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# Champions and Near-Champions

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The Week That Was  
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After weeks and weeks of words about *Champions of Kamigawa*, it was finally time to see a little action this past weekend at the Prerelease tournaments around the world. Here in the United States the set was greeted with open arms as players flocked to the events and just kept playing all day long. I know that in Boston alone there were in excess of 1,500 tournament entries over the weekend -- and I don't even know if that is the largest event in the country.

I went to the New York event at Neutral Ground where there were hundreds of players lined up in a torrential downpour prior to the advertised 8a.m. kickoff for registration. Mike Flores and I ended up playing there on separate days despite trying to coordinate things so we could play in one of the team events. Alternating family obligations saw me playing Saturday while Mike could only attend on Sunday.

I got into the second flight of the day. Flights are just Tournament Organizer-speak for tournaments. In the past, Prereleases were usually run as one large tournament. Now they are run as smaller events allowing players to get their hands on the new cards faster, since you only need 32 or 64 players to sign up before a flight fires off.

Sitting down for my tournament, I cracked the packs with less information than I have ever had coming into one of these tournaments. I had done a preview of the set for *Undeclared* magazine, which afforded me an opportunity to see five cards, but I did not get to preview any cards for this site and I did not even look at all the ones that went up. I probably knew less about the set than the any other player at my table as the decks were handed out.

Players all around me were talking about white, which was apparently very powerful in the midnight prerelease that had been held the night before. After sorting my cards, I scanned my white cards hoping to find some of the samurai goodness that they were talking about. However, it was clear that white was my weakest color with only four playable creatures -- *Kitsune Diviner*, *Kabuto Moth*, *Kitsune Healer*, and *Kami of Ancient Law*.

I set white aside and looked to my remaining colors, settling on a black-red-blue deck that just touched red for *Glacial Ray*, *Yamabushi's Flame*, and *Pain Kami*. I played the black largely on the basis of *Pull Under* and the *Infest*-like *Hideous Laughter*, but the creatures were mediocre without any of the larger Soulshift fellows needed to generate card advantage. After splitting my first two rounds using the black build, I shifted to a green base that gave me some fat creatures, mana fixing, and acceleration. Had I built this deck from the start, I am sure I would have gone 4-0 as opposed to 3-1 but at least I got some packs to draft with later.



Champions of Kamigawa Prerelease		
Sealed Deck #1		
Main Deck		
40 cards		
7 Forest	1 Humble Budoka	1 Consuming Vortex
6 Island	1 Kami of Twisted Reflection	1 Gifts Ungiven
2 Mountain	1 Kashi-Tribe Warriors	1 Glacial Ray
1 Swamp	2 Moss Kami	1 Kodama's Reach
16 lands	1 Myojin of Life's Web	1 Mystic Restraints
	1 Orochi Ranger	1 Pull Under
	1 Pain Kami	1 Reach Through Mists
	1 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Thoughtbind
	1 Soratami Cloudskater	1 Yamabushi's Flame
	2 Soratami Rainshaper	
	1 Soratami Savant	
	1 Soratami Seer	
	1 Vine Kami	
		9 other spells
	15 creatures	



## Shuffling up and Dealing with Fame

The first time I met Dave Williams was at Worlds 1997. There used to be this side-event tournament series at Pro Tours that was called the Merchant Team Challenge. Stores would sponsor a team of players and they would play in side events all weekend, with points awarded for top finishes. I was there with Rob Nieves, Bruce Johnson, and Steve O'Mahoney-Schwartz. Steve introduced us to two of his friends, Dan Burdick and Dave Williams, and they joined our team for the Challenge.

Steve O's domination of the Standard side events and my good fortune in opening **Thawing Glaciers** in two separate *Ice Age/Alliances Sealed Deck* sides put us in a good position, but Dave was a monster. He played in every event he could sign up for and won more than his fair share of them. I remember being impressed with his play skill but more than anything I was taken with the joy with which he and Dan Burdick gamed, which buoyed all of us throughout the weekend. In the end, we won the title in a rather contentious battle with Pete Leiher and a squad from the Virginia area.

