

# Putting Your Deck First

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Now that *Darksteel* has been around for a few weeks and everyone has had a chance to see some of the cards in action I think it's about time we covered a draft situation involving the shiny new set.

Right now, so early after *Darksteel's* release, people often don't have the necessary experience to be positive about which of two particular cards is best. I've done a fair amount of drafting with *Darksteel* already – probably around 30 to 40 drafts – but I still wouldn't want to tell you whether you should definitely take Barbed Lightning over Echoing Ruin just yet. Cards like that are just too close to call until you learn just how *Darksteel* has changed the Limited environment.

The other thing to remember is that you'll never be seriously drafting *Darksteel* in a situation where you'll have to make a first pick without any other information. For the next four months you'll have 30 *Mirrodin* cards drafted before opening your *Darksteel* pack and that will always influence your decision. Certainly that's the situation being faced this week.

Last week's poll featured a *Mirrodin-Mirrodin-Darksteel* booster draft. After starting out drafting blue-black Affinity you eventually moved into black-red as the blue cards stopped coming around. You had already managed to pick up the following selection of playable cards in the first two *Mirrodin* packs:

Lifespark Spellbomb  
Gold Myr  
Needlebug  
Triskelion

Pewter Golem  
Barter in Blood  
Consume Spirit  
Nim Shrieker  
Nim Lasher  
Wail of the Nim  
Wall of Blood

Pyrite Spellbomb  
Goblin Replica  
Atog  
Shatter  
Shrapnel Blast  
Krark Clan Grunt



Neurok Familiar  
 Aether Spellbomb  
 Somber Hoverguard  
 Fabricate  
 Crystal Shard

You open up the following Darksteel pack:





Which card do you draft?

There are a few obvious choices there and a few not so obvious ones. In Pristine Angel you've opened what is easily one of most powerful limited cards in the set but it's in none of your three possible colours. There are three powerful commons in your main colours along with splashable artifact kill, a nice piece of equipment and a good artifact creature too. So which should you go for?

Here's what you all voted for:

Which card do you draft?		
Pristine Angel	3362	26.5%
Arcbound Crusher	2031	16.0%
Chittering Rats	1886	14.9%
Essence Drain	1046	8.2%
Oxidize	977	7.7%
Darksteel Ingot	800	6.3%
Leonin Bola	713	5.6%
Spire Golem	506	4.0%
Unforge	378	3.0%
Auriok Siege Sled	275	2.2%
Arcbound Stinger	232	1.8%
Krark-Clan Stoker	159	1.3%
Hallow	117	0.9%

Echoing Truth	105	0.8%
Nourish	100	0.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12687</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

So the bomb rare gets more than a quarter of the vote! I'd really like to do another poll on that particular card just to find out how many of the people who voted for the Angel planned to play it and how many would draft it just so their opponents didn't get it. The rest of the cards were voted for in approximately the order I'd expect. I do think people over-valued the Ingot a little bit as you can usually pick one up later on in a draft. The one in this pack might even make it back round the table to you.

Let's move onto discussing which card does actually make the best pick for this deck. As usual I'm going to get some of the Pros opinions out of the way before giving you my own.

**Victor van den Broek:** From the cards drafted I wouldn't dismiss blue immediately. Crystal Shard, Spellbomb and Hoverguard make up for a fine splash, and Fabricate could still make the cut as well. In the booster there's a good blue card (Spire Golem), but that requires you to be heavy blue. That will definitely not be the case and I don't consider it a real option. Unforge and Essence Drain are solid options as well and I'm pretty sure the right pick is either of those. If you've seen quite some equipment go by earlier, Unforge is solid, but I would probably pick the Essence Drain as it is always removal, and that's what BR wants.

**Olivier Ruel:** If it's not a Pro Tour or a Grand Prix then I'd take Pristine Angel for sure, otherwise I'd go for the Chittering Rats. I'm not quite sure about how good Arcbound Crusher is though, as I've never played it, but it might be the better card.

