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Darksteel MVPs

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 Swimming With Sharks
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It is going to be one of those PTQ seasons....

I missed out on a chance to play in a PTQ in Philadelphia this weekend due to it being scheduled on Valentine's Day. That would normally not be a big deal but it doesn't look like I will get a chance to play in a San Diego Qualifier tournament until the second half of March. I have a scheduling conflict this coming weekend that will keep me from the Edison, NJ PTQ and the delicatessen decadence that is Harold's. The next two weekends will be out of the question since I will be providing event coverage at [Pro Tour Kobe](#) and then [Grand Prix: Hong Kong](#) the following weekend.

That is going to leave me three weeks to cram in as many PTQs as possible. It looks like I will be going to Virginia on the 13th and New York on the 20th. The PTQ season will draw to a close with [Grand Prix: Columbus](#) during the last weekend in March. That looks like my nearest option for the final weekend as most of the East Coast tournament organizers have shied away from scheduling anything against what is sure to be one of the biggest tournaments ever held in this part of the world.

While finding time to play **Magic** on the weekends continues to be a challenge for me, I have found plenty of chances to draft during the week at Neutral Ground. I have drafted quite a bit of *Darksteel*. I am on my second box of the new set. We only use one pack of *Darksteel* when we draft so that should give you some idea of how often I have been hitting the draft table.

While everyone is getting hip to how much better black has gotten in *Darksteel* I have been happily snapping up blue cards. There are four really solid blue creatures. **Neurok Prodigy** is a solid flier with a decent ability. Your opponent will always have to think twice about engaging your Prodigy in combat when you can trade a **Darksteel Citadel** in hand for their creature. I have no problem drafting this guy highly for my blue decks but the other commons present a dilemma that I have to resolve differently from deck to deck.

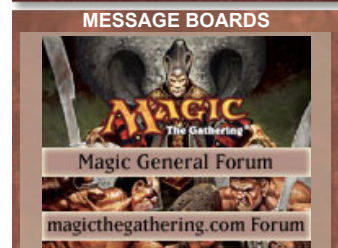
All of the affinity golems have turned out to be good in their own way but the **Spire Golem** is clearly my favorite. He comes in the same common run as the **Vedalken Engineer** and lately I have been taking the 2/4 over the powerful blue elf in my blue decks. Twice I have passed triple **Vedalken Engineer** to secure three **Spire Golems** for an aggressive blue flier/affinity deck. He always seems to hit the board on turn three—if it is not off of three Islands it is two Islands and a Myr. I always took **Fighting Drake** very high and this guy is no different.

Now, if you have some powerful high casting cost artifacts you should ignore the Golem and windmill slam the Engineer onto the top of your picks each time. In a team draft at Grand Prix: Oakland I took the Engineers over **Spire Golem** because I had **Bosh**, **Iron Golem**. Twice he came down on the sixth turn and completely dominated the game thanks to a little engineering.

Serum Tank was another card that worked very well with the Engineer. You can start drawing two cards a turn as soon as the fourth turn and still have mana to make a play each turn. The same holds true for equipment. If you find yourself with some good equipment like the **Loxodon Warhammer**, **Vulshok Battlegear**, or **Viridian Longbow** then the Engineer will make moving it around more manageable and still allow you to advance your board position.

People still seem shocked that the Engineer makes colored mana. He gives you a way to utilize any replica you might be splashing and even lets you use your Spellbombs to do something other than dig for a card. I have actually won a match these past two weeks by using the three weakest Spellbombs for their actual abilities. I gained five life and lived to attack with my Warhammered flier. I made a land into a 3/3 creature for a lethal attack. I even used **Necrogen Spellbomb** to force my opponent to discard a Warhammer that I had put on top of his deck with **Looming Hoverguard**. You don't want to draft an Engineer to support off-color Spellbombs but there are plenty of activated abilities to keep in mind.

