

Scott Wills

Monday, April 19, 2004

The team PTQ season is now well underway with the first round of U.S. qualifiers having been completed now. I hope to be able to touch on that format a little bit but unfortunately it's not a format that anyone has a lot of experience with right now. In England we don't get our PTQs until May (and even then the country only gets two of them) so I won't be playing the format for a while yet personally. Never-the-less I still hope to be able to give you something well before the end of the season.

At the time of writing this (the middle of last week) I'm actually contemplating a £300 flight to GP Washington so I can team up with fellow Englishman Sam Gomersall who'll be playing there. None of my regular team-mates are attending GP Bochum (which also takes place on the same weekend) so Washington is my only option.

On the one hand I'm not sure that a 14,000 mile round trip is really that sensible a plan for a weekend's **Magic** excursion. On the other I'd really like to play, the flights aren't *that* expensive really, Sam would make an excellent team-mate, and I might be able to swing the leave from work even at such short notice..

Well, I've got the rest of the week to decide but if you see Sam teaming with someone else when you read the coverage don't be too surprised.

Last Week

Before you read anything relating to the team format from me I still have last week's draft pick to discuss. A quick refresher on the situation for you:

It's a *Mirrodin-Mirrodin-Darksteel* booster draft and your deck is shaping up nicely. Your playable picks after the two *Mirrodin* packs are as follows:

Disciple of the Vault
Neurok Familiar
Silver Myr
Psychic Membrane
Nim Lasher x 2
Cobalt Golem
Duskworker
Myr Enforcer x 2
Somber Hoverguard
Looming Hoverguard
Mirror Golem

Terror
Irradiate
Lightning Greaves
Nuisance Engine
Scale of Chiss-Goria
Synod Sanctum
Thoughtcast

Talisman of Dominance

Annul

Ancient Den

Vault of Whispers

You open up your *Darksteel* booster and are presented with the following choices:





Which card do you chose?

You have quite a nice deck shaping up here. There are a lot of very powerful cards in there already: Terror, Looming Hoverguard, two Myr Enforcers, Mirror Golem, Irradiate, etc. The Myr and Talsiman make for a good mana-base providing both acceleration and some artifacts to power up your Affinity cards. If anything though, the deck is a little short of artifacts at this time, and a little short of creatures in general. Your late game is strong already with the two powerful six casting cost creatures, but you need to have enough artifacts in the deck to ensure the two Enforcers don't end up costing the same. You could do with a few more solid creatures too, especially something that could come out in the first few turns of the game.

The above *Darksteel* booster provides numerous options. There are at least five or six cards in that pack that would definitely find a place in the main deck were you to draft them. So what did everyone pick?

Which card do you chose?		
Hoverguard Observer	2414	18.0%
Vedalken Engineer	2267	16.9%
Whispersilk Cloak	2265	16.9%
Oxidize	1837	13.7%
Darksteel Gargoyle	1286	9.6%
Chittering Rats	1034	7.7%
Arcbound Worker	437	3.3%
Razor Golem	408	3.0%
Serum Powder	384	2.9%

Auriok Glaivemaster	261	1.9%
Darksteel Pendant	234	1.7%
Neurok Prodigy	234	1.7%
Reap and Sow	161	1.2%
Tangle Spider	128	1.0%
Pteron Ghost	65	0.5%
Total	13415	100.0%

Some interesting results this week with only a handful of votes differentiating the top three picks. The first two choices don't surprise me at all; those are the two cards I would've expected to top the list. I am surprised that Chittering Rats came so low down the list though. I've talked about their power before and here they're on colour and they fit nicely into your mana curve. I would've predicted them to finish in the top three.

Culling the weak

Before we get to the good stuff I'm going to remove the cards that are basically unplayable in this deck so we know which cards really are worth considering from this pack. I'll work from the bottom up of the reader's answers.

Pteron Ghost is rightly dismissed first of all. He's a typically very average in most white decks unless you have a lot of artifacts worth protecting at which point he usually makes the cut. This isn't a white deck however and it's certainly not worth hurting your mana base just to fit a Ghost in.

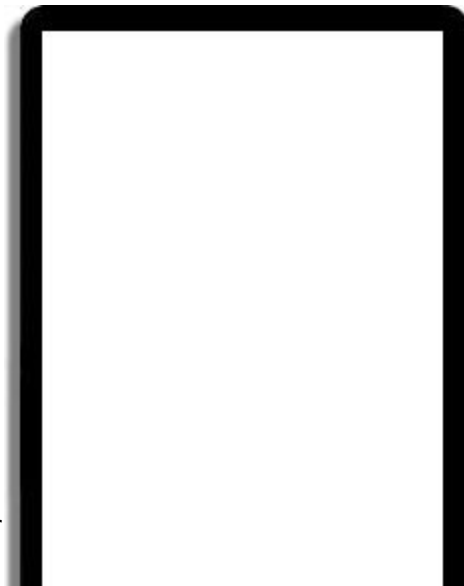
Tangle Spider next. Same deal as the Ghost really. He's a much better card than the Ghost but the additional coloured mana in his casting cost means there's absolutely no way he could fit in this deck.