**Ken Krouner:** Pristine Angel is clearly a bomb. There is no question that it is by far the most powerful card in this pack. It is worth going into the worst color in the set and format in the third pack? No way.

That said, there is another bomb in this pack. Arcbound Crusher is absolutely insane. While you aren't currently overloaded with artifacts in your deck, *Darksteel* does offer several good and cheap artifacts that can make this guy even better. Add to that the fact that he triggers on your opponent's artifacts you are good to go.

**Kai Budde:** The choice basically comes down to two cards: Chittering Rats and Spire Golem. Essence Drain is fine but not as good as the rats and the deck will have to support double black anyway. Right now with that card pool I don't think that you look like a black/red mage. The red cards are easily splashable and Darksteel blue is very good. Also I am not a huge fan of splashing Crystal Shard. The card is the most effective early in the game and if you run only 2-3 Islands, you usually won't be able to use it right away. I think the decision between the rats and the golem comes down to personal preference but I'd go with the artifact creature. Going for a blue base allows you to play Vedalken Engineer and that little guy powers up the quite ridiculous combo this deck offers - Triskelion and Crystal Shard. With a Fabricate to fetch the missing part it is quite likely that you will find the two cards in mid-game and Barter in Blood and both good blockers on the ground and in the air mean that you should be able to make the game long enough ...

**Michael Flores:** I think I'd take Chittering Rats. My friends and I actually are in a great deal of debate about the common pick order in black. Some people like Essence Drain the most but to me it seems like an embarrassingly bad five mana Consume Spirit. I mean it's very good when you have it online, but some of the other cards seem more

consistent due to their superior speed (I might actually like Chittering Rats the best, anyway... depends on the deck).

Chittering Rats really punishes people in this block because no one seems to be willing to play with more than four lands or so despite the fact that they are first-picking seven casters. They are going to be complaining about missing their third drop either way, but at least if you've hit them with a Chittering Rats, you can point at it and then they sort of have to shut up for a turn before they start complaining again. More importantly, if you get multiple Chittering Rats, you can really stunt an opponent's early game board development. Consider the fact that people seem to value cards like Frogmite and 3/2 haste guys very highly. Chittering Rats is at least potentially faster than those cards and can generate favourable trades. Most importantly, in this deck, you have Crystal Shard. Either card is good on its own, but together they violate obscenity laws from Dominaria to the Mirrodin's Core itself.

**Adrian Sullivan:** I would have to take the Essence Drain, but I really want to take that Arcbound Crusher. With Consume Spirit and Barter in Blood already in the deck, another elimination spell is always a good bonus, and the increase in Black makes both of those cards better. In addition, Consume and Essence Drain also help each other out because of their similarity. Each additional Drain effect makes all of the subsequent ones more powerful.

Arcbound Crusher is really, really tempting. He can become incredibly big very easily, but there really aren't that many artifacts in the deck, so you're going to have to be relying on your opponent to help you out here.

**Mike Turian:** Well, you certainly get a lot of options with this pack but I think there is only one clear choice, Arcbound Crusher. The Crusher has been amazing every time I have seen it played. At first I was skeptical about the power of a 1/1 for four mana but the Crusher grows out of control in no time. The Auriok Siege Sled, Essence Drain, Chittering Rats and Unforge are all solid cards but none of them contain the raw unstoppable power of Arcbound Crusher. As soon as I saw the Crusher in the pack I was almost positive I knew what my pick would be. He is just too good to pass up.



**Terry Tsang:** I would probably take Essence Drain here. Your deck will most likely end up as three colors so you want to limit the number of double color spells that you will be playing. Drain is a decent removal card and the single black in the cost makes it better for the deck.

