

Scott Wills

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**H**ello dear readers and welcome once more to Limited Information. Alas, my common sense prevailed and I didn't make it over to Washington for a last minute Grand Prix last weekend. My countryman Sam Gomersall did well but his team finished a couple of swiss points short of day two unfortunately. If you're at all interested in the Team Limited format then I heartily recommend checking out the coverage for both GP Bochum and GP Washington. The feature matches are fun to read and there are a couple of nice articles on the drafting strategies employed by some of the Pro teams. Definitely worth reading if you plan on entering one of the Team Pro-Tour Qualifiers this season.

This week's column will be dealing with the draft pick I presented to you last week. It was a little less complicated than previous weeks in that it was a first-pick, first-pack situation and there were no prior picks to take into consideration. Having said that, the pack itself was chock full of nice picks with no immediately obvious best pick. Here's the situation again as a reminder:

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?

Immediately there should be a bunch of cards that jump out as possible contenders. There's an awful lot of power in that pack, which is nice in that it means you know you'll be getting a quality first pick. It does however make the decision difficult, as there is no obvious 'bomb' rare or uncommon to pick from this pack.

So which card did you all decide to vote for? Let's have a look:

Which card do you draft?		
Spikeshot Goblin	3122	25.6%

Skeleton Shard	2474	20.3%
Myr Enforcer	1745	14.3%
Detonate	1158	9.5%
Nightmare Lash	971	8.0%
Arrest	878	7.2%
Fangren Hunter	522	4.3%
Thoughtcast	436	3.6%
Wizard Replica	286	2.3%
Power Conduit	202	1.7%
Neurok Hoversail	171	1.4%
Moriok Scavenger	82	0.7%
Scale of Chiss Gorja	63	0.5%
Inertia Bubble	46	0.4%
Goblin War Wagon	42	0.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12198</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Some nice results there. Both the powerful red cards make it into the top four, although there's a big jump in votes when you cut to the top three. The Spikeshot, the Skeleton Shard and the Myr Enforcer are arguably the three most powerful cards in the pack, but does that necessarily make them the correct choices?

Whilst there is a lot of power in that booster there are also a lot of not-so-powerful cards too. Before we get into discussing the good stuff it's worth taking a moment to get rid of the bad.

## The Benchwarmers

It's a close tie between Inertia Bubble and Power Conduit as the worst cards in this pack. It says something about Wizards' balancing of limited formats that even these two cards can find uses in limited on occasion. Inertia Bubble isn't the best of answers to problem cards like Crystal Shard or Icy Manipulator but it's usually worth sideboarding in should you happen to be up against those particular artifacts. Neither of these cards is first pick quality and as such they won't be discussed any further.

Scale of Chiss-Gorja and Neurok Hoversail are the next two I'm cutting. It's rare when either of these two make my main deck although I will concede that there are odd times when it's correct to do so. They aren't cards that should be picked this early in the draft though. In a booster this powerful, both of these cards should definitely make it around the table for you to pick up as 9th pick should you have your heart set on having either of these in your deck. They're clearly not first-pick quality from this pack and so these two also get removed from consideration at this point.

Next up its Wizard Replica and Goblin War Wagon. I'm far happier to play the Replica than the War Wagon in any of my decks. Indeed, I think the Replica is often acceptable even if you're lacking blue mana. The War Wagon can fill the role of giving you a bit of beef on the ground but in general its drawback makes it very weak. It's usually one of the first cards I try and cut when it comes to deck building after the draft. Both of these cards are definitely playable and they do have the advantage of not necessarily committing you to a colour, but there are plenty of better options in this booster.



Thoughtcast is the next to get the chop in this first round. It's a filler card really; it doesn't do anything particularly exciting most of the time, even when you do get two cards for one mana you're still only up a card. It's definitely not the best Blue card in the pack; both Wizard Replica and Myr Enforcer count as better 'blue' cards for me.



The final also-ran is the Moriok Scavenger. Much like Thoughtcast it's an average card most of the time although it is something you're generally happy to have when it's appropriate. At this stage of the game the Skeleton Shard is obviously a far superior pick if you think you might want to take a black card or plan on recurring some artifact creatures. The Shard has to be taken over the Scavenger and thus the Scavenger is never the correct pick here.

