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# My Nationals Experience



## Report from US Nationals

Alex Shvartsman · Week In Review  
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The road to Worlds is paved with good intentions. It is also paved with the little yellow bricks of registering your decks correctly and being able to figure out the tiebreakers.

For me this was the third time I attended U.S. Nationals as a competitor. It was also the first time Nationals was actually a World Championship qualifier for me. Over the last three years I've been flush with Pro points, automatically qualified for all premier events. This season however, I have not played much **Magic** at all. I still love the game, but my work, my girlfriend, and various other hobbies have managed to keep me away from casting Magical spells.

I was not going to attend U.S. Nationals, because I did not believe I would do well. After all, I have never really drafted *Fifth Dawn*, nor played **Skullclamp**-saturated Standard. I went mostly because my store had a dealer table at the show and I needed to be there for work. Of course, it would have been a crime not to play once I was already in Kansas City, and so my "testing" began at the North American Challenge, where I actually spent an entire day watching Standard matches being played out.

Even though Affinity won that tournament, I walked away from it feeling that Elf and Nail was the best deck to play in this format. I relayed this feeling to my teammate Justin Gary. Justin is in the same boat as me. He had to cut down on **Magic** over the course of the last year because he was in law school. The school is out for the year though, and he was itching to practice for the tournament. So we threw all the popular Standard decks together and spent a few hours over the course of a week testing them. We were frustrated that no deck, no matter how tweaked, was beating Affinity consistently.



"Affinity is like Necro, and **Shrapnel Blast** is like **Hymn to Tourach**," Rob Dougherty said to me last weekend. "No matter how well you were set to beat Necro, sometimes they would draw two Hymns and just beat you. Likewise, they just draw two Blasts and you cannot really play around them."

Neither of us wanted to play Affinity and both of us wanted to play something that beats it. We were not entirely satisfied with Elf and Nail, but it seemed to do better than the other archetypes, so that was the plan Wednesday morning when we got into the car and were on the way to the airport.

Our conversation centered on **Magic** of course and we kept trying to figure out the way to crush Affinity. Justin had tried a red-green control deck earlier in our testing, but it wasn't working well enough.

"You know," I said, "we should just play four **Seething Song** and four **Furnace Dragon** maindeck." We tried incorporating these cards into Justin's build and liked what we saw. On the plane we



proxied up the deck and started playing it, getting something like a 7-1 result against Affinity and a 6-2 result vs. Japanese Goblins. This was very encouraging, so we kept at it, testing in our hotel room through most of the day on Wednesday. Justin talked on the cell phone with Mike Long who apparently was also testing mono-red control and we shared our findings. Mike's deck was a bit different (and the final version he played remained different) but we were able to help each other out nevertheless.

The deck's one flaw was its inability to beat Elf and Nail. That matchup is as bad as the matchup against Affinity is good. We were willing to take our chances though – you just can't build a deck that crushes *all*

the other archetypes, and if you have to lose to something, might as well lose to a deck we predict won't be played by as many as 10% of the field.

I felt a lot better about my chances in Constructed, but still had serious doubts about drafting. Fortunately, an opportunity to do a practice draft presented itself on Wednesday evening. I ended up drafting a very solid black-red deck. I was doing well enough until we came upon a *Fifth Dawn* pack. Now this was my second *Fifth Dawn* draft ever. My first *Fifth Dawn* draft was only four players strong and I lost to Justin in the finals of it :). This time around I looked at my *Fifth Dawn* pack and found nothing worth taking for my deck. My pack kept going around until it reached the other side when someone jumped up and down and proclaimed that we are all really bad at **Magic** for passing him such broken cards. Broken cards? The pack seemed very weak to me. I asked him to tell me what the card was at the end of the draft, and when the last of *Fifth Dawn* cards were picked through, he showed me **Cranial Plating**.

"Is this card any good?" I asked.

Let me tell you, it is very good. In fact, it is so good that he just bashed my head in with it when we played. As anyone else whose seen it in play can attest, **Cranial Plating** is clearly the best common in *Fifth Dawn*, whether you are playing black or not (which I was, even more of a reason to feel like a newbie for missing this obviously ridiculous card).

I ended up going 1-1 but did not get a chance to play a third round. Justin Gary ended up winning the draft. And so having learned what the best common in the format was, I was now about twice as ready for Day 1!