**Nicolai Herzog:** Your options are basically Arcbound Crusher, Chittering Rats, Essence Drain, Leonin Bola and Spire Golem. The deck is lacking some creatures at this point which rules out the Essence Drain and even more so Leonin Bola. Spire Golem also doesn't look great because it seems that you will only splash blue. That leaves Chittering Rats and Arcbound Crusher. I think my pick would be the Rats because you don't have that many artifacts to make Crusher great and only a couple of artifact creatures which

also quiet weakens it. Besides, you have Crystal Shard which makes picking the Rats even better.

There's a bit more dissension than normal amongst the Pros this week but I don't think that's unusual for what is still a fairly new set.

I think they've basically covered all of the possible picks from this pack. The cards I would immediately dismiss are Auriok Siege Sled, Arcbound Stinger, Nourish, Krark-Clan Stoker, Echoing Truth, Hallow and Darksteel Ingot. All of these are just obviously underpowered when compared to other choices in the pack or simply in the wrong colours.

Oxidize should also go as while it is a fine splash card, it isn't splashable in this deck. You're quite possible going to play three colours as it is and you don't want to play a fourth. It's not worth ditching the powerful blue splash for a sole Oxidize.

Spire Golem is an amazing creature when you are running seven or more Islands but it gets very mediocre when Blue is a splash colour. Blue isn't particularly deep in Darksteel and one of its best commons – the Quicksilver Behemoth – isn't very good in this deck. Given that Blue was cut-off through the two Mirrodin packs I wouldn't expect it to be possible to make it a major component of this deck. As a result the Spire Golem is not a high pick in the deck we're looking at here.

I'd also dismiss Leonin Bola at this point. It is a very good card but I don't rate it as highly as the other cards in the booster. The deck is looking like it could be fairly creature light already and I don't think this is the sort of deck that makes the best use of the Bola.

That leaves the following five noteworthy cards, all of which were mentioned by at least one of the Pro players:



The first of those five cards that I think should be passed along is Unforge. Unforge does what it does very well but it's a very narrow card. Not all decks run equipment and even when they do you don't always need to kill it to be able to win. Getting two of your opponent's cards for one of your own is obviously excellent but in my experiences with Unforge that doesn't happen too often. The main reason I'd pass this over is that there's already a Shatter and a Goblin Replica in the deck so there are already solutions to problematic equipment. In addition to that, because Unforge is both a narrow card and also a common, picking up one later on in the draft is entirely possible.

Next up is the powerful Pristine Angel. Let's get one thing clear right away – Pristine Angel is completely ridiculous in limited. There aren't too many single cards that just outright win games but this is definitely one of them. She's up there with Molder Slug in my opinion. She's very difficult to block because she's big and she flies and on top of that she effectively doesn't tap to attack as long as you have a spell in your hand so you can untap her after combat. If you're able to hold onto just one Instant she's pretty much unkillable as you can untap her in response to any targeted removal spell. Unfortunately the problem we have here is that we can't really play her.

It's already looking like there will have to be a splash colour to make up enough cards for the deck. There's no way the Angel's inclusion in a four-color deck should be contemplated. Realistically she can't be splashed in a three-color deck either as although there is a Gold Myr, there wouldn't be room for enough white sources to be able to cast her consistently. The two main colours can't be abandoned in favour of white at this late. Zero white cards were drafted from the first two boosters indicating that the person to the right is very likely to be drafting white. Combine that with the fact that White isn't a particularly deep colour in *Darksteel* and it is not very likely that further playable White cards will come round.

Once the fact that she can't be played is accepted, there is a second question: do you draft her because you don't want to play *against* her? The short answer there is simply "No." Sorry to all those people who picked her; I know why you did but it isn't correct to do so.

Let me try to convince you why.

By picking the Angel as a "hate" draft (i.e. just so none of your opponents get to play it) you definitely hurt your own deck as there are some very playable cards here for you. The deck of the player who would otherwise get the Angel would also be weakened but at what cost? Your deck would be worse through a missed pick and one other person's deck would be worse as it would lack an Angel but that effectively makes all the other decks in the draft pod better! Most draft pods have eight players and play three rounds. If that is the case you'd only play three of the eight people in the pod, so there's a better than 50/50 chance you won't even play against the person who receives the Angel.



