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Three Days to Go

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Swimming With Sharks
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Wow. When I started [the third incarnation](#) of my column for this site [Regionals](#) seemed incredibly far-off. Now US Regionals, the biggest Standard tournament weekend of the year, is only three days away. If you are planning on attending a Regional tournament in your area you probably have decided on what deck you will be playing. It is very likely that if you are playing you will be running around with one of the decks that have proven themselves in other events around the world in the weeks leading up to the tournament.



Whether you are planning on playing Ravager Affinity, Goblin Bidding, Tooth and Nail, Mono-White Control, Green-Black Cemetery, Astral Slide, or any of the other decks that have proven themselves you are probably agonizing over your sideboard. Even if you refuse to select your deck from the arsenal of information you have been given on this and other sites and will be playing a deck of your own fiendish design you have to acknowledge that most of your opponents will not be so independent-minded. Net-decker and rogue alike will play two-thirds of their games after an opportunity to sideboard and that seemingly innocent pile of fifteen cards is usually the difference between qualifying for Nationals and playing in a side draft by round five.

While the North American tournaments that qualify American and Canadian players for their National Championships are all being held this Saturday the rest of the world runs their events differently. There have been multiple events in Japan in the weeks leading up to the North American events. Our Man in Japan, Ron Foster, recently sent me a collection of links to a Japanese webpage called the Magic Daily News which featured the results from four Nationals Qualifiers in Japan. There were a handful of interesting decks and more than a few interesting sideboard developments.

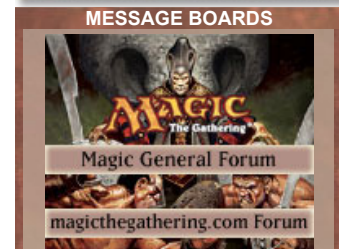
One sideboard that stood out for me was from the second Kanto Regionals tournament won by Hirata Tatsuya. He played a twenty land, twenty creature, and twenty spell Affinity deck with a couple of intriguing sideboard choices and a clear plan of attack against the dominant decks the format had produced.

Ravager Affinity

Hirata Tatsuya - 2nd 2004 Kanto Regionals - Champion

| Main Deck 60 cards | | Sideboard |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Blinkmoth Nexus 4 Glimmervoid 4 Great Furnace 4 Seat of the Synod 4 Vault of Whispers <hr/> <p>20 lands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Arcbound Ravager 4 Arcbound Worker 4 Disciple of the Vault 4 Frogmite 4 Myr Enforcer <p>20 creatures</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Shrapnel Blast 4 Skullclamp 4 Thoughtcast 4 Tooth of Chiss-Goria 4 Welding Jar <hr/> <p>20 other spells</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Furnace Dragon 4 Mana Leak 4 Pyroclasm 4 Seething Song <hr/> <p>15 sideboard cards</p> |

The first thing that stood out for me was the presence of **Mana Leak**. This popular counterspell was a key component of many of the earliest Broodstar Affinity decks before the shadow of **Arcbound Ravager** was cast across the red zone. As the decks became more and more aggressive counterspells became too slow and reactive for this new breed of decks. They were too busy killing you on turn four to counter anything. Many Affinity decks had been running **Genesis Chamber** in this spot to pile on the slower control decks with the additional token creatures.





Call me crazy but **Mana Leak** seems good against any deck that needs to resolve six and higher casting cost spells to win. Countering the first (or merely forcing the opponent to play around it) **Furnace Dragon**, **Akroma's Vengeance**, or **Tooth and Nail** with **Mana Leak** buys the Affinity deck the critical turns it needs to extract those final points of life from the opponent. His four **Mana Leaks** stood in the way of any of the control decks the format could put forth much more ably than one more target for the inevitable additional artifact destruction the deck would face in games two and three.

For the always dangerous Goblin Bidding Hirata could reach into his sideboard for **Pyroclasm**. The *Ice Age* reprint is also good against any creature horde strategy such as elves, zombies, and white weenie. Between **Mana Leak** and **Pyroclasm** the base set provided Hirata with answers to about two-thirds of the field. That left him with only the mirror to contend with. Only the mirror...

Many of the German Affinity decks have been running green to support some combination of **Oxidize** and



Has its time returned?

Naturalize in the main deck and sideboard. Hirata chose not to worry about one-for-one artifact removal and instead chose to devote seven sideboard slots to transforming his deck from an Affinity deck to an Anti-Affinity Affinity deck with **Seething Songs** and **Furnace Dragons**.

If you look back at the decks from [the Hong Kong Regionals](#) you will find a list that opted to run an Affinity build that ramped up to the mirror-shattering dragon. The only problem is that many other decks have emerged as viable options in the months since Kobe and while still the dominant deck in the format, Affinity is being crowded for top billing by those decks. Against decks with plain old non-artifact lands and creatures blowing up all of your own stuff ain't so bright. But out of the sideboard...

In a mirror match his deck is capable of blowing up the world somewhat reliably around turn four or five with a 5/5 dragon flying around where the world once stood. He also has **Blinkmoth Nexus** which gives him an additional creature that sticks around post-dragon.

I singled out Hirata's sideboard because it is simple and clean. He has something he can rely on in all of his major archetype match-ups while his cards remain flexible enough to cope with unexpected situations. Elves? No problem, just reach for the **Pyroclasm**s. Rogue Green-Blue deck with **Day of the Dragons**? Got it covered with four **Mana Leak**. The only narrow cards in his board are there for what is sure to be the most popular individual deck at most Regional events—Ravager Affinity. For that match-up narrow is fine. They don't need to do anything else since they will already be putting in overtime throughout the tournament.

If you want to check out a number of different decks from the Japanese tournaments the links are here (though the site is in Japanese, the decklists are in English):

- <http://miyaken.stbbs.net/20040416.html>
- <http://miyaken.stbbs.net/20040415.html>
- <http://miyaken.stbbs.net/20040414.html>
- <http://miyaken.stbbs.net/20040404.html>

Different tournaments qualified different numbers of players to advance to Nationals, which is why some tournaments include lists beyond the traditional eight. One of the other things that stood out for me—although not sideboard related—was that many of the **Tooth and Nail** decks in Japan have added **Wood Elves** into their maindeck mix. One turn faster than **Solemn Simulacrum** the **Wood Elf** does not let you get anything but a **Forest** and will not draw you a card when it stands in the way of a **Myr Enforcer**. Something to think about over the next few days—I'm just saying.

In my coverage for [Grand Prix Washington DC](#) I featured Chris Pikula in [the introductory paragraphs](#). Although Chris, Igor Frayman, and Chris Manning were not successful at the Grand Prix a slightly revamped team played this past weekend in a PTQ at Neutral Ground. Chris and Igor picked up GP Detroit Top 8 finisher Josh Ravitz and I am happy to report that the threesome won the PTQ as the Max Fischer Players. Chris Pikula is back on the Pro Tour after a better than year-long absence. It may have been even longer for the well-respected although lower-profile Igor. As for Ravitz, he has been butting his head up against the glass ceiling of the Pro Tour Qualifier circuit for the past year and hopefully this is the beginning of a successful ascent to the next level of the game. Congrats guys!

Next week: *Fifth Dawn* Rising!



Chris Pikula, *Magic Invitational* Champion '99

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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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