I have not had to worry about taking the **Quicksilver Behemoth** very early. He comes around very late in draft which I don't understand. To me it's like I still have three packs of **Myr Enforcer** except that I can wait on drafting the one in the third pack until later on in the draft. He also doesn't die to **Electrostatic Bolt**. The only time he costs more than the **Myr Enforcer** is when you have seven artifacts in play. His "drawback" even works well for you in many situations. If your opponent can't block him then it is unlikely that he can attack into him either. How lucky for you that you can attack with him and then replay him to hold the ground.



I pass all the blue commons for **Neurok Transmuter**. He is my MVP in blue for **Darksteel**. In fact, this guy is my absolute favorite card in the format. He feels like he stepped out of an Invasion block draft. The non-fliers in blue have been a lazy group of underachievers to date. While I have a fondness for the **Lumengrid Warden** I am also the first to admit he is just a **Leonin Den-Guard** with absolutely zero aspirations. I have always imagined that the **Lumengrid Warden** lives in his parent's basement and screens phone calls from telemarketers in exchange for rent.

And what about his fat friend the Wanderguard Sentry? Whenever you play this guy he cranes his neck to look at the fistful of cards your opponent is going to kill you with and merely shrugs with apathy. The only non-flying blue common that is worth a darn in **Mirrodin** is the **Neurok Spy** and he wants nothing to do with either of those last two guys I mentioned. He just hangs out with the **Somber Hoverguard** and tries to make him crack a smile.

The Transmuter reminds me more of **Tidal Visionary** or **Fylamarid** with all his tricky ways. The first time I got to play with him I had a **Molder Slug** and a **Glissa, Sunseeker** in my deck. Now, I was probably going to win most of the matches with that deck anyway but when I saved my **Molder Slug** from a **Terror** by turning it into an artifact creature I knew that the Transmuter was going to be one of my top cards in this limited block.



As long as you have blue open he provides all sorts of problems for your opponent. The most obvious use is to either save your artifact guys from **Shatter** and **Echoing Ruin** or to be able to use those spells on **Fangren Hunter**. Remember that if you want to use **Echoing Ruin** to hit both of your opponent's **Fangren Hunters** you would need to turn them both to artifacts for the **Echoing Ruin** to kill them both. **Echoing Ruin** says "all other artifact with the same name." (I had a friend proxy up a **Myr Landshaper/Echoing Ruin** deck. When he attempted to destroy all my lands with his "combo" I had the pleasure of giving him four actual **Echoing Ruins** to use in future builds.)

While he mixes well with artifact destruction he also has more subtle functions. When will people ever learn that they need to **Electrostatic Bolt** my Transmuter and not my four toughness artifact creature? I have already pointed out his ability to foil a **Terror** and it stands to reason that he makes Purge an all-purpose removal spell. Where he really shines is when you run up against the modular deck. When your opponent chooses a target for their +1/+1 counters you can fizzle it by changing the target into a non-artifact blue creature. Of course, you can also make your non-artifact creatures bigger if you have modular guys by using the Transmuter's ability.

I tend to draft a lot of green-blue and the Transmuter works well in that archetype. He makes your artifact removal more versatile and keeps your protection from artifact men and **Tel-Jilad Wolf** very busy. I had one draft where he teamed up with a **Roaring Slagwurm** to create a **Falter** effect for the win. I turned all of my opponent's creatures into artifacts and attacked with everyone. The ability of the Slagwurm caused all of the creatures on the other side of the table to become tapped and my team ambled across the red zone to victory.

One of my best uses for the Transmuter came in a game where I had only one blue mana but needed to turn two of my opponent's creatures into artifacts so they would bounce off of my protection from artifact team. I used my one blue to turn the Transmuter itself into an artifact creature and then used my **Vedalken Engineer** to make two blue and channeled the mana through my Transmuter.