This is the deck list I submitted on Monday morning:



The One-Moxed Wonder by Alex Shvartsman & Justin Gary		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
4 Wooded Foothills	2 Pulse of the Forge	4 Naturalize
2 Forest	4 Seething Song	4 Stone Rain
4 Darksteel Citadel	4 Talisman of Impulse	4 Molten Rain
3 Great Furnace	4 Damping Matrix	2 Flashfires
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Pyroclasm	1 Pulse of the Forge
7 Mountain	2 Slice and Dice	
24 land	4 Electrostatic Bolt	15 sideboard cards
4 Furnace Dragon	1 Chrome Mox	
	25 other spells	

2 Rorix Bladewing  
3 Avarax  
2 Solemn Simulacrum

11 creatures

I found an Affinity deck in the first round, and things went exactly according to plan. I devastated him with Dragon every time, including a turn three **Furnace Dragon** (off a Talisman and **Seething Song**). In the second round I found and killed me some Goblins. Third round was not looking so good, as my opponent was playing Forests. I managed to kill enough of his Birds and such to slow him down though and beat him up with my creatures before he could cast **Tooth and Nail**. In the second game he had a really lame draw, further compounded by my land destruction spells, and so I somehow managed to win this really bad matchup to go 3-0 in constructed against a perfect sample of the metagame.

I was really worried about the draft portion, but it seemed to be working out just fine. I drafted a solid Red-Blue deck with a pair of **Leonin Bolas** and a number of other powerful cards. I won my first round and was all set to play against Mitchell Tamblyn when a judge called me over and gave me a match loss for misregistering my deck.

Apparently I only registered thirty-nine cards as I marked off one instead of two **Leonin Bolas**. This stupid error ended up costing me a match, a perfect 7-0 day one record, and a spot in top 8. I am horrible at registering decks as I have the attention span of an idiot hamster. It has cost me numerous games and matches over the years, and this time it may have cost me thousands of dollars. Well, perhaps this costly lesson will prevent me from making such mistakes in the future – but then I feel that way every time this happens.

I went on to win my next two matches, ending up tied for first place with thirteen other players with a 6-1 record. No one was undefeated for the day. I played Mitchell for fun and beat him, so in that sense I would have been the only undefeated player. But, no one to blame but myself.

One more draft to get through before returning to the more familiar ground of constructed play. I managed to get an insane deck that time, picking up a **Skullclamp**, **Leonin Bola** and two **Trinket Mages** to fetch them. The rest of the deck was not too shabby either, a solid blue-white beatdown strategy. I beat up on my first two opponents (including a [feature match against Gabe Walls](#)) and only lost to Bill Stead in the final round. It was close but his deck was as good as mine and his draws were slightly better. Overall, I certainly could not complain.



Four rounds of Constructed to go and two match wins needed to top 8. I [faced off](#) against teammate Zvi Mowshowitz playing Seth Burn's Artifact Goblins. I had Zvi's exact deck and sideboard list in my deck, as my employee built his deck out of my store's cards on Thursday. Although it was tempting, I did not browse the list prior to playing Zvi. To be fair, I already knew more about his deck than he knew about mine. I beat him in the first game. Zvi did not know my sideboard and almost had an aneurysm after I blew up four of his lands in a row on turns three through six! He was astounded to find out that our sideboarding strategy against Goblins involves boarding in eight land destruction spells! It may not be obvious, but it makes perfect sense once you think of it. Goblins are incapable of winning this matchup off their 1/1 creatures. They need **Clickslithers**, **Goblin Goons** and **Siege-Gang Commanders**. If you can prevent them from casting these creatures early, you can easily outrace them with **Rorix** or even just **Avaraxes**.

One win away from top 8, I faced Ben Zoz, and he absolutely crushed me with his blue-white control deck. I really have no chance at all of winning game one as I have something like 15 dead cards against him. After sideboarding (and I literally add in all fifteen of my cards!) my chances get a lot better. Game one went according to plan (i.e. he smashed my face in). In game two I had a great hand and only needed a red land. I failed to find it, or any other land, until turn 7. By then my land destruction was less than stellar and a pair of **Silver Knights** sealed my fate.

In thirteenth round I got paired up to Dave Humpherys, who had a better record than me. I asked if he would concede the match so that both of us could make top 8, but he was not 100% sure he'd be able to get a draw in the following round and we had to play. Dave was playing Goblins and although he took me to three games, I was able to pull off the win.

Standings went up and it appeared that not all players with a 10-3-1 record were going to make top 8. I was paired against Brian Kibler, who was playing a white-green control deck. Although this matchup is bound to be better than blue-white, it was still probably a bad matchup. Therefore, I choose to take a chance and draw with Brian rather than play it out. Unfortunately for me, just about everyone else drew too. Craig Krempels took the greatest chance, drawing out of seventh place. However, tiebreakers were very kind to him that round while most of my opponents lost, and when top 8 was announced I learned that I was left in ninth place – the only player at a 10-3-1 record to miss top 8. I walk away \$1500 richer but without an invitation to the World Championships. Perhaps I will qualify on rating – or perhaps my team will make top 4 in Seattle, which should give me enough Pro points to qualify. Either way, it was a good performance and a good weekend in retrospect, even if I did not feel that way immediately after it was over.



The rest, as you know, is history. After succeeding on his drawing gamble Craig Krempels went on to win the whole thing. Good job on his part. I will talk more about this and other Nationals in next week's column, as we return to our regularly scheduled programming.

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