

Scott Wills

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Editor's note: Scott Wills recently injured his back and shoulder and wasn't able to complete his article in time for this week, but we are hopeful of having him return next week with the conclusion to his Limited Pointing series. In the meantime, please enjoy this article, which first appeared on Monday, May 17.

Monday has rolled around once again and that means time for some Limited Information. No *Fifth Dawn* preview for you today, I'm afraid. Mark Rosewater actually designed the set so it only seems fair that he gets the daily preview card! Pop over and have a look at his column if you want to see something *Fifth Dawn* related; I'm going to cover a topic that I think I've received the most requests for since I started this column. This week I'm going to talk about signaling in draft: what it is, how to recognize it and why you should use it.

What is signaling?

Signaling can mean slightly different things to different people but in general it refers to the process of passing specific cards in a draft in order to indicate to another player what colors you are, or are not, going to be playing.

Signaling is most relevant in booster draft. When you draft, you're obviously not allowed to tell the other drafters what cards you have so the only way to give them any information is by the cards you pass them. Signaling here refers to passing cards in specific colors with the hope of giving the drafter to your left a hint of the colors that you're drafting. There's also the process of picking up signals that the drafters next to you might be trying to give you. I'll get onto why you might want to send and pick up signals shortly.

When it comes to Rochester draft, signaling is a little less relevant as all the draft picks are made with the cards being visible to all the drafters. In these drafts signaling is still important but it's much easier to do. It's not difficult to signal a preference for drafting red if you just take the best red card every time it's your pick. In Rochester draft (and, to a lesser extent, Booster draft) cooperation tends to be the correct way to go, so paying attention to other people's draft picks is a very good idea. You don't want to be sharing a color with lots of other players as there'll just be less good cards for each of you as a result. If you share a color with a neighbor then you'll hurt both your deck and theirs as you'll both be fighting each other to take the best cards in your color whilst the other players on the table get their pick of better cards in the remaining colors. So signaling is not hard to spot in Rochester, it's just a matter of giving the signals the appropriate attention.

Why is signaling important?

Lots of reasons really, but they all basically come down to one thing: you want to draft the best deck possible in order to stand the best chance of defeating your opponent's. If your aim in a draft is not to win, but instead to try and draft a cool combo or just have fun with some off-the-wall cards than that's fair enough, signaling won't matter one bit to you. In my experience though the act of winning is actually a lot of fun and if you care about that too it's important that you at least grasp the basics of sending and picking up on draft signals.

In a match of **Magic** there aren't many areas where you can gain a large advantage over an average opponent so you need make the most of every advantage you can get. Obviously one advantage is

that you might be able to play a little better than them. You can also build your deck with a good mana base to alleviate any potential mana issues as much as possible. You might also be able to arrange the mana curve of your deck better so that your deck plays out better than your opponent's. In draft, one of the main places you can gain an advantage is simply through having better cards than your opponents and that's where the signaling aspect of it comes in.

If you can pick up on what colors the drafter to your right is taking then you can avoid drafting those colors yourself. This is a good idea because if that player is drafting different colors from you it increases the chances that they'll pass you a good card you can use. If you were both drafting white and a late pick Arrest came to them then they'd scoop it up leaving you with a weaker pick. If they were white and you were black for example then they might get a mid-pack choice of Terror or Leonin Den-Guard and they'd take the Den-Guard leaving the better card for you to grab. Same thing applies for the player on your left who you are passing to. If it were possible to ensure that he or she was drafting different colors to you then during the second set of packs, when the direction of the draft reversed, you would expect to get better picks as they passed over the good cards in your colors in favor of cards in their own colors.

Most players settle on their two colors within the first round of packs within a draft. It's at this point that signaling is most important. Whilst it's usually possible to change colors in the second or even third pack of a draft, doing so often renders some of your valuable early picks from the first pack useless. If you're able to receive and send good signals in the first few picks of the draft you set yourself up much better for the rest of it.

Understanding Signals

One of the more important aspects about signaling is your understanding of the general quality of the cards available in each limited format. I've talked before about how "picking the best card" is most often the correct way to go, but when it comes to signaling it's important that you have a fairly decent idea as to what most people assume the best card actually is.

As an example, let's consider Terror and Irradiate. The general consensus is that Terror is better than Irradiate. That might sound obvious, but this is just to illustrate a point. There would be some people who would not agree with that – and that's fine – but popular opinion among the Pr's, the people who write articles on draft pick orders, and the general populace is that Terror is a higher pick than Irradiate. Now if you draft an Irradiate over a Terror from your first pack, you'll obviously be passing that Terror to the drafter on your left. He or she might pick up your pack and say to themselves "Hmm... there's a Terror here, and the person on my right has drafted a common. Terror is better than all the other black commons and so they can't possibly have drafted a black card. I will take the black card so I won't be fighting them for a color."

If your opinions differ from the general consensus, that's fine. You do however need to be aware of what the majority of players consider to be the better cards in each color in order to be able to give as clear a signal as possible.