*Often just fine even without blue...*

## The Starting Line-up

Normally we're left with only five or so cards that are worth discussing in more depth but this time 'round I think there's seven that need considering:

- Nightmare Lash
- Detonate
- Skeleton Shard
- Arrest
- Fangren Hunter
- Spikeshot Goblin
- Myr Enforcer

There are five cards in there that I think rank slightly higher than two of the others and I'm going to discuss those two lesser cards first.

Nightmare Lash is a card you don't see getting played very often, but when it does, it can often be very powerful indeed. Think along the lines of Empyrial Plate only it's better when you randomly top-deck it in the late game. You have to have a lot of Swamps, and realistically for it to be up near the Plate in power level you need to be mono-black. Such decks are few and far between but they're certainly not unfeasible. Many of the better black cards excel when you're mono-coloured; Consume Spirit is the most obvious one but try racing a second turn Grimclaw Bats when your opponent can pump it up to five or six times when it really matters. On top of being mono-coloured you really need a fairly aggressive deck with plenty of early drops. It's no use taking a bunch of damage early on as the life payment for equipping the Lash can then get prohibitive and you certainly won't make the most of it if you're forced to leave the equipped creature on defence.



You can definitely try and force a mono-black deck but if the cards don't come your way then the Nightmare Lash isn't going to be playable. Without knowing whether you're going to get the appropriate deck to make it work I don't think it can be considered the correct pick here. Some of the other cards in this booster work in the same way: Spikeshot Goblin and Myr Enforcer also require significant support to work at their best. However with

*Potentially strong, but only if things work out...*

those two particular cards it's much easier to get that support and I think they have to be considered ahead of the Lash in this instance.

The second card I'd like to go over here is Detonate. It's obviously a very powerful card in this format but the problem is we've got another very powerful red card too. The only question is: which one should be picked? For me it has to be the Spikeshot Goblin. The Detonate is a fine card when all is said and done but it can be a little expensive to cast at times. The damage inflicted by Detonate is nice, and the fact that it cuts through regeneration can also occasionally come in handy, but overall I think I'd prefer a Shatter in most circumstances.

There are games where a third turn Spikeshot dies quickly to an Echoing Decay or a Pyrite Spellbomb and there are games where the one damage it's capable of dealing just isn't that relevant. There are also games where you slap a Bonesplitter or Vulshok Morningstar on it and completely dominate your opponent as a result. Detonate never single-handedly wins games whereas Spikeshot has a very real possibility of doing just that. Both cards are splashable given the single red mana in their casting cost and with only their respective power levels to take into account I believe the Spikeshot should always be picked ahead of Detonate in a first pick situation as we have here.

With those two cards out of the way you're left with five possible picks:

- Skeleton Shard
- Arrest
- Fangren Hunter
- Spikeshot Goblin
- Myr Enforcer

It's interesting that this basically comes down to a card of each colour despite the fact two of them are actually artifacts. Now that we've got down to this stage I'm going to take some time to give you a few opinions other than my own:

**Raphael Levy:** The cards I would consider are Spikeshot Goblin, Arrest and Myr Enforcer (I'm a big fan of the enforcer, and if you're not in the mood for deciding which colour you want to draft, then, he's the man). Raphael Levy, GP Madrid '04

I would go for the Spikeshot Goblin, which is in my opinion the best card in the pack (guess I don't have to explain why Spikeshot Goblin is a good card...). You are not sending clear signals by doing this, but whatever, there are still plenty of good cards in the pack, and Detonate may not be the choice of your neighbour. Just cut the red later on. If sending CLEAR signals is what you think will make your draft better, you should go for the Arrest, cutting the white from this pack (and from the next ones).

**Kai Budde:** The possible picks here are Skeletal Shard, Arrest, Fangren Hunter, Spikeshot Goblin and Myr Enforcer. Detonate and Nightmare Lash fall behind as there are better picks in their respective colors. While the power level of those five isn't exactly equal, the difference isn't all that big. I think it comes down to personal taste here. I hate being the green mage, so Fangren Hunter is no option for me. Skeletal Shard can be great in the right deck, but at this point it could potentially be useless as well, so I wouldn't go with that either. Arrest is a fine card, but I like Myr Enforcer and Spikeshot Goblin better. Down to those two, my pick is Spikeshot Goblin. It is just a bit more powerful than the Enforcer and while I am always going to play Enforcer, that is probably true for the goblin as well as it is good enough for a splash.