Among the prizes we won were a box each of *Legends* and *Antiquities* -- although I cannot remember the exact prizes, I will never forget that weekend as one of the best times I ever had playing the game of **Magic**. I ran into Dan this past summer at U.S. Nationals and he echoed that sentiment. Dan, who is the brother of Wizards R&D's Matt Place, fell away from the competitive aspect of the game years ago, and of the original team only Williams and I still played (although Steve OMS does duck his head back in periodically). Dan and I were pondering whether or not Dave would ever play again as he had just earned his \$3.5 million for his second-place finish at the 2004 World Series of Poker.



Williams had not shown up for Nationals the week after the WSOP but there was a simple reason for that -- he was not qualified for the tournament. Pro Tour--Seattle followed and Dave was there on the poker-themed team Bottom Set with Bob Maher and Neil Reeves. Real-life obligations had pulled Bob away from the game and he was contemplating not attending Seattle, but played in order to give Dave the Pro Points he needed to qualify for Worlds 2004.

It was clear that Dave would not be turning his back on **Magic** over the summer, but what about after his face had been broadcast into millions of homes and he became the latest poker celebrity? The final-table episode has been shown umpteen times on ESPN by now, and seven years after meeting Dave in Seattle my most recent sighting of him was during Chris Berman's Top 10 on the Sunday SportsCenter.

I caught up with Dave as he prepared for a poker tournament in Atlantic City and asked him about his newfound fame, the final table, and his love of gaming.

**BDM:** Obviously your whole life changed when you win \$3.5 million. Did it change again when the show aired on ESPN?

**Williams:** It does externally. At home and with my friends and family, I am still the same old me. But now the general non-professional poker player knows about my success and I assume I'm going to be recognizable to a small degree of the public, which is a definite change.

**BDM:** What were your expectations going into the WSOP?

**Williams:** I didn't really set any expectations going into the tournament. I think that kind of thinking can only make the tournament more stressful and take away from good play. If I set my bar for anything below first place, that would seem very weak and almost like negative thinking, but on the other hand if I set it for first place, that is overconfident and I am most likely going to fail at meeting my expectation. I felt it was best to have no expectations, just play good cards and see what the end result is.

**BDM:** Most people in the **Magic** community assumed you would never set foot inside another tournament site. Was there any point you considered not playing "low-stake" card games again?

**Williams:** Not at all. I am a true gamer and love to game regardless of the stakes. I am not a game player for the money, but for the love of the game.

**BDM:** I was intrigued by your comments to Justin Gary during Worlds about not wanting to sit on a beach with your winnings -- can you elaborate on that a little for me?

**Williams:** I am an action junky. I like to have my mind constantly in action, working on something. Sitting on a beach would be fun for a short period, but I get bored easily and would eventually be ready to play some kind of game or solve some kind of problem. The thing I hate most is sitting and doing nothing.

**BDM:** What have you done with yourself since your final match with Greg Raymer?

**Williams:** Mostly the same things I did before it. I travel to tournaments. Although now they are poker tournaments instead of TCG tournaments, which I still go to.



**BDM:** What is the most common question you have been asked since your near-win?

**Williams:** Most people ask what it is like to have so much money.

**BDM:** Can you describe what was going through your mind as that final hand played out? Was there any part of you that just shrugged and said, 'Hey if I lose I have \$3.5 million'?

**Williams:** People have assumed that by the way it looks, but I can say there is no chance that I thought that. Once we are down to two people, the minimum I can win is \$3.5 million. So in a sense the slate is empty and I am playing heads up for \$1.5 million and the victory. \$3.5 million was guaranteed at that point, so there is no reason to be satisfied with just that when I am now playing for something more. I wanted to win at that point more than anything in the world, and I felt that I was ahead in the hand.

