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Though this column is normally for constructed **Magic**, as the format of the current crop of Pro Tour Qualifiers is *Champions of Kamigawa* sealed deck, we decided to briefly change things up and devote Swimming with Sharks this week to preparing you for those selfsame tournaments. While most people would consider me a far better constructed player than limited, I have actually won many more Limited PTQs than Constructed, believe it or not. Like our usual Limited expert on the staff, Scott Wills, I started playing competitive sealed deck PTQs many years ago, and when I won my first limited PTQ, the format was *Mirage/Mirage/Visions!*



Now many players will write about draft, and as the weeks progress, you will find many articles by many authors about what cards to draft in what order. By my experience, the draft portion of a Limited PTQ is the easy part. Think about it: you have to win maybe three rounds of draft to take the PTQ, but to even advance to the draft portion you have to weather six or eight rounds of sealed deck. Moreover, the quality of the players in the draft portion is not guaranteed to be very high. I have found that a huge percentage of the players in the draft portion of PTQs are not actually all that great, got to the Top 8 as the beneficiaries of extremely powerful card pools in the Swiss portion, and have no idea how to win without the inherent competitive advantages provided by their sealed decks.

In this article, we will therefore concentrate on the more difficult, and far longer, process of sealed deck in the Swiss. Sealed deck has fewer theory articles and primers than draft for one simple reason: the pros play almost no sealed deck. In fact, solid amateur players tend to be far better at sealed deck construction than even the top tier of pro players for the simple reason that the amateurs are actually forced to test their sealed deck skills week in and week out and the pro players tend only to exercise these muscles at Grand Prix events.

There are two factors in advancing in a sealed deck tournament:

1. Card pool quality
2. Play skill

A superb player can sometimes overcome a poor card pool, but there are countless examples of strong players who have found themselves unable to make the Top 8 of a PTQ. Obviously strong card pools will be even more dangerous in the hands of the best players, but the best card pools will potentially carry even poor players through the Swiss rounds. They might not have wins that are as pretty as better players, they might give you an extra turn or miss an on-table kill, but it really isn't that difficult to swing a Dragon four times in the sky. A good rule of thumb is that if the round is late and you are sitting down at a low numbered table across from an opponent that you have never seen, the chances are that he has a powerful sealed deck.

Regardless of the power level of your sealed deck, there are some basic guidelines that you should always follow.

1. Start by sorting your cards by color and mana cost.

2. Typically play 3 colors; sometimes you will get lucky and be able to run 2, and in special cases you will run 4 or even all 5, but most sealed decks tend to be 3 colors.
3. Plan to play 16-18 lands, preferably 17-18.
4. Plan to play as many solid creatures as you can in your colors, preferably 16 or more (though this can vary wildly format to format).
5. Pay attention to your mana consistency: there is nothing worse than having great cards that you cannot cast, not because you were manascrewed, but because you didn't have the right color of mana.

After sorting your sealed deck by color and mana cost, there are a couple of questions you will always ask:

1. Do I have any absurd cards that will immediately direct the colors of my deck (e.g. Ryusei, the Falling Star)?
2. What rares did I get?
3. Which colors have the most removal?
4. Do I have any relevant mana fixers? (corollary: can I go two colors?)
5. How many playable creatures are available?
6. How many lands go in this deck?
7. Do I have to play on a curve?

The first questions are also the most fun. There is nothing more gratifying in the world of sealed deck than seeing a card like Keiga, the Tide Star staring up at you from your pile of 75.

A card like that will guide your color choices and help you make tough decisions. Having a card like that may inspire you to run cards like Commune with Nature that you wouldn't normally consider. The best sealed decks tend, not surprisingly, to be those with the best threats or most powerful card advantage. Many times a single rare creature will be able to carry an entire game alone, while a card like Rout or Starstorm will almost always devastate an opponent beyond any possibility of winning. Your rares are the least consistently available but most powerful potential segment of your deck. Go there first.



The second path to a great sealed deck lies in removal. You might not have the best deck, you might not have the most card advantage, but you might still be able to cut a swath through the Swiss because of your volume of answers. The reasons for this are many. For one thing, good answers are almost always faster than good threats, meaning that you will have time to play your own cards while simultaneously spending mana on your opponents'. The second reason is that players often overvalue hands containing their bombs. Would you mulligan a hand that had six lands and your Legendary Dragon Spirit? I would keep a hand like that a lot of the time, at least depending on the known contents of my opponent's deck. A single Rend Spirit or even Mystic Restraints will contain a single Jugan, the Rising Star with ease. I once sliced through Day One of a Grand Prix 7-0/14-0 with an unspectacular 3 color deck with no legitimate bombs and no green, playing against everything from Phyrexian Processor to Morphling to Yavimaya Hollows just because I had a large volume of removal and was able to hold off my opponents' more spectacular threats long enough to go lethal with my Gray Ogres.

