

Mike Flores

Wednesday, September 22, 2004

Now even though we **magicthegathering.com** columnists get to do preview cards such as Time Stop, Nezumi Shortfang, and Heartbeat of Spring, we don't necessarily get to see the entire set ahead of time. This was not always the case, though. Back when I was doing articles like my Fledgling Dragon preview and Ravenous Baloth preview for the Sideboard (now part of **magicthegathering.com**), I actually worked from a full spoiler. You can see in the Ravenous Baloth preview, for example, that I referenced Wretched Anurid, a Beast with a special ability quite the opposite of the featured green card. Writers working from a full spoiler weren't allowed to play in Prerelease events. With perfect knowledge of all the cards, especially if they had been thinking about how these cards worked together, it just wasn't fair to the other players.

This time around, though, all I had was one plain text email from Scott Johns with three little paragraphs of card text. As such, I got to play in my first prerelease since *Nemesis*.

I was actually pretty excited going into my first *Champions of Kamigawa* experience. Along with mana acceleration like Heartbeat of Spring, green was getting some neat cards to actually get ahead in land count, such as Kodama's Reach and Sakura-Tribe Elder. Kodama's Reach seems to me like a really *really* good Explosive Vegetation. Now Explosive Vegetation is a strong card, and in a roundabout way helped contribute to the *Champions of Kamigawa* Legend Rule... But it costs four. When you are getting beaten down by Goblins, the last thing you want to do on turn four is tap out for an Explosive Vegetation. You might not even have drawn the first four lands that you needed to play your next two (free) lands. Kodama's Reach, on the other hand, costs three. It doesn't put two lands directly into play, but in addition to the first Rampant Growth effect, it makes sure that you always hit your next land drop. That is an extremely subtle but important difference, not to mention something to smile about, because if you don't have your next land in hand already, the likelihood of drawing it goes *down* when you play a card that thaws two basics out of your deck.



Green acceleration gets a big boost

I recently showed my friend and former Swimming with Sharks columnist Brian David-Marshall an updated G/W listing for States. Like Olivier Ruel's 5-1 World Championship deck, it played Rampant Growth. Brian kind of chuckled and showed me the Sakura-Tribe Elder. I almost couldn't believe how good it looked. As good as Kodama's Will is, Sakura-Tribe Elder might be even better. Say you play it out on turn two against Arcbound Ravager. What is he going to do? Attack? Is he really going to trade a land while you go search up another land? Say you are on the play and you know you are going to sacrifice the Sakura-Tribe Elder before your fourth turn so that you can pump out a cheater Plow Under. What stops you from getting a point in? What is he going to do? Block?

I got the chance to play in the very last flight at the Neutral Ground New York *Champions of Kamigawa* Prerelease. It was only three rounds, but I was anxious to get my hands on the cards. My sealed deck had Isamaru, Hound of Konda, so I went straight to white, but eventually decided against it because of the mana presented in other colors. The presence of the above lauded Kodama's Reach and two bridge lands kind of made my decision for me. Notice how I was able to play a single Mountain to consistently splash two excellent red removal spells.

Champions of Kamigawa Prerelease



Main Deck

40 cards

6 Forest	1 Ashen-Skin Zubera	1 Befoul
1 Lantern-Lit Graveyard	1 Cruel Deceiver	1 Glacial Ray
1 Mountain	1 He Who Hungers	1 Hankyu
1 Pinecrest Ridge	1 Humble Budoka	1 Hideous Laughter
8 Swamp	1 Kami of the Hunt	1 Honden of Night's Reach
17 lands	1 Kashi-Tribe Warriors	1 Kodama's Reach
	1 Matsu-Tribe Decoy	1 Rend Flesh
	1 Moss Kami	1 Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang
	1 Nezumi Graverobber	1 Waking Nightmare
	1 Nezumi Ronin	1 Yamabushi's Flame
	1 Orochi Ranger	
	1 Rootrunner	10 other spells
	1 Wicked Akuba	
	13 creatures	

I was actually going to play Serpent's Skin or Vine Kami over Wicked Akuba – I was a little apprehensive of his mana cost on two – but Wicked Akuba ended up drawing a lot of removal. People were terrified of this little guy 2/2 who plays like a 3/2.

Things I learned:

Hankyu is no Viridian Longbow.

Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang is surprisingly excellent. I don't know if it is just because I was in green and had the mana, but I dominated any game where I played this Legendary Artifact. The thing is, it's not just an overpowering piece of equipment - it's infinite Dragons. Say you have a Dragon. You probably win. If your opponent kills it and it reverts back to Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang... you have another Dragon. To be precise, you have the opportunity to swing with a +5/+5 equipped beater *and then* have another Dragon. At instant speed. In the middle of an opponent's attack. It's seems an obvious play if someone points it out, but Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang is also strong against removal when it's still in Artifact form. I dodged one removal spell just by summoning up my 5/5, making my opponent whiff with his removal. Ah, the new cards.

