

Champions Sealed Deck Primer Search

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Monday is here once again and that means it's time for your weekly dose of Limited Information. With the Pro-Tour Nagoya qualifiers taking place over the next few weeks I thought now would be a good time to turn our attention to the sealed deck format. Whilst Rochester draft will be used for the top 8 of these qualifiers you'll still have to make your way through the swiss rounds and it's there that your sealed skills will be tested to the max. Limited formats are my speciality and I've played in countless sealed deck qualifiers starting way back when *Mirage-Visions-Weatherlight* was the current format! Hopefully I'll be able to share some of the things I've learned over the years with you.

Although winning a qualifier is what most players are aiming at, for many players just making it to the top eight is a goal in itself. Some of you will probably feel you know everything there is to know about sealed deck but that isn't true for everyone and so I'm going to start today by going through the basics of *Champions* sealed deck to make sure everyone has a good grounding there. In the next couple of weeks I'll move on to some example builds so you can see some of the ideas put into practice and see some examples of the difficult choices you can find yourself presented with in this format.

There are lots of things to consider when building a deck from your card pool and you're often faced with some very marginal decisions. In most qualifiers you'll have to play between six and eight rounds of **Magic** with your sealed deck so building it correctly from the start is very important. Amongst the things you should consider are:

- Which colours to play
- Whether to stick to two colours or risk including a third
- Which spells and creatures within your colours to play
- Identifying any potential combos worth playing
- Maintaining a good mana curve amongst your spells
- What lands best support your spells
- What sideboard options you have

You'll only normally have 45 minutes to build and record your deck in a qualifier and that might sound like a lot of time but when you have tough decisions to make it can fly by much faster than you'd think. I'll be going through each of these considerations and explaining what you should be looking for and thinking about with regards to each of them. Hopefully once you know what to look for you'll be able to make the most of the time you have available to you.

Choosing your colours

When I first open up a sealed deck I'll sort the cards into their colours and then I'll go through each colour and remove everything that I don't consider to be playable. Cards like Devoted Retainer would stay in as I might consider playing him in a fast Samurai themed deck but there are other cards like Ragged Veins or Psychic Puppetry that I don't consider playable under any circumstances and it's best to put these to one side and forget about them.

Once you've got the playable cards sorted you can have a look at each of your colours and see how many good cards you have in each of them. At this point you should be looking for out for any bombs - ridiculous cards like Keiga, the Tide Star or Kumano, Master Yamabushi, which will definitely draw



you to their respective colours. You should also pay attention to the overall quality of your creatures; do you have creatures that will have an impact on the game either due to their size or their abilities? There's no point having a lot of creatures if they're all small and without useful abilities. The same applies to your spells in each colour; make a note of any creature removal you have, as these spells are especially important. You should also look at whether you have a good range of casting costs amongst your creatures; it's no good playing just big creatures that cost five mana or more as you'll be increasing your vulnerability to mana screw and even if you did draw the right number of lands you might be dead before you even

get to cast them.

The key here is balance. Ideally you'd like a nice range of casting costs, starting from one or two mana, all the way up to a few bigger creatures costing four mana or more. You'd like to have some evasion (creatures with Flying or Fear) too so you can attack your opponent in different ways. In this format there's a comparatively high number of cheap creatures so you should try and compensate for this and play a number of smaller guys yourself so you won't get too far behind an opponent who gets off to a fast start.

In terms of numbers it very much depends on how good your spells and creatures are. I'd try and play at least 12-14 creatures in this format but there's no need to play bad creatures over good spells. If you have a lot of removal spells in your card pool then by all means play them, just make sure the creatures you do play are good ones so you'll be able to win the game with them.

When you've decided what your best colours are it's a good idea to pick the best two and see what sort of deck you have if you put all the playable cards from those colours together. Sometimes you'll find you only have 18 cards doing this in which case you'll need to add a third colour but you may well find you have 24 or 25 playables in your two best colours in which case a two colour deck may well be the way to go.

