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A League of One's Own



The lowdown on leagues

Chad Ellis · Online and Enjoying It
Tuesday, July 27, 2004

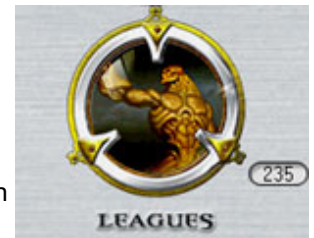
Voting is now closed for the [MTGO Community Award](#) and we'll be announcing the winner next week with a more in-depth look at his/her/their contribution to the MTGO community. Thanks to everyone who voted, and of course thanks again to everyone who sent in nominations.

Part of what makes MTGO special is that it isn't just an online translation of **Magic**. Both Wizards and the MTGO community have used the differences between electronic and physical cards to make MTGO special. Players have created their own virtual rooms for auctions, conversation, and more, and Wizards has tapped into the global player base in a way that simply wouldn't be possible offline.

MTGO Leagues are a great example. While there is nothing inherently impossible in holding leagues at a store or other physical tournament site, only the scale and flexibility of MTGO's player base would make it possible to hold regular leagues, week after week with starting times around the corner whenever you log on.

So what is a League, anyway?

For the long version, go to the Leagues section of MTGO and click on the question mark in the upper right hand corner. But here is most of what you need to know.



Leagues are ongoing (minimum four weeks) competitive Limited tournaments that don't affect your MTGO ratings. Instead you score points by playing up to five matches per week - two points for each win and one for each draw.

You begin a League with the equivalent of a Sealed Deck (one starter and two boosters, or five boosters if you're in an *8th Edition* League), and build the best deck you can. But each week you add an appropriate booster pack to your deck and rebuild from your expanded card pool.

This means a few things. First, if you open a weak set of starting packs you can still hope for a **Crystal Shard** or **Grab the Reins** to be added to your deck later on. Second, it means that the tournament gradually gets more of a constructed feel as you go forward. Removal gets less scarce, synergy gets tighter, and your opponents will increasingly be fielding decks that have a coherent purpose and strategy rather than a conglomeration of good cards.

What's so good about Leagues?

For one thing, Leagues give you a lot more tournament play per entry fee than other formats. In week one you invest a starter, two boosters and two event tickets and play in five rounds. In weeks two and onward you play another five rounds with just the optional cost if an additional booster. Thus, even if you pay the maximum amount, the shortest league will still let you play twenty competitive matches over a month for opening the equivalent of eight booster packs and two event tickets. Further, you're welcome to play in "extra" matches as well (and they can even help your tie-breakers).

Leagues are also a great alternative to draft for players who want competitive play but don't necessarily want to swim with the sharks. The 1700 room's draft queues don't run quickly enough to keep folks like me there, and a common complaint from less experienced players is that they enter a draft queue hoping for two or three rounds and a shot at the prizes and then see multiple 1800+ ratings among the players seated at their table.

Leagues, by contrast, are fairly safe waters. Whether it's because the top players prefer to stick with "real" formats (i.e. those we feel comfortable with), because we prefer to stick to formats that are relevant to PTs or PTQs or whether we're not tempted by the lower prize-to-investment ratio, Leagues seem to the serious-casual players who may not be on the Pro Tour but like to fight it out with something on the line.

Another nice feature is that you don't get eliminated from a league. Since you can play as many as five rounds a week for points (and more after if you want), a league offers you at least twenty total matches, meaning you're much less likely to get knocked out by mana screw or running into the "God deck".

What can I win?

As noted, the prize-to-investment ratio in a League is lower than in a Draft. A 4-3-2-2 draft payout represents almost one and a half boosters per player from an investment of three boosters plus two tickets. The typical league allows up to two hundred and fifty six players and offers four hundred and two boosters in prizes, from twenty-seven boosters to first place down to a single booster for finishing 128th. This is a bit less than two boosters per player but your pack investment is significantly higher. If you want to make a profit in League, you'll need to finish in the top 8, something which isn't easy to do unless your name rhymes with "My booty."

So how do I build my deck?

There are lots of good articles on the Net about building sealed decks, but League deck-building has to go beyond this because of the additional booster each week. As you start adding to your card pool, you should keep the following things in mind:

Build more than one deck. A typical sealed deck card pool has only a few possible "good" builds, and quite often there is only one basic build with the real decisions coming down to a few cards here or there. In *Mirrodin* Block, for example, your sealed deck may "force" you to play a base-White equipment deck, but in later packs you add an *Arcbound Ravager* and two *Quicksilver Behemoths* to your cardpool. Along with the other cards, you may find that you have two or more viable decks. Your opponent will rarely, if ever, sideboard from one deck to another, so if your "Rock" deck loses to their Paper, don't forget the opportunity to bust out Scissors.

