1

This builds off of the prior point. Once you have an open that you feel demands a response, test both against and not against that response. Stress test this - play against what you feel is the worst possible matchup for your open, and learn in what order to play and activate your cards that gives you the best outcomes. You get to start with 5 cards, but it’s up to you in what order to play those cards. Don’t get tunnel visioned into thinking you always have to lay your books down before summoning a unit, for instance. Play with different sequences and continue to look for opportunities to attack when a good trade is available. This type of testing will increase your confidence in Round 1, and therefore the game as a whole, because the outcome of the first Round can easily decide how the rest of the game unfolds.

Pay attention to value in trades

Ashes is a game of inches; a game of incremental advantage. Be on the lookout for situations where you can gain a small advantage over your opponent. Small permutations in the way your turns and your attacks unfold can give you one more damage on your opponent, or be the difference between killing their knight or leaving it at one health.

Plan dice expenditure in the round

Manage your side action economy

As always, the golden rule of Ashes is: Plan ahead! There is nothing worst than realizing you could have won here and now... if only you had meditated that one Divine die to play Fork Lightning into Crescendo on the swing, clearing the enemy's blockers and reducing their Phoenixborn's life total to 0. The same idea can also apply to dice powers, especially the ceremonial, illusion, divine, time and nature dice powers. When used in the right moment they can have incredible impact.

Always know your opponent's unique and ability

One of the easiest mistakes to make in Ashes is forgetting what your opponent's Phoenixborn ability and unique/loyalty card are; what they do, what they can target, and what they cost. It can easily lead to sequencing mistakes, or putting out units that will immediately be lost before you can make use of them and therefore put you at a dice/card disadvantage (examples not limited to Odette's Enter the Fray and Sword of Virtue, Tristan's Tsunami Shot, Harold's Hunter's Mark, and Jessa's Fear). This is also one of the easiest mistakes to rectify by simply asking your opponent (if playing in person) or keeping Ashes.live open for reference while playing online.

Prepare to pivot

When planning your round or even your turn, you need to be prepared for your opponent to throw a wrench in your plan. Be on the lookout for key removal spells or important reaction spells. This means you need to be nimble and prepare contingency plans, but also to be ready to change those plans if the situation arises, or if a better opportunity comes up. Having tunnel vision on a single objective can leave you with your guard down if you failed to predict your opponent's actions, or it can make you miss an opportunity to outright achieve a game winning advantage..

Frog Up

The Natural die power (frog "ping") is widely considered the best dice power in Ashes due to it's ability to damage and/or destroy units. It's incredibly versatile and non-committal. You can clear a blocker before swinging; you can set up removal with other cards, particularly Fester, or leave a unit vulnerable to attack in a subsequent round. The threat of a frog ping alone can alter the sequencing of your opponent, and also makes a pass on their side risky because you can ping a unit before your own pass into the next round. If you are in nature, you should always have a frog ready, even if you able to fully spend your dice elsewhere.

Be conservative and patient with your guard; let units die

Your guard is an incredibly potent resource in Ashes. When used correctly, it can give you crucial tempo, essentially forcing the opponent to virtually waste their main action to no effect on the Battlefield. It can also save an important unit that will produce carryover value into next round. Once your guard is broken, every unit your opponent fields instantly becomes direct removal. This means that the threat of a guard is almost as valuable as using your guard, because it forces your opponent to respect it and to play around the potential loss of tempo. For this reason, it is much better to allow an equal or slightly worst trade early on in the round if it means you can better keep control of the battlefield during the rest of the round.

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