

Strength Through Specialization Search

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Welcome to Cycling week! Cycling is one of the best limited abilities. It's a source of card advantage and it can help smooth out draws that have too many spells or lands. Unfortunately, there isn't any Cycling in the current block! As a result I'm afraid you'll have to wait until it comes back for a third time for an article from me on it. There are plenty of interesting topics to cover on the current block though, so I'll be leaving the history lessons to the other columns this week.

Apologies to all of you who were disappointed that there was no poll in last week's column. A combination of things was responsible but mostly it was me being stupid (I sent a previous, unfinished version of the column to Scott Johns) and my ISP being annoying (They took my e-mail server down for 36 hours so I didn't read Scott's 'No poll this week?' e-mail until it was too late). I'm still a bit new to this though so I hope you'll forgive me.

Now that *Darksteel* looks to be live on the **Magic Online** servers everyone can now draft with it 24 hours a day should they so desire. As the poll didn't make it in last week, I'm going to cover a topic related back to last week's article instead of my planned topic. I received a number of e-mails from readers asking about the black-red archetype that a few of the Pro players mentioned last week. Whilst I'm no Pro, I can still give you my own opinions as to how that particular colour combination shapes up in *Mirrodin-Mirrodin-Darksteel* drafts.

Aggro or control?

In my experience there are two very different types of black-red. One of the key things is realising which one you're drafting and modifying your picks accordingly. The first approach is an aggressive, tempo related version. It values cheap aggressive creatures and good equipment very highly, and it makes a lot of use of what most people would class



as the more mediocre cards in the colours. It subscribes to the theory of rather than relying on drawing your Electrostatic Bolt to deal with an opposing Platinum Angel, why not try to win the game before your opponent can ever play it? The second type of black-red is a much slower, controlling sort of deck. It values creature removal very highly and utilises the slower, more powerful creatures.

One of the important skill elements in drafting comes from recognising how pick orders change during a draft. When you open your first booster the Spikeshot Goblin may well be the better pick than Shatter, but by the time the second boosters gets opened the reverse may be true. You can read up on people's opinions on draft pick orders all over the Net but they don't often explain how and when these orders change.

This goes back to the concept I've often repeated of drafting the best card *for your deck* instead of just simply drafting "the best card". There's obviously a wide spectrum of black-red decks you can draft and the goals of the particular deck you are drafting defines how highly you value a particular card. What we're really talking about is drafting towards an *archetype*, rather than just a pile of good cards. Hopefully I'll be able to give you a few clues as to how and why the draft pick orders change for these different types of black-red.

Aggressive black-red

This version of black-red places a higher value on cards that deal damage directly or cards that aid you in your ability to deal damage. There's a very wide range of cards that come in those categories.

Aggressive creatures deal more damage than utility creatures in general and thus the utility creatures won't be a high priority when you're drafting this deck. In general you want your creatures to be threatening and to be able to do some serious damage to your opponent should they get through. The Nim cards are a perfect example of this. Although they require significant support via a decent number of artifacts it's quite easy to get a Nim Lasher or Nim Shrieker up to 4 power or higher. Whilst the Lasher dies to pretty much any blocker it will force a trade in the vast majority of circumstances and that's usually fine but there are a lot of late pick equipment cards that improve the



Lasher significantly. A Neurok Hoversail can send it over the top, a Slagwurm Armour turns most blockers into chump blockers and a Whispersilk Cloak lets you get the damage through to your opponent no matter what creatures they hold back. The Cloak also has the added bonus of protecting the Lasher's fragile toughness too. Whilst I'm not normally a fan of the Cloak, if you have a number of Nims in your deck it becomes a very nice card to have.

Creatures that have drawbacks are also fine in this sort of deck. Nim Abominations, Cathodions and Grimclaw Bats are all excellent here. You don't mind that you lose life to them as you plan on making your opponent's life disappear at a lot faster rate than your own.