News from the PTQs

While I was not able to play in my local Pro Tour Qualifier (PTQ) this weekend I was able to obtain the Top 8 draft decks thanks to Gray Matter Conventions good man, Mike Errante.

The winner of the PTQ was one of Philly's own, Tom Kelleher. Tom is a Pro Tour veteran who has yet to experience the same level of success on the Pro Tour that he has on the PTQ circuit. He did post a strong money finish at Pro Tour New York 2001 as a member of Cyanide along with Jon Becker and Ed Linsky. Tom demonstrated one of the most reliable draft strategies that has emerged in the **Mirrodin** block to date...

Open Loxodon Warhammer!

Main Deck 40 cards		Sideboard
5 Island	1 Bonesplitter	1 AEther Vial
4 Mountain	1 Echoing Ruin	1 Alpha Myr
8 Plains	1 Loxodon Warhammer	1 Battlegrowth
17 lands	1 Pyrite Spellbomb	1 Bloodscent
	1 Raise the Alarm	1 Burden of Greed
	1 Vulshok Gauntlets	1 Darksteel Ingot
	1 Vulshok Morningstar	1 Dead-Iron Sledge
1 Alpha Myr	7 other spells	1 Dross Scorpion
1 Arcbound Bruiser		1 Galvanic Key
1 Arcbound Fiend		1 Grimclaw Bats
1 Aurick Transfixer		1 Groffskithur
2 Cobalt Golem		1 Hallow

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Death-Mask Duplicant 1 Loxodon Mystic 1 Loxodon Punisher 1 Neurok Spy 1 Pentavus 1 Rustspore Ram 1 Skyhunter Cub 1 Skyhunter Patrol 1 Soldier Replica 1 Yotian Soldier <p>16 creatures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Inflare 1 Malachite Golem 1 Molten Rain 1 Razor Barrier 1 Tower of Fortunes 1 Unforge 1 Vex 2 Wanderguard Sentry 1 Whispersilk Cloak <p>22 sideboard cards</p>
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In Amsterdam there were a number of cards that the Pros said they would take over **Loxodon Warhammer**. Despite all of the cards that were mentioned I believe only one **Loxodon Warhammer** was passed all weekend in Amsterdam. It remains one of the elite cards in the set with the ability to steal a game from a frustrated opponent.

Tom had three other solid pieces of equipment in his deck including the best common equipment in each of the two sets—**Bonesplitter** and **Vulshok Morningstar**. It is no wonder that he ended up going white since that color has the best interactions with equipment as evidenced by his **Skyhunter Cub** and **Loxodon Punisher**. Tom did not manage to get a **Leonin Den-Guard** to combo with his Gauntlets but did play with a **Yotian Soldier** with an eye toward a 5/6 creature that doesn't tap to attack.

Tom was also fortunate enough to open one of the most frustrating rares in the set—**Pentavus**. If you get to untap with this guy in play it is almost certain that you will win the game. He has only gotten better with the addition of modular creatures but let's face it—he was just fine to begin with.

One of the interesting facets of Tom's deck is that he splashed two different colors. Rather than having a deck that is white-blue splashing red (which is what I thought when I first looked at his list) his deck is white with a splash of blue and a splash of red. He only had three cards that required blue mana—a **Neurok Spy** and two **Cobalt Golems**, and two cards that required red mana—an **Echoing Ruin** and a **Pyrite Spellbomb**. Of his five cards in his splash colors only two actually needed colored mana to not be dead in his hand.

Tom's mana was pretty interesting as well. He did not have any Myr and chose not to play with **Darksteel Ingot**. Seventeen lands were pretty much a given and I'm not sure if I would not have played eighteen (or at the very least the Ingot) in his shoes. Four Mountains and five Islands may seem like a lot for two cards but if he drew his **Echoing Ruin** or **Neurok Spy**, Tom wanted to be able to play it. Plus with absolutely zero ways to deal with a **Spikeshot Goblin** other than his **Pyrite Spellbomb** I am sure Tom was not playing it with an eye toward cycling.