A quick word about Reap and Sow: you shouldn't be playing this in your deck for its ability to destroy lands. The only time this should even come close to making the cut is basically when you have the multiple Cloudpost deck. There are no other lands worth searching out with this – Stalking Stones and Blinkmoth Nexus just aren't worth the investment of four mana and a card to fetch.

Darksteel Pendant was fairly low on the list here. If this card is going to be playable it's in this sort of deck where it boosts up your Nim Lashers and cheapens your Myr Enforcers. I think if I had a Pendant at the end of the draft I'd probably play it in this deck but there's no need to take one early in the draft, especially when there are so many other better picks for this deck.

I'm surprised to see Neurok Prodigy so low but I'm hoping it's just because there are other superior blue cards in the pack, not because people don't like him. I've found the Prodigy to be a fine little card – I love having turn three creatures with evasion and the fact that he also has an occasionally useful ability makes him very good. He isn't as good as the Observer though, so I'm guessing that most of the people who chose 'blue flying creature' as their pick correctly went with the Observer instead.

Auriok Glaivemaster is similar to the Ghost in a lot of respects. It's mediocre in some decks, and quite decent in others. This deck only has a single piece of equipment but more importantly it has no white mana. This isn't the sort of card you want to splash even if you could do so without hurting your mana.



I have actually tried Serum Powder in limited and concluded that usually it's not worth the card. The mulligan ability rarely comes up and most of the time when you draw Serum Powder it's worse than any other playable spell would be at that point in time. The times when it is playable are when you have a lot of higher casting cost guys and need the acceleration no matter how shaky it is. It can also be played in an Affinity deck like you have here but it's still not good enough to warrant first-pick status given your other options.

*Solid, but strictly worse than
Observer.*

Yet another 'white' card that I would cut right away is Razor Golem. Whilst you obviously could play it in this deck if you wanted to there's no way you ever would. Six mana 3/4s are not the best even if they don't tap to attack. There's much better stuff here than this.

The final card I'm going to include in this section is the Arcbound Worker. If you were able to pick up a Worker later on in the draft this is definitely the sort of deck it's playable in. If I have enough targets for the Modular ability I think playing an Arcbound Worker is fine. It's nice to have something that attacks your opponent for a few points early in the game, and often he can trade for an opposing Nim Lasher or Alpha Myr or something. Even when he doesn't he can be sacrificed for a useful effect without losing you the +1/+1 counter that you basically paid your mana for at the start.

With those cards out of the way the following are left: Hoverguard Observer, Vedalken Engineer, Whispersilk Cloak, Oxidize, Darksteel Gargoyle, Chittering Rats.

All of these cards received a reasonable share of the vote and I think they're all worth discussing in a little more depth.

The Contenders



I'm going to deal with Oxidize first even though it didn't get the least number of votes of the remaining cards. It's obviously a very powerful card in this format, able to take out lots of the ridiculous bombs for the measly price of one green mana. Due to that casting cost it's also very splashable and it's the sort of card that's useful to draw at any point in the game. The only thing in question really is whether it's possible to splash for it in the deck you have here. Looking at the mana of this deck there are quite a few cards that want black mana early – Disciple of the Vault, the Nim Lashers and Terror. There is also the Looming Hoverguard which requires double blue. We do have both a Silver Myr and a Talisman of Dominance to help out with the colour issues but playing these means you should probably be looking at sixteen lands in this deck.

If that were everything to consider then you could probably think about splashing Oxidize here. However, you should also be thinking about the rest of the draft. Some of the best on-colour creatures you can expect for this deck all require heavy mana commitments. Spire Golem, Dross Golem, Chittering Rats and Grimclaw Bats are all cards you should be hoping to pick up through-out the rest of Darksteel and all of these cards require a heavy colour commitment to make the most of them. In addition to that the Spire and Dross Golems require a high number of basic lands to be good and we already have two artifact lands here that may well get played in order to speed up the Affinity cards. With those facts in mind I think any splash colour in this sort of deck is going to hurt the mana-base considerably. You'll have to

sacrifice some of your coloured mana and possibly even one of the artifact lands in order to fit the necessary green mana in. That really isn't worth it for the addition of a single card.