The final thing to note is that there is a Barter in Blood that has already been drafted. Even if this deck should end up facing the Pristine Angel there is at least one card that can take her out of the game.

So basically there's a better than 50/50 chance you won't play the player with the Angel. If you do play them there's a reasonable chance they won't draw the Angel. If they do draw the Angel you still have an out in your deck to be able to deal with it. It's simply not worth hurting your own deck just to take a card from one other player.

The Pristine Angel should be avoided completely in favour of a better pick for your own deck.



That leaves just three cards: Arcbound Crusher, Chittering Rats and Essence Drain. These are definitely the three best picks from this pack.

The Essence Drain is a very solid removal spell. I would say that in this deck it is better than the Consume Spirit that has already been drafted, as it doesn't require a ton of Swamps to power it up. This deck is doing okay for removal though. There are already a few removal spells here and I think you could easily expect to get passed at least one Essence Drain, Echoing Decay or Echoing Ruin to up that count. I don't think this deck is really desperate for a removal spell at this point.

The Essence Drain is a fine pick, one that I wouldn't be disappointed about opening but I think the other two cards are at least equal to the Drain in terms of power as well as having some great interactions with the rest of the deck.

Chittering Rats has gotten a lot of attention recently. Ken Ho won Grand Prix Oakland at least partly on the strength of the three Chittering Rats in his final draft deck. The Rats are a great little card by themselves but they get much nastier in multiples so getting one early in a draft is a very good thing. There isn't much in this deck that adds value to them except for the one obvious card: Crystal Shard.

In my first article I talked about a lack of sources of card advantage in this format, well the Rats are just that. When you play the Rats and your opponent is forced to put a card from their hand onto their library you are effectively denying them their draw step. You can often trade the Rats off for a Vulshok Berserker or some such and when you do you will have effectively traded two of your opponent's cards for one of your own.

When you add a Crystal Shard to the mix things can get ugly very quickly. If you can get into a position where you can cast and bounce the Rats every turn you force your opponent to either empty their hand of cards altogether or face never drawing a new card for the rest of the game.

Imagine a situation where the board is clear but your opponent has an Essence Drain and a Terror in their hand. You have just your Crystal Shard but you draw your Chittering Rats. That's the end of the game right there. Your opponent can throw the Essence Drain at your head but they'll never be able to get rid of the Terror as long as you don't provide them with a target. Every turn for the rest of the game you can just make them put the Terror back onto their library. The Shard will sit in play protecting the Rats from the Essence Drain as long as you don't tap out in your turn. Same thing if your opponent was in a situation where they had five lands in play and only a Tangle Spider and Wurmskin Forger in their hand. They'll never ever draw that sixth land if you cast Chittering Rats every turn and they will be doomed to forever draw one of the two uncastable spells in their hand. Of course you have to *realize* that they're in this situation and play accordingly but how you do that is another article entirely.

Even if they are able to empty their hand you might force them into a situation where they have to throw away a nice combat trick like a Predator's Strike or a Roar of the Kha just so they can start drawing new cards again.

You do have to check that you'll be playing the Crystal Shard in this deck though. I personally don't think that can be avoided. I think you'll definitely be running a number of blue cards when the draft is completed and whilst I do agree with Kai when he says the Shard isn't a good splash card I could easily see this deck running five sources of blue mana in the end which makes it perfectly viable.

Now there's one last card in the booster to discuss. It's interesting to me that the two players who selected Arcbound Crusher as their pick (Ken Krouner and Mike Turian) both did so with a great amount of confidence. Some people might say that's simply because they are American and brash confidence is just second nature to them! I think there's a little bit more to it than that.

When Arcbound Crusher is good it's ridiculously good. I've played several games where it's grown up to a 7/7 or bigger. Forget Eater of Days; here is your 9 power Trampler for four mana! Well... possibly.

