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Scott Wills is taking a bit more time off, so Scott Johns asked if I could pinch-hit with a Limited strategy article. It was a great opportunity, because I knew exactly what I wanted to write about. Most Limited articles focus on the main deck. We write about draft picks, color selection in your sealed deck, when and what to splash, etc. But most players, in my observation, don't know how to get the most out of their sideboard in Limited matches. In PTQ swiss rounds (or prerelease rounds for that matter), this means they miss chances to win games two and three of tough matches. In Top 8s and other drafts, it means they make incorrect card valuations and waste later picks because they aren't drafting with sideboarding in mind. We'll try to amend this here with a brief look at sideboarding strategies for Sealed Deck and then a focus on Booster and, for the Nagoya PTQs, Rochester draft.

But first, a flashback. Many years ago, long before I was any good, I found myself playing Hammer, aka Sean Regnier, in a sealed deck match. I'd been fortunate with my card pool, which yielded a very strong creature base, good removal, and some power artifacts including Jayemdae Tome and an Ivory Tower (did I mention this was many years ago?). I was pretty excited about my chances.

Shawn 'Hammer' Regnier

Hammer won a tight game one, about a turn before my Tower/Tome took over the game. Looking back, I strongly suspect that I lost because of the tempo sacrifice of using the Tome too aggressively (in order to gain life from the Tower) and that I might have stood a better chance if I'd held back a bit. But no matter...game two I had a perfect hand with Tower, some early plays, a removal spell, and the Tome to rebuild my hand.

Hammer, meanwhile, sideboarded in his Red cards and blew up my artifacts just when they were about to become relevant. With those out of the way, he outplayed me and easily took the match. I remembered watching him swapping a bunch of cards into his deck but it had never occurred to me that he was sideboarding in an entire color.

## Sealed Deck and the Color Swap

If you want to win a sealed deck tournament, there are few better weapons than the color swap. Sometimes it's just trading in a splash of two Black Terror spells for a burn spell and a Shatter, or Pacifism and Disenchant. It was a close call which to splash when you made your first build and you knew in advance that against some decks you'd make the swap. But other times it's a real color swap, or even a completely different build, e.g. changing from White Weenie with some splashed Red cards to R/G beats.

If your card pool looks like it is capable of multiple builds, don't just pick the best one. Think about whether the "second best" build(s) is good against a particular decktype. Your U/W deck may not quite have the tools to win, so you build a G/B deck...but remember that you have Circles of



Protection for Red and Green which suddenly become quite powerful cards against the R/G beatdown archetype.

The important thing about the color swap is that you have to think about it ahead of time. You should sleeve the cards (including the land) that you want to bring in and know which cards are the most likely to come out. This advanced planning serves two purposes – it means you're thinking when you have plenty of time and no pressure rather than when you are under the timed pressure of the sideboarding period. Instead you just shuffle and present, which means that you may be able to make the swap without your opponent even realizing what is happening.

The former point is a practical one, to reduce the chances that you mis-sideboard. If you're a quick enough thinker you may not need it. But the latter point is always worthwhile because it involves giving your opponent as little information as possible. By swapping in a few cards, thinking a bit, swapping in a few more, etc., you make it impossible for your opponent to know whether you've brought in a whole color, a few cards or made no changes at all.

To see why this is important, imagine that we're in a non-*Mirrodin* block and that you've just shown your opponent three powerful artifacts, along the lines of Icy Manipulator, Chimeric Idol and Crystal Shard. They are, let's assume, the only artifacts in your deck. You know that your opponent has boarded in Shatter, two Disenchants, Detonate and Overload to deal with them. If you've got anything like playable cards in your sideboard, you're going to board those artifacts out and strand your opponent with five dead spells in his deck, a crippling disadvantage.