"Good answers are almost always faster than good threats."

Now all things considered equal, I will gravitate towards green over every other color in sealed deck, regardless of the format. The reason for this is that green typically has the biggest creatures and the best mana acceleration and mana fixing. Cards like Harrow or Sakura-Tribe Elder play a

special role in sealed deck: they let you play your bombs more consistently and let you play more of your removal spells. In the current format, it should be easy to understand that Sakura-Tribe Elder and Kodama's Reach get you more mana faster. This lets you play out your rare creatures a turn or more before it is "fair" to do so. More than that, they allow you to do crazy things with your mana base like splashing just one or two off-color basic lands so that you can play removal cards from additional colors. Last week, on the *Magic Online* Beta for *Champions of Kamigawa*, former Swimming with Sharks columnist Brian David-Marshall met up with former Latest Developments columnist Randy Buehler. Randy wasn't having the best of luck with his *Champions* drafting, and Brian suggested that Randy start taking Kodama's Reach and Sakura-Tribe Elder higher – as early as first pick. A few days later, the two met up again, and Randy had lost only one game since his conversation with Brian. Forcing green mana fixers early allowed him to take his opponents' removal cards and play them himself. He found himself destroying people with Kumano, Master Yamabushi supported by just two Mountains, surprising other green mages with splashed Pull Unders, or splashing Eight-and-a-Half Tails! While not directly applicable to sealed deck, the principle of playing with green to improve your mana is one that shows its effectiveness by allowing you to play more of the best cards in your sealed deck pool.

Beyond playing green, you can also gain an advantage by playing with dual lands or other mana fixers. I have even gone so far as to choose my deck's colors based on what dual lands I had! The reason is that, at least unless you are paired with a truly exceptional deck, most sealed deck matches come down to two players ramming into one another with creatures that would be literally unplayable in constructed deck. At the end of the day, the player who wins will most often be the player who is able to play the most creatures most consistently.

The last principle of sealed deck, and potentially the most important, involves saving yourself when you have a sub-optimal card pool. A few years ago, the aforementioned Brian David-Marshall came up to me at a PTQ and showed me his sealed deck. It was fine, but by no means broken. I took out his green cards and laid out a curve based on a ton of creatures and a surprising number of Giant Growth-type effects. My reasoning was that while Brian's sealed was fine, it was never going to get him past the remaining decks after round four. If he was going to beat the guys who had Predator, Flagship and Two-Headed Dragon, he had to beat them up as early as possible and punch through lethal damage before the opposing bombs came online. Sealed deck tournaments are some of the most difficult to win because you will not always start on even footing with the man across the table. When his cards outstrip yours, sometimes all you can do is kill him before he draws his best card, or has sufficient mana to cast it.

With these principles in mind, let's take a look at Scott's card pool from Monday.

White:

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 Zuberu

Blue:

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

Black:

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

Soratami Rainshaper
Sorotami Savant

Red:

Mana Seism
Crushing Pain
Glacial Ray
Sideswipe
Unnatural Speed x 2
Brutal Deceiver
Ember-Fist Zubera
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 see the card pool in a **Magic Online** screenshot by clicking [here](#).

First of all, the rares are fairly unspectacular:

- Konda, Lord of Eiganjo
- Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker
- Heartbeat of Spring
- Journeyer's Kite
- Kusari-Gama

Konda, Lord of Eiganjo is likely the strongest sealed deck card in this sub-pool. His mana cost is clunky and he is naturally small for his considerable cost, but he plays both offense and defense and will likely hit for three a turn in the mid to late games.

Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker might get played if we go red, but from where I'm sitting, I don't think we will be heavy red.

Heartbeat of Spring is literally unplayable in sealed deck.

Journeyer's Kite is not the best rare in the world, but I think it has its virtues in sealed deck, especially since we have no other mana fixing.

The jury is still out on Kusari-Gama. There are a lot of things I like about this card. It can create either a situation where damage is guaranteed or a one-way Wrath of God given enough mana. That said, I haven't seen it played enough to be certain that it isn't too slow.



As for green, the color provides little. It has a few creatures and not much else. I could see siding into green against another green mage, for the Serpent Skins and possibly Lure. Kami of the Hunt and Orochi Sustainer are both superb, but their teammates in green are not exactly what we are looking for.

Red has Glacial Ray, which is one of the best commons. To the aforementioned Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker, red adds Ronin Houndmaster, one of its best common creatures, but is pretty thin on threats

overall. One strategy would be to play the Glacial Ray and one Mountain and just hope to wreck the opponent with a large volume of Arcane Spells. This is dicey even though we have a lot of Arcane, but is still something to keep in mind.