**BDM:** I loved the look on your face when Raymer won. Despite winning \$3.5 million you were still burning about the loss. What was burning you more there? The \$1.5 million or the bracelet -- winning the whole tournament?

**Williams:** No contest, winning the whole tournament. The difference between \$3.5 and \$5 million is nowhere near the difference in first and second place in the WSOP. First place is immortalized and is "the champ," while second place is still great, it's nowhere near the accomplishment.

**BDM:** Do you feel like you have been changed much by the experience?

**Williams:** Not really. I still feel like the same person, and my friends say I haven't changed a bit.

**BDM:** How has it changed the people around you?

**Williams:** Again, since I haven't changed most of the people around me haven't either. Everyone is pretty much cool about it. Once they get the "congratulations" out of the way things go back to the way they've always been.

**BDM:** How is your mom doing, now that she is nearly as famous as you are? [Williams' mother was shown prominently in the audience during the final episode.]



**Williams:** She is so proud and loves the fact that I did so well, but since the final 18 just aired, she hasn't had that many chances yet to be recognized. I am sure she will have a great time, as she loves to tell people about the WSOP.

**BDM:** What is it like watching yourself on television in general? Do you look at and have this laundry list of things you wish you could go back to say and do?

**Williams:** It was definitely a very weird feeling. I regret that I didn't show my personality more on TV. I was so focused on playing poker that I didn't get to take advantage of the camera and joke and play around . . . although those things may have taken away from the poker playing and cost me millions of dollars.

**BDM:** What is on your plate as far as **Magic** tournaments?

**Williams:** Going to all events in the United States that don't overlap a major poker tournament. Next up is Grand Prix-Austin, which is great because it's close to home and is limited with a new set. I am more excited about that than the next major poker tournament I am attending.

**BDM:** So you still come to **Magic** tournaments, do you still play casually as well? Like with friends or at local smaller tournaments?

**Williams:** Not really, but I didn't do that much before the WSOP. Since **Magic Online** was released, that has been my primary source of casual **Magic** and it still is.

**BDM:** Who is the next **Magic** player we are going to see at a final poker table?

**Williams:** That is a hard question, as most of my close friends play poker and play it well. I don't want to give any one of them priority over the other, so lets just say it'll be one of the guys you see me with at the Pro Tours.

**BDM:** Twice I saw mention of **Magic** in the ESPN show or during the online coverage. Once it was for Mattias -- who apparently won a Type 1 tournament once -- and during the ESPN show it was for John Murphy, who then proceeds to sleep through the beginning of the day's competition. There really isn't a question here, that just cracked me up.

**Williams:** Yeah this was pretty odd, since I am the most prominent **Magic** player of the three of us. The way they portrayed it with Murphy ("sort of like D&D!!!") made me glad it was him and not me. Since the WSOP, I've met lots of the big-name poker pros, and it's funny because they know I play **Magic** and aren't quite sure what it is. They always ask, 'What is this **Magic** game you play?' 'Is there big money in it?' 'How do you play?' I just thought that was kind of funny.

## Gather 'Round

Thursday is the public launch for the long-awaited official **Magic** searchable card database, [Gatherer](#). I know I will be taking constant advantage of it, both as a writer and a deck builder. Need a list of all the samurai in *Champions of Kamigawa*? What about the number of cards that reference sheep? The information is now at your fingertips, thanks to this nifty little interface that is the result of Doug Beyer's hard work.

"I started building Gatherer in 2003 as a little project to provide the Online Media department with a way to look up Magic cards quickly," Beyer said. "Back then, called by the ugly title of "Multiverse-Driven Web Database," it used a restricted set of data pulled directly from Multiverse (WotC's internal database) and let you search cards by their name or card type."

The clunkily named became an essential office tool for the Online Media guys, and discussion began about turning it into a tool for public use.

"Since 2003, it has gained a ton more searching options, a pretty interface courtesy of in-house designer Jen Page, bunches of ways to sort and format the output, some new backend hardware, and the name Gatherer (which was intended as a "playtest" name, but it just fit so well that it stuck)," Beyer added.