Creatures with evasion should also be a high priority here. Nim Shriekers and Grimclaw Bats are very important as they can allow you to deal the last few points of damage you need after an opponent has successfully stalled the ground. If you can't get these then it's often correct to play equipment that grants evasion like the Neurok Hoversail and Whispersilk Cloak that I just mentioned. Emissary of Despair is excellent in this deck as it can come out early, has evasion and has the potential to severely punish your opponent for developing their board. I also like Dross Golem in this deck. It can come down nice and early on turn three if you have a couple of Swamps and the fear ability does come into play on more occasions than you might think. It's nice to have another guy that can attack into Skyhunter Patrols and Tel-Jilad Archers.

Cards that increase the damage potential of your creatures also help. There are a lot of different things that fall into that category though. Creature removal doesn't improve your creatures at all but it does help your guys deal damage to your opponent rather than to a blocker and so removal is still as important here as always. Your ideal equipment is the aggressive-but-cheap equipment like Bonesplitter or Vulshok Morningstar. Obviously you'll be happy to play a Loxodon Warhammer but Equipment like Vulshok Battlegear and Vulshok Gauntlets can often be too slow for this deck. Other minor cards that increase the damage your creatures can deal often make the cut too. Tooth of Chiss-Goria is an acceptable card to have in this deck for example. Even things as simple as making sure you pick up late on-colour - or even off-colour - Artifact Lands to improve your Nims can help your deck a great deal. Nuisance Engine is another very good example. While it's incapable of dealing any damage in its own right it can significantly enhance your Nims whilst providing fuel to improve other cards like Disciple of the Vault or Krark-Clan Grunt.

Mana Myrs are also fairly important to this deck. They increase your tempo, provide additional artifacts (which this deck usually wants), and they allow you to play a lower land count. They can also

be equipped later on and can often provide an extra point or two of damage when you're attacking your army into a smaller number of defenders.

As far as creature removal goes Barbed Lightning is probably the pick of the bunch as ideally it kills a blocker and takes bite out of your opponent at the same time. Compare this with Essence Drain which deals the same damage but only gives some extra life that usually won't be relevant. Cards like Essence Drain and Consume Spirit are not high picks here. You don't want to be seeing those in your hand on your third or fourth turn when you want to remove a blocker so you can continue your attack. By the time they get active you may already have lost too much momentum. Remember, this archetype is about the early rush, not the late game.

Just as some of the slower removal is weak, some of the slower creatures aren't high picks either. I'm more of a fan of Pewter Golem than most but he isn't a card you'll pick highly here. Often it'll be correct to take a Disciple of the Vault or Nim Lasher over him. If you have no alternatives then by all means draft him and play him; He is still a solid addition to this deck, just not something that's a high pick here. Four and five mana spells should be the top of your mana curve in this deck. I wouldn't expect to play anything that cost more than that unless it was something that would have a big impact on the game, or provide a good finisher. I'm thinking about cards like Mirror Golem, Triskelion and possibly even Goblin Dirigible as worthwhile inclusions.

Utility creatures like Goblin Replica or Moriok Scavenger aren't that great here either. You want to have good aggressive creatures and you want to be in a position to be able to attack with them early and often. This will sound a little weird but even Chittering Rats aren't as amazing as normal in this deck. When you're planning on "out-tempoing" your opponent the lost draw phase is not as significant as it might be because you don't plan on them having time to utilise every card they draw anyway. Once again, as with the Pewter Golem comment in the last paragraph I'm not saying the Rats are bad or shouldn't be played, only that they're not at their best in this sort of deck. The Rats are still very good here, but I would almost always rank them below Echoing Decay in this deck and I might even take Grimclaw Bats over them if I needed an early drop and some extra evasion.

Black-red control

As I already mentioned this version of black-red is far more controlling. It's basically in it for the long game, and it won't usually expect to win the game early, relying instead on an ability to deal with an opponent's threats and some way of generating card advantage in order to exhaust an opponent's resources.

As one of this deck's aims is basically to generate card advantage, any creatures that can do so are an automatic inclusion. Spikeshot Goblin is the most obvious of these, being able to take down any number of one toughness creatures and then improving massively if you can enhance its power in some way. Goblin Replica is another fine addition. It has the potential to trade with an attacker whilst being sacrificed to remove an additional artifact too. It also combines very nicely with anything that brings it back from your graveyard. Moriok Scavenger is a solid card for this deck too. You're quite happy to trade off an early guy for a Vulshok Berserker or something and then get it back later on with the Scavenger. Chittering Rats is obviously huge here also. You expect the game to go long so the missed draw will definitely count and the Rats can usually trade for something during the course of a game.