It turns out that Tom was unhappy with his mana and wanted a ninth Plains over the fifth Island. There were a number of games where a **Skyhunter Patrol** or **Loxodon Mystic** languished in his hand while he waited for a second white source. He did not want the Ingot since he felt that he had creatures he would rather be casting on turn three as opposed to accelerating his mana.

Tom faced off against Kate Stavola in the finals of the tournament. Kate has been coming to Gray Matter PTQs for many years but stopped when romance took her westward and she ended up working at Wizards of the Coast. Now she is back on the East Coast and has begun playing **Magic** again. Recently engaged to TOGIT frontman Patrick Sullivan, Kate was hoping to win the chance to join her fiancé at the Pro Tour in San Diego. It would have been a lovely Valentine's Day story but Tom is just not the romantic type.

Philly PTQ Top 8 Draft deck		
Finalist Kate Stavola		
Main Deck		Sideboard
40 cards		
6 Forest	2 Barter in Blood	1 Dream's Grip
1 Mountain	2 Consume Spirit	1 Dross Scorpion
1 Stalking Stones	1 Darksteel Brute	1 Fists of the Anvil
9 Swamp	1 Deconstruct	1 Hunger of the Nim
17 lands	1 Echoing Decay	1 Leonin Bladetrapp
	1 Farsight Mask	2 Malachite Golem
	1 Talisman of Impulse	1 Myr Adapter
	1 Unforge	1 Myr Mindservant
1 Chittering Rats	10 other spells	2 Nourish
1 Death-Mask Duplicant		2 Titanium Golem
1 Emissary of Despair		1 Viridian Acolyte
1 Flayed Nim		1 Viridian Joiner
1 Glissa Sunseeker		1 Vorrac Battlehorns
1 Grimclaw Bats		1 Vulshok Berserker
1 Iron Myr		1 Wail of the Nim

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Juggernaut 1 Pewter Golem 1 Tel-Jilad Archers 1 Tel-Jilad Exile 1 Tel-Jilad Wolf 1 Viridian Acolyte <hr/> 13 creatures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Whispersilk Cloak 1 Wizard Replica <hr/> 20 sideboard cards
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Kate was clearly the only black drafter in the *Mirrodon* packs and had two copies each of **Barter in Blood** and **Consume Spirit**. The only other drafters with black picks in *Mirrodon* were Tony Tsai who took a splashable **Betrayal of the Flesh** and Lee Churchill who took a similarly splashable **Terror**. TJ Impellizeri took a couple of **Disciple of the Vaults** no doubt hoping to draft the popular Amsterdam Disciple/Spellbomb archetype.

Black is still underdrafted in *Mirrodon* although it is becoming more fashionable now that *Darksteel* offers so many goodies in the color. One of the problems that drafters can face within the artifact block is that your color commitments are so tenuous that you can switch into one of the strong colors in *Darksteel* without too much difficulty. For example, Lee Churchill had only a **Terror** to indicate a second color by the time *Darksteel* was opened. Had anything leaped out at him he could have gone in that direction.

He picked up a couple of solid white cards including the ridiculous **Test of Faith** and picked up four black cards to round out his deck. After Kate started out so strongly black in the *Mirrodon* packs I can't help but think that she must have been disappointed to not get doubles of either the **Chittering Rats** or the **Grimclaw Bats**.

In the end Kate's creature count was a little on the light side—even with a pair of **Barter in Bloods**. She did have a **Darksteel Brute** and a **Stalking Stones** to help in that area but I am surprised that she could not find a way to work the **Wizard Replica** into her deck. I was also surprised to see her splash the **Unforge** in her deck. I can only imagine that during the draft she ended up passing plenty of good equipment and wanted to have another answer. With **Glissa** and **Deconstruct** it would seem like she was already in decent shape for any game one and she would have still had the option of siding it in for the second game.