When most people first looked at Darksteel Gargoyle I think their first thought was "Sure it's indestructible, but seven mana for a 3/3 flyer? Too expensive!" I know my own thoughts were along those lines but having played with and against the card numerous times I think a casting cost less than that would've made it a little too powerful in limited. Even at seven mana the Gargoyle is quite playable and makes the cut in my decks the majority of the time. As an artifact the card is obviously playable in your deck but the main thing going against the Gargoyle here is his casting cost. You're already looking at a deck with two guys at six mana and another expensive creature isn't something that should be high on your agenda here. If there were no other possible choices then the Gargoyle would be acceptable; you'd probably play him and just cross your fingers for no awful draws. There are other choices though, and better ones at that. There's even a four mana 3/3 flyer which should definitely be picked ahead of the Gargoyle if it's a solid creature you are looking for.



Chittering Rats was the one card that surprised me in the poll. *Good even at this price, but not what this deck needs.* Maybe it has fallen out of favour a little lately, but I'd definitely have put it in the top three myself. The deck you have above already has a lot of power at its high end, but what it is lacking is some good creatures to play early in the game. Nim Lashers are fine and everything but they're not always the sort of card you want to throw out on turn three when you have few or possibly no artifacts in play. Your opponent might be attacking with early drops like Arcbound Workers, Raise the Alarm tokens and other small creatures that they'd be happy to trade for a Lasher whereas you won't want to be trading the Lasher off that early in the game. Having something like the Rats on turn 3 is great as they'll deny your opponent a card which they may need to develop their board whilst at the same time provide a throwaway blocker or something that can attack the following turn too. Having said all of that the deck you're looking at here is more heavily blue than black (a likely factor in the results and you'll likely want to keep it that way if you pick up some Spire Golems and Vedalken Engineers in *Darksteel*. As a result the Rats might be a little difficult to cast on turn three all the time. As powerful as the Rats are, I think there are still yet more powerful options in this booster.

Before I get down to the last three cards that received the most votes I'm going to take a second to include some Pro opinions on this pack. Given the close nature of the poll results the Pro's choices might surprise you a little.

Mike Turian: Occasionally I will have a deck in which the Vedalken Engineer would be a close call with the Hoverguard Observer. The Observer is the clear choice for your deck. Its double blue casting cost shouldn't be an issue as your deck already has Looming Hoverguard and no heavy black cards. A 3/3 Flyer for four mana is incredibly powerful in Limited. Chittering Rats, Vedalken Engineer, and Neurok Prodigy are all fine cards but they just aren't as good as Hoverguard Observer.

Adrian Sullivan: There is no question in my mind that I would scoop up the Chittering Rats. The deck already wants more creatures, and this one is a great pick in a mostly underwhelming pack. One of the great things about a Rat is that with more of them, they get even more potent. The little Chitterer might not be a powerhouse, but that means you are also not too unlikely to get more of them.

And what are your other options? Going into other colors for Oxidize, or some subpar artifacts... I go with the in-color Rat.

Daniel Zink: I'd pick the Hoverguard Observer. Considering that you don't have many artifacts for your affinity cards yet you really want to pick up as many good artifacts as you can put your hands on. But unfortunately the options are simply not good enough here. You also don't want to pick the Vedalken Engineer because of your lack of many artifacts. That leaves Hoverguard Observer, Neurok Prodigy and Chittering Rats as picks in your colors out of which I consider the Observer to be the most powerful.

Victor van den Broek: The viable options are Chittering Rats, Vedalken Engineer, Neurok Prodigy and Hoverguard Observer in my opinion. The Observer is much better than the Prodigy and as such the 2/1 flier is not a real option in this pack. Chittering Rats is good but it doesn't seem to do as much in this deck as it would in others, whereas the Engineer and Observer should be pretty good. Engineer works well with the Enforcers and other artifact creatures, but the deck already has a Myr and a Talisman, and you should be able to pick an Engineer up a little later. As such I'd pick the Observer and go for a good offensive flier.

Patrick Sullivan: My pick out of this pack would be the Hoverguard Observer. The cards I considered picking were the Chittering Rats, the Vedalken Engineer, and the Observer. I think that the Prodigy is strictly worse than the Observer and didn't consider it at all. The deck in its current form, while not exactly creature light, is certainly short on creatures I would actually like to cast. Although the Engineer's potential is certainly alluring, it actually may under-perform in this deck due to the lack of equipment and generally weakness of most of the artifact creatures in this deck. In fact, many of this deck's best threats (the Hoverguards) can't be helped out by an Engineer. The Chittering Rats is in my opinion the best black common in the set, but this deck appears to be mostly blue with a black splash, making double black on turn three unlikely at best. In the end, I would take a powerful, cheap threat for a deck lacking in it - the Hoverguard Observer.