**Jeroen Remie:** I would pick the Spikeshot. I think this pack is very deep and comes down to colour preference a lot. I have had the most success with Red decks, and therefore I pick the Spikey, which I think is slightly better than the other red card.

**Anton Jonsson:** I would pick Spikeshot Goblin. Red is still the best color in the format and the goblin is at least as good as any of the other cards in the pack. Trying to send a good signal is pretty much impossible in this pack since what card the person on your left picks will depend entirely on his first pick. Some people probably pick Myr Enforcer in this pack to avoid making a color commitment but they are only fooling themselves since by picking the Enforcer you are in fact committing to either blue or black or a combination of blue and black

**Zvi Mowshowitz:** Take the Spikeshot Goblin, smile and be happy. There's no question what the best card is, and to take anything else is to overthink or have a gigantic color bias. If you think another color is that much better than red, then by all means go ahead and get yourself an "I pass Spikeshot Goblin" T-Shirt.

Zvi Mowshowitz, PT Kobe '04

**Jake Smith:** I think Spikeshot is the best card in this pack, followed by Skeleton Shard. In MMD drafts I don't really care about signals I'm sending, unless I am taking a white or green card, so passing the Detonate and Shard, whilst taking the Spikey is what I'd do. Taking the Spikeshot also gives me more options than taking the Shard, as I can take any colour next pick (although I'm not such a fan of RW anymore). I'd expect to be red Affinity, with either blue or black, and I'd be expecting to table a Scale or Scavenger. I don't really think very hard about these kinds of picks - if my pick allows me to play Affinity, I always just take the best card and ship the rest.

**Victor van den Broek:** Quite a powerpack, several very good cards in here: Nightmare Lash, Detonate, Skeleton Shard, Arrest, Fangren Hunter, Spikeshot Goblin, Thoughtcast and Myr Enforcer. The question is what signals do you give when you pick a certain card, and which is better than the other in a certain archetype.

Nightmare Lash obviously requires a lot of swamps to be good, but if you have them it is very good. Still I see that card as a very heavy commitment to black, which might be something you don't want to make early on. In the red department there is Detonate and Spikeshot Goblin. Detonate is much better than the Spikey in my opinion and that removes the Goblin from the list of options. Arrest and Fangren Hunter are the only good cards in their colors, so they remain a viable pick. In the Affinity deck there are three picks, Myr Enforcer, Thoughtcast and Skeleton Shard. I don't like first-picking either Thoughtcast or Skeleton Shard, because you're not sure those cards will be good in your deck ultimately. In case you'd want to make an Affinity pick here Myr Enforcer is the right pick in my opinion. All in all it comes down to Nightmare Lash, Detonate, Arrest, Fangren Hunter and Myr Enforcer (which is essentially a blue pick in this pack). Only picking the Myr Enforcer would send a distorted signal because of the Skeleton Shard and Thoughtcast, while if someone to your left sees Thoughtcast, Myr Enforcer and Skeleton Shard in the pack, he can safely assume you're not going to draft affinity. After that it is mostly a question of what you prefer - personally I would pick Detonate, as it is easily splashable and very powerful.

**Ken Krouner:** Well this pack has the best common in the set, which is an artifact so that lowers the choices to five right off the bat. Nightmare Lash and Power Conduit just aren't near Myr Enforcer's power. Detonate is good but not worth committing to a color especially when the player to your right may not understand how much better enforcer is than Spikeshot Goblin, and go into red behind you. Skeleton Shard is great and has

gotten significantly better with *Darksteel*, but I am still hard pressed to take this card over the Enforcer.

It is a photo finish between the Shard and Enforcer, but I really like not committing to a color and pick 1 Enforcer is amazing. Shard doesn't necessarily commit you, but let's be honest, if you aren't black, the card is not nearly as good. Add all this up and it is Enforcer for me, but I wouldn't make fun of anyone who took the Shard.

It is six to two in favour of the Spikeshot Goblin there although in reality it's not quite as clear cut as that because there's a lot of different choices proposed as second picks in this pack. Raphael says Spikeshot over Arrest, Kai and Anton both think it's Spikeshot over the Enforcer. Jake rates the Shard highly although he goes with the Spikeshot too. Victor rates Detonate slightly above the Goblin whereas Ken rates both Skeleton Shard and Myr Enforcer over it!

So although we have a clear cut first pick choice there are still a lot of differing opinions amongst that small sample of Pros.