The other creatures that fit into this category are those that allow you to trade your life total for cards in play. I'm thinking mostly of Wall of Blood but it's true of Grimclaw Bats also. The Wall especially can put a serious halt on any attacking from your opponent and give you time to start using your more powerful cards. In most decks the Wall is weak, but it's fine in this type of deck. The Bats are trickier as you have to keep mana open, but a little later on in a game keeping two mana open to deter any incoming Skyhunter Patrols and the like isn't difficult.

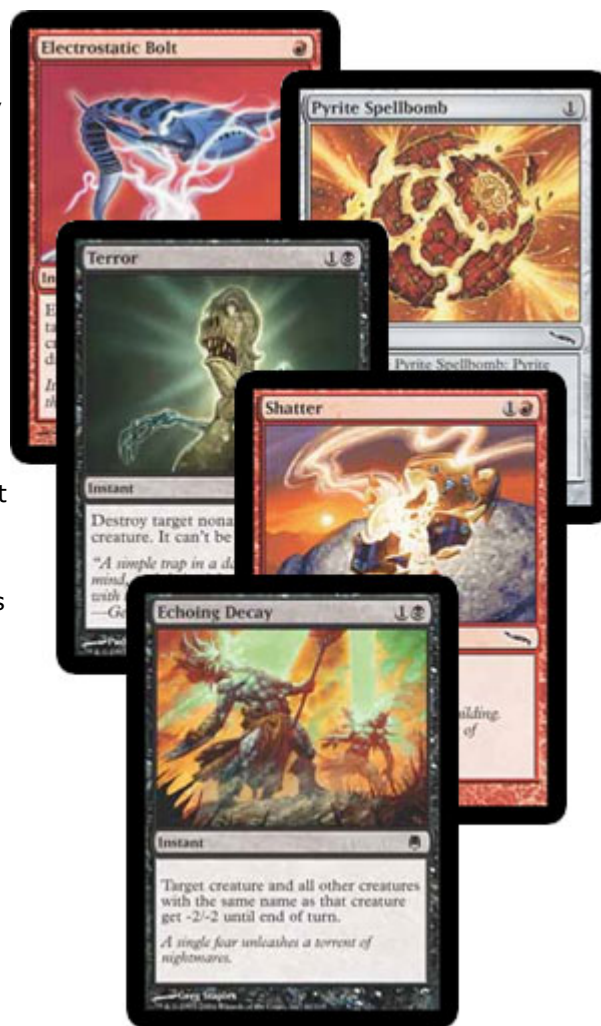
Regenerators are at their best here as well. Pewter Golem, Flayed Nim and Slith Bloodletter can all hold off an incoming attacker indefinitely if you have the mana. The first two of those also serve an excellent role when you come to attack as they're both very difficult to deal with.

There aren't many cards which generate card advantage in this block but the ones that do fit nicely in this deck. I'd rate Granite Shard almost as highly as Spikeshot Goblin in this deck, primarily because you won't typically be playing any equipment here and as a result the Spikeshot won't be dealing more than one damage a turn very often. Serum Tank and Skeleton Shard are both excellent ways of getting some additional cards once you get to the mid-game and late-game stages of a duel. Both of those two cards should be considered high picks here, and Skeleton Shard is particularly good if you have a Goblin Replica or two.

As your creatures tend to be a little bit more expensive and slower, cheaper removal is more important here. Electrostatic Bolt, Pyrite Spellbomb, Terror, Shatter and Echoing Decay are all at the top of the list of cards you want in the deck. You take these over pretty much any creature. Playing a few of the slower removal spells is fine too of course; in this deck Essence Drain and Consume Spirit are nice to have because the life-gain is actually relevant to you. Unlike the aggro deck, Barter in Blood is exceptionally good here.