In the end she lost to the guy with the Warhammer so I guess she had the right idea. Tom had only one way to dispatch a **Glissa** and I would have expected Kate to win this match-up but such is sometimes the unfairness of the Warhammer.

Here are the two decks that Tom and Kate had to get past for their finals battle. Tom played Allan and Kate was pitted against Lee Churchill.

Philly PTQ Top 8 Draft deck		
Semi-Finalist Allan Shuldiner		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
40 cards		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 Forest 1 Great Furnace 6 Island 1 Mountain 1 Swamp 2 Tree of Tales <hr/> 16 lands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Echoing Courage 1 Echoing Truth 1 Electrostatic Bolt 1 One Dozen Eyes 1 Pulse of the Grid 1 Skeleton Shard 1 Thirst for Knowledge 1 Vulshok Morningstar <hr/> 8 other spells	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 AEther Vial 1 Ancient Den 1 Angel's Feather 1 Chimney Imp 2 Dross Prowler 1 Geth's Grimoire 1 Krark-Clan Shaman 1 Machinate 1 Molten Rain 1 Nim Replica 1 Psychogenic Probe 1 Pteron Ghost 1 Reap and Sow 1 Scavenging Scarab 1 Seething Song 1 Tangleroot 1 Yotian Soldier <hr/> 18 sideboard cards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Arcbound Bruiser 1 Arcbound Fiend 1 Copper Myr 1 Fangren Hunter 2 Frogmite 1 Lumengrid Sentinel 2 Silver Myr 1 Solemn Simulacrum 2 Sombre Hoverguard 1 Tangle Spider 1 Tel-Jilad Wolf 1 Viridian Joiner 1 Wurmskin Forger <hr/> 16 creatures		

Philly PTQ Top 8 Draft deck	
Semi-Finalist Lee Churchill	
Main Deck	Sideboard
40 cards	

9 Plains	1 Arrest	1 Arcane Spyglass
7 Swamp	1 Blinding Beam	2 Awe Strike
16 lands	1 Bonesplitter	1 Blinkmoth Well
1 Auriok Glaivemaster	1 Chromatic Sphere	1 Clockwork Condor
1 Chittering Rats	1 Darksteel Ingot	1 Dross Scorpion
1 Goblin Dirigible	1 Fists of the Anvil	1 Echoing Truth
1 Grimclaw Bats	1 Icy Manipulator	1 Incite War
1 Leaden Myr	1 Leonin Scimitar	1 Kraken's Eye
1 Razor Golem	1 Solar Tide	1 Leonin Elder
2 Scavenging Scarab	1 Talisman of Indulgence	1 Moriok Scavenger
1 Skyhunter Patrol	1 Terror	1 Necrogen Spellbomb
1 Slith Ascendant	1 Test of Faith	1 Nourish
10 creatures	1 Turn the Tables	1 Power Conduit
	1 Viridian Longbow	2 Scrounge
	14 other spells	1 Sphere of Purity
		2 Steel Wall
		2 Tanglebloom
		21 sideboard cards

I have to say I am a little perplexed by the last deck. I had to check a couple of times before I was sure that **Fists of the Anvil** was checked off in the played column until I was sure that it was included. Had I drafted this deck I would have definitely played the **Clockwork Condor** and the **Moriok Scavenger** over the **Fists** and the **Chromatic Sphere**. With a **Viridian Longbow** and a **Solar Tide** I might have also tried to work the two **Steel Walls** into my build. In addition to wanting additional critters to wield the bow you could also force people to play into your **Wrath** effect with the 0/4 walls clogging up the ground.

Good luck to everyone playing in the San Diego PTQs this weekend. Next week I will talk about some of the green **Darksteel** cards and whine about missing another PTQ.

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Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is **Top8Magic.com**, the publishing house that is releasing **Michael J. Flores: Deckade**.



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