## The Final Five

There are numerous things to consider when thinking about what you take from this pack. As I've mentioned, I believe the five playable cards to basically be one of each colour. Myr Enforcer doesn't require Blue mana but if you want him to be good he'll end up in a deck alongside Sombre Hoverguards and Quicksilver Behemoths and as a result it's not unreasonable to consider the Enforcer as a move towards blue. Skeleton Shard can be run without access to black mana but it really is quite costly to use then and nowhere near as powerful as when you do have black.

You could simply make your decision from this pack based on your favourite colour. That wouldn't be too bad if the cards were of equal power level but as many of the Pros suggest, the Spikeshot Goblin is a little bit ahead of the remaining four cards in terms of pure power. Ken Krouner rates the Enforcer ahead of the Spikeshot but he's in the minority with that opinion and I have to side with the majority in putting Spikeshot top of the pile in terms of power.



*Better signals, but at the cost of sacrificing power...*

Before making your choice you should give a little bit of thought to what the next few picks will be from this pack. I personally would rate Skeleton Shard as the second best card from this pack although I certainly wouldn't disagree with anyone who put Myr Enforcer alongside it. Fangren Hunter is close to both of those but in general green is one of the weaker colours and as a result you wouldn't rate the Fangren as highly as you might otherwise. There's certainly an argument to be made for taking the Shard and passing on two red cards leaving your neighbours to fight for that colour and ensuring you get some decent black cards in pack two. Would that actually happen though?

If the Spikeshot and Detonate were the only good cards left then it probably would, but it's entirely possible that the drafter next to you will have the same thought as you did! If they first picked a Myr Enforcer or a Skyhunter Patrol then they may well look at the Enforcer or Arrest in this pack and think "I don't want to fight my neighbours for red and there's a great card in my colour so I'm going to pass on both the red cards". In that situation you're worse off than ever as you've passed up the best card in the booster without any real gain.

An argument for Enforcer over both Shard and Spikeshot relates to its commonality. Spikeshot is generally considered to be the best common in the set so if you take the Enforcer your neighbour will

hopefully see that the pack is missing a common and assume you must have taken a non-red card. However if you took the Skeleton Shard the signal is less clear – perhaps you took Grab the Reins over both the Detonate and the Spikeshot?

I like Zvi's quote about over-thinking the situation. There are all sorts of possible combinations and permutations to consider when it comes down to the signals you'll be sending with this pack but with so many top level cards in one pack it's not easy to send any clear signal at all. If sending a clear signal is your goal then Arrest or Fangren Hunter become the right pick but you have to sacrifice a fair bit of power in order to make that choice. Even then there's certainly no guarantee the rest of the players will pick up on the signals you're trying to send. On top of that you have to consider that you have no idea yet which colours your neighbour will be passing you. It's all very well committing to a weaker colour but if you don't get passed the right cards you'll be in a very bad situation indeed.

At the end of the day there's a definite danger of over-complicating this situation and you could end up painting yourself into a corner. You have the best common in the set available to you and there are no significant reasons why you shouldn't take it. I mentioned last week that I knew I picked incorrectly from this booster. Well I went ahead and took the Skeleton Shard with the intention of going black-blue. I passed the red cards with the intention of putting my neighbours into that colour but they didn't bite. I had an average black-blue deck after pack one but had to pass up on several solid red cards in pack two. I opened a second Spikeshot which I debated taking for ages but eventually I went with an on-colour card. Even at that point I should've just switched to the most powerful colour in the block but I stuck to my guns and my deck definitely came off worse as a result.

With a pack like this you can try and be clever but there really isn't a need to. When in doubt, keep it simple and just pick the best card in the pack.

Spikeshot Goblin is my choice for the right pick from this booster.

## **Next Week**

Next week I'm going to be doing an article on a Team Sealed build. It's been requested by several readers and hopefully I'll be able to give you some pointers that might help out in the Team Pro-Tour Qualifier season.

If any of the readers out there have an interesting card pool from a recent PTQ or Grand Prix team event that they think would be worth discussing within the column then please feel free to e-mail it to me at the address below. I appreciate it might take a lot of time for readers to type up their card pools so please don't feel obliged to do so. I'm only going to be able to cover a single build in the column so if I don't receive anything suitable I'll just crack open some packs and go through a fresh build for the column next week.

I hope you'll all join me next week, and until then, thanks for reading.

Scott Wills  
Limitedinformation@yahoo.com