Another thing that's important to pay attention to is the rarity of the cards you are getting passed as they can make a huge difference in the signals you're getting. Let's imagine you get a third pick from a pack that includes a Fangren Hunter. If there are two commons missing then it's a fairly safe bet that neither of the two players on your left is drafting green as they should've taken the Hunter over



any other green common. Sure, it's possible that Deconstruct was taken over it but Fangren is generally considered the better card so you have to assume that Fangren Hunter would've been picked over it. If instead there is an Uncommon and a Rare missing, however, then the signal is less clear. It's very possible that Molder Slug, Glissa, or One Dozen Eyes was taken from that pack and unfortunately you've got no way of knowing. In that sort of situation you either stay on color and perhaps pick something else or you just go with the best card in the Hunter and try to pay close attention to any signals in the next couple of packs you get passed.

In general it's a good idea to go along with any obvious signals you might receive from the player on your right. 28 of the 45 cards you draft come through them (you open 3 packs yourself and 14 picks come from the other direction) before they get to you. If they are drafting the same colors as you then you're going to get your best picks cut from the pack nearly two thirds of the time. If someone goes to the effort of sending you an obvious signal then it's usually worth cooperating and going along with that as you'll both have better decks as a result. They dominate your picks for almost two thirds of the draft and you have to give that some respect in most circumstances.

You're in the same dominant situation over the player on your left. Let's assume that your first two picks are both artifacts: an Icy Manipulator and a Mirror Golem. As your third pick of the draft you get the following playable cards as options, with two commons missing:

Skyhunter Patrol, Blinding Beam, Tel-Jilad Archers, Thoughtcast, Pewter Golem, Bottle Gnomes.

You might be tempted to pass on both the white cards as it's possible that the player on your left will take the other one over the remaining cards in the pack. However if you think about what the other two players have picked it should be fairly clear that neither has taken a white card. They've both looked at that pack and taken something like Spikeshot Goblin, Electrostatic Bolt, Terror or some other good card. They've seen the two white cards, decided they don't want to fight over white and passed them on.

However, this is definitely a pack where it's correct for you to take a white card. It's quite possible the players on your right are drafting black or green and you don't want to be sharing a color with them. The player on your left may well take the other white card from that pack but that isn't so bad for you. You've most likely got two non-white drafters on your right and they'll be passing cards to you for the majority of the remaining picks. You're getting a clear signal here that white is open and it's definitely right to move into that color. Although you may well put the player on your left into white with this pick, that isn't too bad for you and who knows, it may well be possible to cut future white picks and force them out of white by the time the second pack is opened.

When trying to send signals to the player on your left it's important to make them clear when it's possible to do so. If you try to be too clever and give difficult choices then there's no way of knowing for sure what they'll pick. Imagine a pack with the following playables:

Irradiate, Arrest, Skyhunter Patrol, Slith Ascendant, Somber Hoverguard.

Your initial thought there may well be to scoop up the Irradiate or Hoverguard and pass the white cards letting all of your neighbors fight over them. However if you remove either of those two cards from the pack your neighbor might just look at it and have the exact same thought. Although Irradiate and Somber Hoverguard are different colors they're both basically indicators of the same deck-type – UB Affinity. Your neighbor may well decide that they don't want to fight over white either and take the card that steers them to the exact same archetype as you. From that pack it's better to take the best card in the pack – Slith Ascendant in my opinion – and try to send clear signals in future packs. Who knows it's possible that the player on your left might see the two good white cards and decide they don't want to fight anyway and still go with either the Hoverguard or Irradiate.



Signals can still be important even once you get around to the late picks of a pack. Quite often you'll be settled into your colors – red-white for example – and then you'll get your 11th pick pack with no playables in it for you at all. Instead you take something mediocre in another color, a Nim Lasher perhaps. Often this is not a good idea. You're never really going to be losing a game to such a card and by taking it away from a neighbor you're giving them one less card which might solidify their position. You don't really care that they have an extra Nim Lasher but by giving it to them you give them another potentially playable card in a color that you don't care about. Even small picks like this can have a psychological impact on a player. If they open their next pack and get the choice of Terror or Electrostatic Bolt they're far more likely to go with the slightly inferior Terror if they think to themselves "Well I've got six playable black cards so I'm definitely going to be playing black". Perhaps those "playables" consist of a Lasher, a Moriok Scavenger and a Wail of the Nim that you

gifted to them late. If you just took those cards away then they're far more likely to think "Hmm, only three playable black cards so far, perhaps the guy on my right is drafting black too, I'll take the Bolt and go red."

By giving your neighbor reasonable late picks in colors other than your own you make them less likely to switch colors later in the draft. You're certainly not hurting your deck at all by doing so and the slight increase in power to an opponent's deck is outweighed by the increased chance they'll pass you the goods in the second pack.

Everything will change a little once *Fifth Dawn* arrives as the pick orders of cards might change and also once you have all three sets to play with the dynamics of the draft change a little. However the general theories presented here will always apply to any draft situation, it's just a matter of learning what does and does not constitute a signal in a given format.

That's it for this week, see you all again in seven days time I hope.

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