Your best deck may become your second-best deck. In the above example, it might be that your White deck and your Affinity deck are both good and which you play depends on matchups. But it is equally possible that your best sealed deck will no longer be your best deck when you've added two or three new boosters. White Weenie doesn't show up on the Block Constructed scene, and the more packs you have the more likely a constructed-like approach will become possible, and optimal. Be sure you're flexible enough so that instead of just adding a few good cards to your deck you examine your entire cardpool and are ready to switch approaches altogether.

Bear in mind the difference between Limited and Constructed. As your card pool (and everyone else's) increases, some of the key factors of Limited play will become less relevant. Most significantly, removal will become less scarce and decks will become faster. Both make fatties less useful than in your original build. A *Fangren Hunter* is sometimes enough to win almost on its own against a sealed deck, and is in any case a strong "reason to play Green" card when all you have is a starter and two boosters. Later in the league, however, your opponent is far less likely to struggle for an answer, and your tempo will suffer more if you have too many spells costing five or more mana. Meanwhile, some "bad" cards may become good as you're able to



tune your deck into a cohesive strategy. In Leagues with *Fifth Dawn* you may even be able to put together a genuine combo deck in the third or fourth week.

Are there any other ways to improve my results?

At the risk of suggesting something a bit against the spirit of League play, there is one way I've noticed that you can "tweak" your results, albeit in a tiny way. If you don't play your full five matches one week, you're able to play them in later weeks. That is, the real cap is on the total number of matches you can complete within any given time period. At week three, the cap is at fifteen matches, but you could in theory play all fifteen that week. This means if your original deck isn't too exciting (or especially if you have some very good cards but are a few cards short of completing a deck) you can hold off until the following week, hoping that your deck will show greater improvement than those of other players.



As the weeks progress, so will the decks you'll face...

As an example, suppose you're in a *Mirrodin* block League and your starting sealed deck includes *Myr Enforcer*, *Frogmite*, *Bonesplitter*, *Thirst for Knowledge*, *Grab the Reins*, *Pyrite Spellbomb*, *AEther Spellbomb*, some artifact lands and some other good cards that lead you towards U/R Affinity. But when you put all your cards together you realize that you can only come up with twenty or so playable spells. You've got a deck with a fantastic "top" that is coming up short in terms of filler.

In a regular tournament you're stuck. You can either run some chaff cards or make an awkward splash. In League, you've got the option of playing few or no matches in the first week and hoping to open, for example, *Echoing Ruin*, *Spire Golem* and *Quicksilver Behemoth* in your next *Darksteel* Booster, in which case your deck may have moved from shaky to beatstick.

Leagues offer a strategically rich play environment not available outside of MTGO. For a small investment you get a month or more of competitive play, with new deck-building challenges each week. All this and flexible timing - what more could you want?

A Quick Aside on the Casual Games - Serious Decks Constructed room.

Right now MTGO Standard is in that unusual state where it hasn't caught up with offline Standard in terms of sets but has done so with respect to bannings. More specifically, *Skullclamp* isn't legal and *Fifth Dawn* isn't, making MTGO standard (and Block) a format with no parallel offline.

For people who play both online and off, notably those who are preparing for block constructed PTQs, this makes MTGO constructed tournaments a bit useless for practicing and training. For many, the "Serious Decks" room in Casual Constructed is a good answer.

The room is just what it sounds like - a place where people get together to play unsanctioned games or matches with serious constructed decks. Rogue decks are welcome (although players will sometimes advertise "tier one only" or specify specific decks they want to play against), but you should only bring decks you'd seriously consider playing in a sanctioned tournament.

The level of play (and quality of decks) is a bit lower than you'll find in a sanctioned constructed tournament - due most likely to a combination of players testing rogue decks and the presence of some 1700 players in their own casual room - but it's definitely not bad. In my own testing I've faced *Crystal Witness*, *Big Red*, *Ravager Affinity*, *Tooth and Nail* and *Ironworks* combo decks, played by good players and with no shortage of rares. I've also played against some less-common decks like *White Weenie*, but I've faced very few decks I'd be really surprised to see after round one of a PTQ. In general the players are quite solid, and don't make more play errors than a typical PTQ regular.

Unfortunately my somewhat odd personal situation (my wife and baby girl have been living in exile for the past several months due to her visa difficulties) and work situation have made it almost impossible for me to play in this season's PTQs. But I've identified a handful that I can attend, and will be spending a lot of time in the Serious Decks room between now and then, getting ready. Come by and challenge me to a match sometime!

P.S. I'd like to thank the people I interviewed for this article and also to apologize for not quoting them by name. I suffered a power outage shortly after doing the interviews and hadn't saved them as a file, so while I did my best to include your comments I couldn't do so by name this time around.

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