So is it ridiculously good in this deck?

Adrian and Nicolai both point out that you don't have a huge amount of artifacts in this deck. I think there are eight or nine artifacts that I would imagine making the deck at this point. That's not a huge amount but it's not inconsequential either. The Crusher only really needs one or two artifacts to enter play after him to be a very decent card; anything beyond that and he's excellent. I think due to the fact that he receives counters from your opponent's artifacts there's enough here to assume the Crusher would be solid at worst. The other thing that is relevant here is that you are very, very likely to pick up additional artifact creatures throughout the remainder of the *Darksteel* packs. Dross Golem, Oxidda Golem and Arcbound Bruiser are all very likely to be included in this deck and the first two of those often come round fairly late in a draft due to their reliance on the appropriate lands to make them worth playing. I would anticipate this deck finally running in the region of 11-14 artifacts, which is plenty of fuel for the Crusher.



The Crusher also has more synergy with the rest of the deck than the Chattering Rats does. I've already mentioned Rats plus Crystal Shard but the Shard will also let you add counters to the Crusher if you have another artifact creature you can bounce and replay. To be honest though just the fact you have an active Crystal Shard is enough to win many games. Having a Crusher or Rats to combo alongside is just the cherry on top of the cake.

The Crusher also works very well with three of the red cards that will definitely be making the deck. Atog, Krark-clan Grunt and Shrapnel Blast all open up a lot of tricky combat equations for your opponent when you have the Crusher in play. At any point in time you can sacrifice the Crusher and move its counters onto another artifact creature you have in play. The combination of Shrapnel Blast plus any Arcbound Creature is extremely brutal as it's cheap and usually catches your opponent completely unawares as you kill one of their creatures and enhance one of your own at the same time.

Atog, Krark-clan Grunt and Shrapnel Blast all want you to be playing with as many artifacts as possible and the Crusher serves to enhance that theme both because it's an artifact and because it also wants the same thing.

The final card which combos with the Crusher is the best of all: Triskelion.

There's no better recipient for +1/+1 counters in this format than the mighty Triskelion. Your opponent could be staring down an Atog and a 3/3 Crusher being mildly worried when you suddenly drop Triskelion into play. Now the Crusher becomes a 4/4 and you can, at will, sacrifice the Crusher to turn the Triskelion into a mighty 8/8 monster capable of machine-gunning your opponent's creatures into the ground!

Overall I think Arcbound Crusher is at least as good as both Chattering Rats and Essence Drain. In many decks it's a lot better than both of those cards and I believe that to be true here. This deck wants to run as many artifacts as possible and there are lots of nice interactions between the Crusher and the rest of the deck. Those facts make Arcbound Crusher the correct pick from this booster for me.

Apart from people overvaluing the Pristine Angel, the rest of the last week's votes came out in the correct order in my opinion. Arcbound Crusher, followed by Chattering Rats, followed by Essence Drain

is the exact same order in which I'd value those cards for this deck.

This week's poll is a little different. Instead of presenting you with a situation, I'm going to ask you to give me your own opinion on how you approach booster drafts. I don't expect this poll to be as popular as the usual ones but I'll be discussing these topics in next week's column so I'd like to get a feel for how the majority of you approach limited play.

When you sit down for a draft do you have a set plan in mind? Do you sit down and try and draft a particular colour combination or are you completely flexible?

#### How do you approach a booster draft?

- I have a set plan and I stick to that plan almost all the time.
- I try to draft particular colours but if they don't come I'll swap to something else.
- I'm completely flexible. I'll draft any combination of colours depending on the cards I get passed.
- I've never played in a booster draft and/or I don't really know what they are.

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One last thing before I sign off this week. Today's column is the longest one I've written so far and to be honest I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing. Do you prefer these articles longer but possibly with more depth, or would you prefer something a little shorter and more succinct? Drop me an e-mail or leave a note on the message board and let me know.

Thanks for reading,

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