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This is obviously an extreme example, but it does come up quite often. I once won game one in a Sealed deck match with Opposition. In game two the Opposition came out and was promptly Disenchanted. After the game, which my opponent won, he showed me two other ways he had to destroy Opposition, which was my only enchantment. I boarded it out, along with two solid but not amazing artifacts, leaving my opponent with dead cards in his deck. (This is known as giving your opponent a Wakefield Mulligan, after Jamie Wakefield's use of the technique in constructed, e.g. leaving his Chokes in his sideboard against Counter-Sliver since he knew the Sliver player would likely bring in Disenchants out of fear of Choke. The beauty of it is that your opponent doesn't even *know* they've mulliganed.)

## **Drafting a Sideboard**

Sideboarding a Sealed Deck is a different animal than sideboarding in draft because you have a fixed cardpool. Thus, you're simply tuning your deck to win a particular matchup. In draft, however, you have the opportunity to improve your sideboard chances as part of your overall draft strategy.

The first thing you must do is track your playables. If you are ahead of schedule on building your main deck you can afford to be more aggressive at picking sideboard cards. If you're struggling to get enough playable spells, you obviously have to concentrate on getting your main deck together.

Part of counting playables involves knowing from experience how easy it is to fill out a deck in the particular format that you're in. Recent blocks have given us Morphs and lots of artifacts, increasing the pool of cards any deck can run and thus lowering the chances that you'll be cut off and be forced either to abandon your early picks or else run short of cards. Thus you typically have some "cushion" which you can turn into extra warm bodies you'll never run or situational cards you might board in. *Champions of Kamigawa* may present a draft format in which getting enough maindeck cards is more challenging, or it may be like *Invasion* where surplus cards were the rule – we'll know soon enough.



The key point in all of this is that a “main deck” spell that sits in your sidebar because you have more solid cards than you need is a wasted pick. Hill Giant is a solid card, but if you have twenty five such cards and two or three of them are in your board and will not ever get boarded in because they would simply replace equivalent (or slightly superior) cards, the only thing they contribute to your draft is possibly hurting someone else's chances.

Meanwhile, cards like Hallow and March of the Machines should not be making the cut of most main decks. But while they are weak overall they have the potential for greatness in certain matchups. Hallow can blow up someone who is depending on red removal to win the game, and March of the Machines can save the day against an opponent with Leonin Bola and Viridian Longbow plus two Trinket Mages to fetch them. Thus they are much better cards to have in your sidebar than some warm bodies.

## Shift your Curve

Another way to improve your deck's overall strength is to create the potential to shift your mana curve. Replacing Hill Giant with Hill Giant is pointless, but sometimes you will want to replace Hill Giant with a slow fattie or a cheap beater, depending on your opponent's build.

If, for example, your opponent blasts out of the gates with an army of 2/1s and finishes you off with Lava Axe, you may need to shorten your curve. The odds are good that your cards are more powerful in the late game so the trick becomes surviving to the late game by making early trades. On the other hand, if your opponent is running a stalling deck with lots of 2/4s and 2/5s, the answer may be to bring in a huge fattie you wouldn't maindeck because its casting cost is too high, or to splash a creature with Fear.

## What do you fear?

Every now and then I'll see a card like Slay or Execute “table” (go all the way around the table during a draft). That should never happen, both because once you're drafting with your sidebar in mind each card is better than a ninth pick (much better) and because someone out there should be taking it out of circulation. If you're G/B and you see Slay you're seeing a card that can be crushing in your own sidebar as well as one that will be great *against* you. Similarly, if you're a U/W player with a lot of 2/2 flyers you shouldn't be letting Giant Spiders wander around unless you're confident you've got good answers to them and actually want your opponents to be running them (not impossible... sometimes all that matters is that they are spending four mana on a creature with only two power).

## Bad Chaff and Good Chaff

A 1/4 for  $2\text{R}$  is playable, but a 1/4 for  $2\text{G}$  is usually weak. That's because Green limited decks normally need to beat down on the ground, whereas White often holds the ground while flyers win in the air. But back in *Invasion* Block Chris Manning recognized that the dominant R/B decks found 1/4 creatures so annoying that it didn't matter if he was running them in the “wrong” deck. With so many creatures with power of two or three and toughness of one (e.g. Rage Weaver, Viashino Grappler, Urborg Phantom) as well as early removal spells that didn't like big butts (Scorching Lava, Exotic Curse, Tribal Flames), a Llanowar Cavalry could either blunt the R/B player's attack or generate card advantage.