Sam Gomersall: The choice for me is between the Rats and the Hoverguard. I think I would take the Hoverguard as this guy is just so good. There's no real complex reasoning behind this one I just think the Hoverguard is more powerful than the Rats.

Jeroen Remie: I'd pick the Hoverguard Observer. In my eyes it's simply the best card. Your curve looks nice with a bunch of three drops, but you seem to be lacking enough fliers. 3/3 is better than the 2/1, Engineer doesn't cut it since it is only good on turn two. You need some more power, and are more likely to get more Engineers in the next packs, and the Rats just aren't as good.

Easy pick for me...

Kai Budde: I think the choice comes down to: Hoverguard Observer, Oxidize, Vedalken Engineer and Chittering Rats.

Oxidize won't be easy to splash as we don't have a Chromatic Sphere or another green mana source. I don't really want to play two or more basic Forests just for this card, so it won't make it. The Hoverguard is clearly the better blue card for us. Engineer is very good but we don't have all that much stuff to abuse him with other than a few expensive artifact creatures. The 3/3 flier is just a more solid choice. That means it boiled down to the blue flier against Chittering Rats. If we already had a Rat, I'd think about picking a

second one but we don't have a combo with it and a 3/3 flier is just a superior card. So my pick here is Hoverguard Observer.

Brian Kibler: This pick is very straightforward - I'd pick Hoverguard Observer. The other conceivable picks are Neurok Prodigy, Darksteel Gargoyle, and Chittering Rats. Prodigy is very fragile, essentially a 2/1 body for one less mana than the 3/3 observer, while Gargoyle is the opposite - very resilient, but much more expensive. This aggressive affinity build wants the most bang for its buck, which means the Observer. The Rats are fantastic, but don't fit the aggressive theme of this build as well as the 3/3 flier.

Anton Jonsson: I would pick Hoverguard Observer. A 3/3 flier for 4 is extremely fast in this format and with a Silver Myr and Talisman already we have an ok shot at playing him turn 3. The other candidates would be the Engineer and the Rats, both of which are fine cards but we are likely to pick up an Engineer later on and the Rat will hurt our mana base. Also, a lot of the time the Rats don't do much at all. Observer is the pick here.

An overwhelming consensus there! 9-1 in favour of the Observer with Adrian Sullivan as the sole dissenting voice. The fact that he didn't mention the Observer at all makes me suspect he possibly over-looked its presence in the pack. Unfortunately I haven't been able to get in touch with him to find out for sure.

It's interesting to me that many of the Pros stated that this pick was very obvious despite the fact that it produced one of the closest votes we've seen in the reader's poll. Why did they all think the pick was so clear? Well let's examine the last three choices and hopefully I'll be able to explain why.

The Final Choices

The Whispersilk Cloak came very close to winning the reader's poll and yet not one single Pro even mentioned it! I think many people have a tendency to over-rate the Cloak a little. It does provide two useful abilities making the equipped creature both untargetable and unblockable, but those abilities are only useful if you have a good creature to put them on. Consider the other more popular equipment cards: Bonesplitter, Viridian Longbow, Mask of Memory, Vulshok Morningstar. All of these do one of two things: they either increase the amount of damage dealt by the creature or they provide some form of card advantage. The Cloak does neither of those things and it has comparatively high mana costs too.

That isn't to say the Cloak is unplayable, it is, just not all of the time. You need the right sort of deck to put it in. Green decks are good examples, where you can drop it on a Tangle Golem and get an instant four turn clock. Green decks lack evasion and the unblockability provided by the Cloak fills that hole. The other sort of deck where the Cloak is playable is close to the deck we have here in fact. Nim Lashers and Nim Shriekers are excellent targets for the Cloak and we do have two such creatures in this deck. However in this situation the Cloak doesn't really work well with the rest of the deck. A lot of your better creatures already have evasion already: Mirror Golem, the Hoverguards, Cobalt Golem and any future Spire Golems or Neurok Prodigys you might pick up in *Darksteel*. As a result that side of the Cloak is wasted in this deck. The untargetability given by the Cloak is also a little unnecessary here. In general Myr Enforcers, Mirror Golems and the like are pretty difficult to kill. Yes a timely



Shatter or Deconstruct can take them out but that's just **Magic**. Trading cards on a 1-for-1 basis is just part of the game. Having a Cloak in play doesn't always prevent that either as the Cloak isn't the cheapest piece of equipment out there and your turn four Myr Enforcer could well bite the dust before you have a chance to protect it.