Even if you can make a two colour deck though, it doesn't always follow that you should. If you can make a white-red deck you should still consider whether you should remove some of your worst cards and replace them with better cards from a third colour. Usually this decision will be dependant upon the cards that you can splash. If you're removing Kashi-Tribe Warriors to include Blind with Anger then that's probably a good thing, but if you're only replacing it with Sokenzan Bruiser than it's not so good. The decision to add a third colour can be made much easier if you have a few ways to support it. Kodama's Reach is one of the better cards in the format for supporting additional colours but cards like Sakura-Tribe Elder, Journeyer's Kite and the various two-colour lands can all help.

Making the cut

Once you have decided on your colours then you may well have to decide which cards within those colours should be played and which should be cut. Typically the first 16-20 cards will be fairly easy. It'll be obvious which are your most powerful cards and those will all be automatic inclusions. It's always the last few cards that need the most amount of thought but they're just as important as you stand just as much chance of drawing these over your best cards each game.

One way to help you make these decisions is to check out any potential combos or synergy some cards may have with your deck. An example from a sealed deck I built recently illustrates this well.

I don't always consider Honden of Life's Web playable. By itself it generates a single 1/1 every turn which is okay but not great. You can often find better things to do for five mana. However in the deck I was building I noticed that I had both Painwracker Oni and Oni Possession and getting Honden of Life's Web out alongside either of these cards makes them much less risky. Once I'd done that I also noticed that I had a Honden of Infinite Rage that I'd basically decided not to splash for and that suddenly became a much nicer card for the deck. I was able to cut some mediocre cards for the two Hondens and even though the splash weakened the manabase of the deck the synergy of the deck was improved significantly and I won a couple of games just because I drew a good combination of those cards.



Synergy: Overused in biz-speak, but still great in Sealed Deck

Another example is a deck I opened that had a couple of Konda's Hatamoto in its pool. I played a lone Brothers Yamazaki to go alongside the always excellent Nagao, Bound by Honor to support those two cards and give them a place in the deck.

In this set it's also worth checking how your Spirit and Arcane spells are interacting. You might want to put a higher or lower value on the Soulshift mechanic depending on the number of spirits you have in your deck. Similarly you might want to include cantrip Arcane spells like Reach Through Mists and Sift Through Sands if you have several spells with the Splice onto Arcane mechanic.

Once you've settled on the right cards you should find yourself with 23 cards that'll make up your main deck. I think in this format 23 is the number to start with as it leaves room for 17 lands which will typically be what you need. Once you've looked at your mana curve and other mana generators you can chose to increase or decrease this count by one.

Building your mana-base

Once you've settled on your spells you also need to decide what lands to play. If you have a dual-land that supports two of your colours then that is an automatic inclusion for me. Sometimes it'll slow you down if you have to repeatedly use it for coloured mana but that's an acceptable price to pay for access to two colours from a single land.



A good general rule of thumb with two colour decks is to split the lands 9/8 or 10/7 in favour of your more prominent colour. Sometimes your prominent colour isn't always the one with the most spells in that colour though. You might end up playing blue with Kami of Twisted Reflection, Mystic Restraints, Sift Through Sands, etc and in that situation you should probably have more Islands to support the double casting cost of those spells. If you're splashing a third colour then you'll first need to make sure your splash cards contain only one single coloured mana in their casting cost. Keiga, the Tide Star is splashable but Jugan, the Rising Star is not. If you have a single card in a splash colour then you should run two lands that provide that colour. Two or three cards in a splash colour usually requires three lands and four or more splash cards will need four or even five lands to support it. The most common ratio of lands you see in sealed is 7/7/3 where your two main colours have seven lands each and your splash colour has three.

When building your mana base you can also take into account any other way you have of generating mana. Another good general rule is to remove one land for every two spells you have that can give

you mana. If you have one Kodama's Reach and an Orochi Sustainer then you can usually safely drop to 16 lands. If you had two of each of those cards then 15 lands would probably be ok.

Checking your mana curve

One of the last things to do with your deck is to check its mana curve. For those of you who don't know what a mana curve is it's quite simply the distribution of cheap vs. expensive spells your deck has. This format is fairly quick so you want to try and include a good number of creatures and spells at two and three mana. Try and keep the quality level as high as possible – I don't want to see any of you playing Silent Chant Zubera if you're playing to win – but make sure your deck has something useful to do in the first few turns of the game.