This deck usually ends up not playing any equipment, not really because it doesn't want it, but rather because very few of the Equipment cards are high picks here. Bonesplitter, Leonin Scimitar, Vulshok Morningstar are not high picks at all for this deck. Viridian Longbow is playable but it's not great here as you're usually playing a low creature count and you struggle to get the Longbow working effectively as a result. You'll obviously still draft and play the ridiculous equipments like Mask of Memory and Loxodon Warhammer though.

This deck aims to deal with any early threats using spot removal or simply by trading creatures off. It shouldn't really seek to try and win damage races as its more powerful cards will usually allow it win when the games go longer. Once the game stabilises a little the card advantage cards will start to come into play a lot more.



Your bread and butter, if you can get them.

That's pretty much all I have to say on black-red for now at least. Those are the two variations that I see as being the best versions of black-red, and they are obviously very different. If you feel yourself

moving into those colours it is worthwhile identifying which of the two decks you think you are drafting and modifying your picks accordingly.

I'm aware that this column is a bit of a departure from the usual one with no Pro quotes, no draft picks, and a more general analysis of a colour combination instead. I'm interested to know whether you would like me to do any further columns along these lines or whether you'd prefer I stick to the usual format. There's a link to the Wizards message boards at the bottom of this article, please feel free to express your opinion there or in an e-mail to me. I hope that I've at least given you something to think about next time you find the black and red cards being shipped your way.

Next Week

For next week's column I'm going to go through a sealed deck build. The pool of cards I'll be going through is listed below. If you can find the time, sit down and run through the cards and decide what you would build if you were lucky enough to open this great selection. Once you've done that fill in the polls with the colours you'd be playing – there's one poll for your main colour(s) and one for any colours that you might want to splash. Please note even if you don't splash a colour, do fill in the second poll stating that.

Card pool:

Artifact:

1 Steel Wall
1 Myr Retriever
1 Myr Adapter
1 Needlebug
1 Frogmite
1 Triskelion
1 Myr Enforcer
1 Bonesplitter
1 Welding Jar
1 Isochron Scepter
1 Vorrac Battlehorns
1 Loxodon Warhammer
1 Myr Landshaper
1 Juggernaut
1 Arcbound Bruiser
1 AEther Vial
1 Leonin Bola
1 Skullclamp
1 Vulshok Morningstar
1 Genesis Chamber
1 Whispersilk Cloak
1 Ur-Golem's Eye

Land:

1 Great Furnace
1 Glimmervoid
1 Seat of the Synod

White:

1 Leonin Den-Guard
1 Skyhunter Cub
1 Skyhunter Patrol
1 Blinding Beam
1 Pteron Ghost
1 Echoing Calm
1 Metal Fatigue
1 Pulse of the Fields

Red:

1 Spikeshot Goblin
1 Goblin Replica
1 Hematite Golem
1 Rustmouth Ogre
1 Fists of the Anvil
1 Seething Song
1 Detonate
1 Electrostatic Bolt
1 Drooling Ogre
1 Krark-Clan Stoker
1 Vulshok War Boar
1 Oxidda Golem
1 Inflame
2 Barbed Lightning

Green:

1 Brown Ouphe
1 Tel-Jilad Chosen
1 Elf Replica
1 Copperhoof Vorrac
1 Battlegrowth
1 Turn to Dust
1 Tel-Jilad Wolf
1 Tel-Jilad Outrider

Black:

1 Nim Lasher
1 Pewter Golem
1 Chimney Imp
1 Skeleton Shard
1 Dross Golem
1 Scavenging Scarab
1 Echoing Decay
1 AEther Snap

Blue:

1 Lumengrid Warden
1 Neurok Familiar
1 Psychic Membrane
1 Wizard Replica
1 AEther Spellbomb
1 Assert Authority
1 Inertia Bubble
1 Override
1 Hoverguard Observer
1 Quicksilver Behemoth
1 Magnetic Flux

Which two colours were your main colours?

- White & blue
- White & black
- White & red
- White & green
- Blue & black
- Blue & red
- Blue & green
- Black & red
- Black & green
- Red & green
- I built a mono-red deck

Submit

Which colour(s) did you splash?

- White
- Blue
- Black
- Red
- Green
- I didn't splash any colour
- I splashed more than one colour

Submit

Have a good week everyone!

Scott.

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