Nezumi Graverobber is my pick for sleeper in the set. As a 2/1 for $\{1\}$, he's actually not bad in terms of efficiency. His primary ability is fantastic, whether or not he flips. I can see this guy making the cut in Extended for his ability to work Roar of the Wurm, Wonder, Genesis, Barbarian Ring, and even cards not from the *Odyssey* Block. As a quick play, you can set up a Duress on turn one, play the Nezumi Graverobber on turn two, and immediately flip to Nighteyes the Desecrator for a fast 4 power attack. That Nighteyes the Desecrator *also* has a special ability that can dominate the game is just gravy.



In any case, I went an unspectacular 2-1 in the Prerelease, which was good for three packs in winnings.

I quickly spent the packs in a team draft and went 0-3. Luckily, my team had Steve Sadin and we won despite my poor first draft. I got Myojin of Cleansing Fire from the booty pile, which is one of the cards I really wanted from the set. When did I start liking eight mana white creatures?



Watch this one

This 0-3 draft had such spectacular plays as Chris Manning top-decking his Jugan, the Rising Star and my subsequent top-deck of Pull Under. I lamented the fact that I had no way to remove Jugan from the game and made the play I had to make just to keep from dying immediately. I took down the Legendary Dragon Spirit but lost to the +1/+1 counters.

I had Nine-Ringed Bo in play. Ah, the new cards.

In the last draft, I did significantly better, again on the winning team with a 2-1. But the story this time around is Splice. I opened Glacial Ray and passed it to Don Lim. I told him that, yes, the pick was obvious, and yes, I was in red and I was going to cut him off (I had taken Ryusei, the Falling Star). Unbeknownst to me, Don had opened his own Glacial Ray. In pack three, I passed Don yet another Glacial Ray, this time taking Hanabi Blast. The funny thing? Don only had the *second best* Splice deck at the table.



In their deciding game, Sean McKeown attacked Don with Kami of the Hunt. Don, at something like 15 life, didn't block. Sean returned Kodama's Might with his Hana Kami and played Kodama's Might, Splicing the second Kodama's Might. Remember, Kami of the Hunt gets +1/+1 for every Arcane spell, so he was a lot bigger than a 2/2. Don responded with Glacial Ray Splicing Glacial Ray or something like that. Sean already had the second Kodama's Might prior to using the Kami of the Hunt and showed his *third* with an additional Splice sequence and finally casting the last Kodama's Might. Don died to spectacular damage.

Speaking of dying from ridiculous life totals, Strength of Cedars sets that up nicely, especially on the back of Kodama's Will or Sakura-Tribe Elder. I saw it being splashed in non-base green decks.

In my last draft, I played three copies of Commune With Nature and two Vine Kami. Why? I already told you that I had a Dragon. I figured Commune with Nature in a 16 creature deck would be a reliable play that kept my curve going... and had the added benefit of finding my Dragon up to four turns early. I went 2-1... but whiffed with Commune With Nature twice (neither in the match I lost). Vine Kami is "only" a 4/4 for 6, but 4/4 is actually pretty big in this format of mostly 2/2 Samurai. The reason I played these fairly clunky monsters, though, is again that I had a Dragon.

In the unlikely case that the opponent deals with the Dragon the first time... there is no reason to believe that they are going to do anything but lie down for your Dragon the second time around.

In sum, *Champions of Kamigawa* reminds me of my favorite set of all time. A lot of people have been comparing it to *Invasion* because of the Legendary Dragons, but *Champions* seems to me a lot more like *Visions*. Bushido is like Flanking to the next level (can you believe it works on defense?), and this

time around, the white first striker doesn't even require mana for activation! *Visions* helped **Magic** geniuses like Brian Hacker teach players about tempo, took mana curve from a primitive idea that was incorporated only in mono-red to a design *requirement* for every deck, and marked the first big wins for the Third Option – combo decks. You might not know this, but R&D bigwig Randy Buehler won his first PTQ during *Mirage/Visions/Weatherlight* PTQs with an Equipoise/Sands of Time combo deck. He never had to qualify for the Pro Tour via PTQs again. For a guy who likes open looks at flexible cards rather than mechanics-driven formats based on undercosted multicolored creatures, watching the graveyard like a hawk, cycling, or Affinity for Artifacts, this set is a breath of fresh air. Much is expected of you, *Champions of Kamigawa*.

Plus... there *are* big Dragons!

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