If you could pick a Cloak up later in the draft there is every chance it would make the cut and be playable in this deck. However it's not something which this deck has to have, the deck can function quite well without it. The Cloak isn't a high pick in draft and I wouldn't be surprised if this one went all the way around the table. The Cloak is an okay card to have in this deck, but it's not the correct pick here.

Second in the reader's poll was the Vedalken Engineer. This little guy also got numerous mentions from the Pros although he was never actually chosen as the correct pick. In some decks I think the Engineer would be at least as powerful as the Hoverguard Observer but this isn't one of those decks. You need a lot of artifacts to make the Engineer ridiculously good and ideally you'd want a couple of cards that the Engineer helps power up even when you have no artifacts in hand. By that I mean stuff like Serum Tank or Viridian Longbow that the Engineer can help pay the costs for even into the late game. This deck does have a Nuisance Engine but that's pretty much the only thing it has.

On top of that, as several of the Pros mentioned, the solid flyers of this deck aren't helped out by the Engineer here. Yes he can help you cast your Myr Enforcers and the Mirror Golem but not the two Hoverguards. The Engineer might help out future Spire Golems but a lot of the cards you might draft in the remaining *Darksteel* packs won't be helped by the Engineer. Neurok Prodigy, Echoing Decay, Essence Drain, Grimclaw Bats are all cards you'll want to draft but the Engineer will be useless alongside them. Obviously you'll want to pick up some cheaper artifacts to help out your Affinity spells but I imagine these will be things like Arcbound Worker or Stinger, Darksteel Citadel and Dross Golems. The Engineer doesn't really help these too much either.

In this deck, from this booster, the Engineer is actually similar to the Cloak in terms of power. It's a good card that is great in some decks, but it's merely decent here. It's a card that can go quite late in a draft and if you can pick one up then you'll probably be happy to have it. It just isn't up there alongside the Hoverguard Observer in terms of sheer power and as a result you shouldn't really be first-picking it ahead of that card in this situation.

That leaves us with just the Hoverguard Observer as both the reader's choice and the pro's choice from this pack. It should be fairly obvious that it's the most powerful on-colour card in the pack. If you look around at the sort of creatures you get for four mana in this block very few of them compare favourably with the Observer. Three toughness is very relevant in this block with Pyrite Spellbomb, Electrostatic Bolt and Echoing Decay all around to take down anything smaller. It also means that the Observer is able to attack into a Skyhunter Patrol whereas a Somber Hoverguard can't.

Anton Jonsson pointed out the Myr and Talisman you have that will both definitely be in the deck. This gives you a reasonable chance of dropping the Observer on turn 3 if you draw him early. The Hoverguard does have a slightly annoying double blue casting cost but in this deck you're looking to go heavier blue than black anyway so that's another vote for the Observer over something like the Rats.



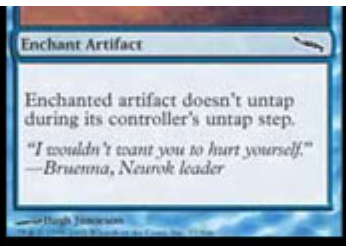
The playable cards in this pack are just that: playable. You'll never be unhappy to run Chittering Rats, Vedalken Engineer, Neurok Prodigy and Whispersilk Cloak in this deck. But quite simply none of those cards are as powerful as a four mana 3/3 flyer and individually they won't normally have as big an impact on a game. This deck is in need of some more aggressive threats and then Observer fits that bill perfectly. As a result I'm in total agreement with both the readers and the pros this week: Hoverguard Observer is the right pick.

Next Week

Another draft pick next week. I'm going back to *Mirrodin* this time around as there are only so many interesting *Darksteel* picks you can have and hopefully this one will be a small change of pace. This one happened to me in a real draft just recently and I know I picked incorrectly. It's a tough pack so choose carefully. Please note – if you think the rare is the best card for your deck then by all means pick it, but please don't select it just because it's rare.

It's a *Mirrodin-Mirrodin-Darksteel* booster draft. You open the following pack and have a lot of choices for your first pick:





Which card do you draft?

- Nightmare Lash
- Detonate
- Skeleton Shard
- Power Conduit
- Goblin War Wagon
- Arrest
- Wizard Replica
- Inertia Bubble
- Fangren Hunter
- Neurok Hoversail
- Spikeshot Goblin
- Thoughtcast

- Scale of Chiss-Goria
- Myr Enforcer
- Moriok Scavenger

Submit

That's all for this week, thanks for reading,

Scott Wills

limitedinformation@yahoo.com

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