If this isn't the case then you might want to swap some cards or perhaps even swap an entire colour. A respectable mana curve is important enough that you might sometimes have to play with sub-optimal cards just to make sure your deck functions effectively.

Sideboarding

The last thing to check is what cards remain in your sideboard. In Limited events every card that's not in your deck forms your sideboard and you can change your deck as much as you like after the first game of each match. You can swap out individual cards so pay attention to things like Enchantment removal and other useful cards that you might want to board in against specific colours or decks.

You're also able to sideboard an entire colour in if you need to. If you wind up playing against someone who beat you with a combination of multiple Shrines in the first game then it'd certainly be worth changing one of your colours to White if you had Kami of Ancient Law and/or Quiet Purity available to you in that colour.

Another recent example of this is when I built a nice green-blue deck from my pool of cards. It had flyers, some removal and bigger green creatures too but when it went up against an aggressive blue-black deck it got beaten really badly. I looked at my sideboard and boarded out the blue and boarded in my own black creatures along with some more of my Soulshift guys too. I even brought in cards like Kami of the Waning Moon, which I normally wouldn't consider playable. In that match-up though it was able to trade for a Nezumi Cutthroat or Soratami Mirror Guard and then it could be returned by one of the Soulshift cards to trade for something else. I also had Venerable Kumo in my board as my initial deck was very light on Spirits but in the green-black version it was excellent as it would always trade with a flyer and then return a Spirit back from the grave too.

That's just one example of what you can do with sideboarding, and situations like that aren't as uncommon as you might think.

Next Week

It's time to put some of these theories into practice. I'm listing a card pool below and my fellow columnist Mike Flores will be giving you a build of this pool in his column on Wednesday of this week. I'll give you my build in my column next week and discuss the reasons for any differences in the two builds we come up with. We're doing this completely separately, so you'll be able to see how two people approach the sealed deck building process.



So, without further ado, here's the pool of cards we'll be working with:

White:

Blue:

Black:

Terashi's Cry
Ethereal Haze
Quiet Purity x 2
Cage of Hands
Devoted Retainer
Harsh Deceiver
Horizon Seed
Hundred-Talon Kami
Kabuto Moth
Kami of Ancient Law
Kitsune Riftwalker
Konda, Lord of Eiganjo
Mothrider Samurai
Silent Chant Zuber

Counsel of the Soratami
Eye of Nowhere
Consuming Vortex
Dampen Thought
Hisoka's Defiance
Peer Through Depths
Reach Through Mists
Sift Through Sands x 2
Field of Reality
Mystic Restraints
Callous Deceiver
Hisoka's Guard
Soratami Cloudskater
Soratami Mirror Guard
Soratami Rainshaper
Soratami Savant

Befoul
Distress
Waking Nightmare
Hideous Laughter
Rend Spirit
Ragged Veins
Cruel Deceiver
Cursed Ronin
Gutwrencher Oni
Nezumi Bone-Reader
Rag Dealer
Scuttling Death
Villainous Ogre

Red:

Mana Seism
Crushing Pain
Glacial Ray
Sideswipe
Unnatural Speed x 2
Brutal Deceiver
Ember-Fist Zuber
Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker
Ronin Houndmaster
Sokenzan Bruiser
Soul of Magma

Green:

Commune with Nature
Gale Force
Joyous Respite
Heartbeat of Spring
Lure
Serpent Skin x 2
Kami of the Hunt
Orbweaver Kumo
Order of the Sacred Bell
Orochi Eggwatcher
Orochi Ranger
Orochi Sustainer

Lands & Artifact:

Cloudcrest Lake
Hankyu
Jade Idol
Journeyer's Kite
Kusari-Gama

You can also click [here](#) to see a screenshot of the card pool, sorted by colour in ***Magic Online***.

So have a look at that and come up with your own build. Please feel free to discuss on the message-board; the link to it is at the bottom of this article. Remember: Mike will be giving you his build on Wednesday and I'll give you mine next week.

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