The pool really makes me want to play black. That color has Befoul and Rend Spirit as spot removal; both cards are ideal for killing the opponent's bombs. Moreover, it has Hideous Laughter, which is quite strong itself, especially with Splice tricks going on. Distress and Waking Nightmare are both excellent role players, but the creature aspect is a bit thin. Beyond the Villainous Ogre + Gutwrencher Oni combination, you really don't have many bodies.

There are a lot of things I like about the blue. It has several flyers and several creatures with toughness greater than power. While you won't normally find me advocating those kinds of creatures, this sealed deck seems very slow, and it might be important to hide behind 1/3 creatures while we set up our removal and hope to draw into the Lord of Eiganjo.

Lastly, we are definitely going to go white. Besides the fact that white contains our best rare, it also gives us some solid flyers and ten potential creatures, which is one of the most important aspects of building any sealed deck.

All of that said, I think this is the build I would choose:



Champions of Kamigawa Sealed Deck



Main Deck

40 cards

1 Cloudcrest Lake	1 Callous Deceiver	1 Befoul
7 Island	1 Harsh Deceiver	1 Cage of Hands
7 Plains	1 Hundred-Talon Kami	1 Consuming Vortex
3 Swamp	1 Kabuto Moth	1 Counsel of the Soratami
18 lands	1 Kami of Ancient Law	1 Hideous Laughter
	1 Kitsune Riftwalker	1 Hisoka's Defiance
	1 Konda, Lord of Eiganjo	1 Journeyer's Kite
	1 Mothrider Samurai	1 Kusari-Gama
	1 Soratami Cloudskater	1 Mystic Restraints
	1 Soratami Mirror-Guard	1 Rend Spirit
	1 Soratami Rainshaper	10 other spells
	1 Soratami Savant	
	12 creatures	

I am not particularly happy with this build. Even with the Cloudcrest Lake and Journeyer's Kite, the mana base is dismal and the creature count is a lot lower than I would typically like to play. The white

creatures are solid and blue has some flyers, but the populations just aren't there. If we wanted to really beef up our lineup, we would be forced to go green, and even then, we would have only Order of the Sacred Bell for a really sizable body. Orochi Eggwatcher actually helps our ability to hold the line, but not enough, I think, to go into the forbidden color combination. I like the fact that the deck has a lot of flyers, and I think it will be able to finish well with all the evasion... as long as it lives long enough to do so.

To live, we have some solid blockers as well as some good defensive cards. One of the things I like about this deck is that even though its own threats are fairly unspectacular, we have cards like Cage of Hands, Hisoka's Defiance, Mystic Restraints, Befoul, and Rend Spirit that can all contain our opponents' best cards. The mana structure basically forced us to play with Journeyer's Kite, which, along with Counsel of the Soratami, will give us some card advantage going long.



I am not 100% on Kusari-Gama yet, but when I am not sure on cards, I try to err on the side of playing more rares. The thing I like about it is that in a creature poor deck, equipment can help turn any old topdeck into a giant. In the late game, Kusari-Gama can become a legitimate problem, and help finish or break through a standoff. I can totally see playing a card like Scuttling Death in its stead, or even one of the myriad blue Arcane spells that are currently sitting on the sidelines, but in this format without Turn to Dust, Carry Away, and Unforge, the equipment is on the starting lineup, at least for now.

In order to win with this deck, we are going to need a lot of luck. Our deck is not set up to beat decks based on a serious curve, that can come out swinging with mana consistent threats turn after turn. We have only one "bear" (2 power creature for 2 mana), and even though we have several cards that are pretty good at holding bears off, we might just find ourselves outnumbered and tapped out, where we can fall for any old combat trick. Furthermore, our guys are not big, and we will lose a straight up fight against most green decks the majority of the time. Against aggressive opponents, we will probably bring in Ethereal Haze and possibly Silent Chant Zuberia or Devoted Retainer. Silent Chant Zuberia is actually not that bad against random x/1 creatures and Devoted Retainer is fine against random x/1 and x/2 creatures, as long as they don't have Bushido. Remember, our goal is to hold the ground with blockers and removal while our flyers win in the air.

One of the neat things about sealed deck is that even though you have to be worried about opposing Dragon Spirits, and almost every player has some rare that can win the game all by itself, a lot of the time, the other guy's deck is clunkier and slower than yours is. This can go a long way to propelling you towards your goal at the end of the Swiss rounds as long as you manage your resources and play tightly. Even though this particular sealed deck is nothing like the kind I would typically want to open, it does have some virtues, and in the right room, might be good enough to carry you.

Make sure to check Scott Wills' column next week for his build as well as some analysis on where we differed, and good luck at your next *Champions of Kamigawa* sealed deck PTQ!