He anticipates that there will be as many different ways to use Gatherer as there are different types of Magic players, whether you are looking up the aforementioned sheep or a way to hose Alluren in Extended.

"Casual players can use Gatherer to search for cards of certain creature types, compare the cost of green fatties or find the last piece of a crazy combo," Beyer said. "Collectors can use Gatherer to find all cards by a certain artist, look up flavor-text trivia, see how a card has changed rarities through multiple printings, or print out checklists. Tournament players can use Gatherer to look up the wording of a card, find out what's legal or banned or restricted in a given format, or see all the arcane spells that they need to know about. Judges can use Gatherer as a way to look up Oracle text or to export Oracle documents. And everybody can use it to gaze at John Avon mountains all day."

It is not going to be perfect just yet, but you can help to nudge along toward perfection by simply taking advantage of the utility and telling Beyer what he can do to improve it.

"Right now, Gatherer is considered to be in 'public beta.' That means it's usable but may have some little details that still need working out. It's been a labor of love for me; I hope everybody enjoys it and provides their feedback to make it as useful a tool for them as it has been for us."

## Event results

There was only one Pro Tour Qualifier this past weekend as most event organizers were preoccupied with running Prerelease tournaments. The Prerelease presaged the upcoming [PTQ season for Pro Tour-Nagoya](#), which will be *Champions of Kamigawa* Sealed Deck. The action kicks off the weekend of October 2nd, and judging by the early buzz on the set, it should be lively season of qualifier action. It is Sealed Deck for the Swiss rounds and Rochester Draft for the Top 8.

Event City	Event Date	Event TO
Anchorage, Alaska (PT Qualifier)	9/19/2004	David Phifer
Finish: 1. Jon Dedych; 2. Adam Rothman; 3. Ryan Meyer; 4. Chris Myers; 5. Luke Weaver; 6. James Ruppert; 7. Eric Heyne; 8. Joshua Beck		

## Back to my second deck

OK, I know you've all had plenty of time to plot and plan what I should have done in my second deck at the Prerelease. I decided to fully exploit the double **Glacial Ray** and played almost all of my blue Arcane spells, including the sorcery-speed **Eye of Nowhere**. A slow Jilt is still pretty good in a creature-based format. My creatures were all pretty awful -- except for the dragon, of course -- but it just didn't matter as I could bounce and burn anything my opponent put out.

By the way -- **Hanabi Blast** is ridiculous. I am sure you know this already, but I just had to share. A **Shock** is almost always better than any other card in your hand and if you get to use it twice you will rarely lose. I also had the blue shrine, which was similarly good. It was strictly better than **Mind's Eye** from the previous set. I did not lose a game where I got to play either one of those cards.

I won the two rounds I played and then split with a Neutral Ground semi-regular in the final round, so I could take my packs and draft with friends. I walked away with enough packs on my weekend to feed my drafting needs until the set is released. I hope you all had as much fun as I did at your local events.



Champions of Kamigawa Prerelease		
Sealed Deck #2		
Main Deck		
40 cards		
6 Island	1 Battle-Mad Ronin	1 Consuming Vortex
5 Mountain	1 Cruel Deceiver	1 Eye of Nowhere
6 Swamp	1 Hearth Kami	2 Glacial Ray
	1 Iname, Death Aspect	1 Hanabi Blast

17 lands	1 Initiate of Blood	1 Honden of Seeing Winds
	1 Kokusho, the Evening Star	1 Peer Through Depths
	1 Nezumi Ronin	1 Reach Through Mists
	1 Ronin Houndmaster	1 Rend Flesh
	1 Scuttling Death	1 Rend Spirit
	1 Sokenzan Bruiser	1 Swallowing Plague
	1 Soratami Rainshaper	
	1 Villainous Ogre	
		11 other spells
12 creatures		

Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is *Top8Magic.com*, the publishing house that is releasing Michael J. Flores: Deckade.



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