Every format has cards like this – cards that our limited instincts tell us are bad but which are actually quite good against particular archetypes. Whether it's Tattoo Ward getting rid of two enemy enchantments or Vulshok Battlemaster stealing tremendous tempo (and often more) from an equipment deck, the players who keep an open mind and explore for hidden treasure will often be rewarded.



## Rochester Draft and pre-sideboarding

The next set of PTQs will feature Rochester draft Top-8s, which naturally raises an unusual aspect to sideboarding because you can pre-sideboard. You know who your first-round opponent is in a Rochester draft – she's sitting across from you. You also know that your second-round opponent will be one of two people – they are sitting two to your left and two to your right. Only in the finals will you play one of the remaining four.

An obvious example of pre-sideboarding would be if you noticed that your first-round opponent and both of your possible second-round opponents were drafting White and you draft Execute and run it main. It's going to be so good in your first two rounds that it's more than worth having a dead card in your third match should you get that far. But most situations aren't that clear. Here are my rules for thinking about Rochester pre-sideboarding (and sideboarding more generally).

First, play your own game. In a Pro Tour Top 8 the payout for winning one match is several thousand dollars. In a PTQ Top 8, it may be nothing or it may be half a box of boosters. Unless you're lucky enough to face someone in the finals who only really cares about the "other" half of the prize (e.g. one of you cares about the slot and the other about the prize), you need to 3-0 your table. Sabotaging your deck to win game one isn't the best way to do that.

Moreover, that approach backfires more often than not even against the person you're trying to beat. It's one thing to draft U/B because your opponent is U/W and your archetype has an advantage against his. It's another to sacrifice the cohesion and strategy of your deck in order to run a bunch of cards that are good only against your opponent.


Keep track of how your opponent's draft is going. Not all Rochester drafts are equal, both because most players are less experienced at Rochester than at Booster and because a table can simply break horribly for one or more players. In my last Rochester Top 8 I was fortunate enough to have my quarter-final opponent's draft go about as badly as I've ever seen. (It went so badly that when we sat down to play he congratulated me on making the semis before we even started shuffling.) This freed me up to pay more attention to my semi-final opponents and the power cards of the table in general, as well as letting me build my best deck without worrying about whether I should be bringing in hoser cards to hurt him.

Identify the most likely source of defeat...or of victory. Chris Manning used this method against me in my first PTQ Top 8. I drafted a mediocre deck except that I opened Overrun in every pack and could thus turn my army of random Green men into a massive trampling powerhouse. Chris simply drafted multiple copies of Respite and then built his deck so that Respite was a good card against



most of his opponents as well. Chris knew his deck could only lose to mine due to Overrun so he turned Overrun from a game-winning spell into a game-losing spell for me. His deck totally trumped mine and in the finals he won by racing his opponent with Respite.

## ***Identify the most likely source of defeat...or of victory.***

Sometimes you know your opponent only has one major advantage over you. It could be a single broken card, like Overrun, in which case you may want to run a specialized answer to it. (Note that Fog-type cards aren't the only way to answer Overrun...you could also run land destruction spells to try to stop your opponent from getting to ) It could be the early rush, which you answer by lowering your

curve and including some creatures with high toughness values. Or it could be a surplus of removal spells, in which case you should prefer a card-advantage engine (even a slow one) over a creature enhancer. Anything you can do to nullify that strategic advantage, without doing much damage to your own deck's strategy, is worth considering.

Unfortunately, sometimes you're the one who has the worse deck. In that case you sometimes need to get lucky, but to do that you need to give yourself ways to get lucky. You could go for a super-aggressive curve, or push your mana base beyond normal tolerance in order to run all your best cards or perhaps to run all of your evasion creatures. The point is you know you're outclassed if you build normally, so you try to identify a potential weakness in your opponent's deck and exploit it. Hopefully that won't happen too often.

