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Sharks of the **Magic** world have a lot to look forward to. Not only do we have the *Champions of Kamigawa* Sealed Deck PTQs just kicking off, but we are also about to hit the annual Champs tournaments. This article is going to address both halves of the busy days ahead: The first part is going to be a bit of a follow-up to last week's article on designing a sealed deck, and the second half is going to be an introduction to Champs.

Part I: PTQ at Neutral Ground - New York, 9 October 2004

I had a chance to play in the Sealed Deck PTQ at Neutral Ground this past weekend. I applied the principles that I talked about in last week's article and came up with this:

Card Pool:

White:

1 Cage of Hands
1 Cleanfall
1 Ghostly Prison
2 Harsh Deceiver
1 Hundred-Talon Kami
1 Innocence Kami
1 Kabuto Moth
1 Kami of Old Stone
1 Kami of the Painted Road
1 Kitsune Healer
1 Kitsune Riftwalker
1 Pious Kitsune
1 Quiet Purity
1 Terashi's Cry

Blue:

1 Consuming Vortex
1 Counsel of the Soratami
1 Floating-Dream Zubera
1 Gifts Ungiven
1 Hisoka's Defiance
1 Kami of Twisted Reflection
1 Peer Through Depths
1 Reach Through Mists
1 River Kaijin
1 Soratami Rainshaper
1 Thoughtbind
1 Wandering Ones

Black:

1 Ashen-Skin Zubera
1 Befoul
1 Cursed Ronin
1 Devouring Greed
1 Gibbering Kami
1 Kuro, Pitlord
1 Nezumi Cutthroat
1 Nezumi Graverobber
1 Ragged Veins
1 Rend Spirit
1 Wicked Akuba

Red:

1 Akki Underminer
1 Battle-Mad Ronin
1 Brutal Deceiver
2 Crushing Pain
1 Kami of Fire's Roar
1 Kumano's Pupils
1 Pain Kami
1 Sideswipe
1 Stone Rain
2 Soul of Magma
1 Uncontrollable Anger
1 Unearthly Blizzard
1 Yamabushi's Flame

Green:

2 Burr Grafter
1 Commune with Nature
1 Gale Force
1 Humble Budoka
1 Joyous Respite
1 Kami of the Hunt
1 Iname, Life Aspect
1 Kodama's Might
2 Kodama's Reach
1 Order of the Sacred Bell
1 Orochi Eggwatcher
1 Orochi Leafcaller
1 Rootrunner
1 Strength of Cedars
1 Wear Away

Lands & Artifact:

1 Cloudcrest Lake
1 Forbidden Orchard
1 Hankyu
1 Junkyo Bell
1 Nine-Ringed Bo

Final Deck

The hardest part about building this deck was whether I should play *Wear Away* or *Kuro, Pitlord* as my last spell. *Wear Away* is actually quite good in a deck like this one because it would theoretically be vulnerable to *Honden* -- especially the blue *Honden* out of especially another green deck -- as well as faux-removal stall enchantments like *Cage of Hands* and *Mystic Restraints*. Moreover, *Wear Away* is just good in a high mana deck with a lot of *Arcane* and a decent number of *Arcane* interactions. Ultimately I played *Kuro* because I was pretty sure I could cast him (where most decks can't), not to mention I wanted another body. Despite the fact that I lost every single game one of the Swiss, *Kuro* won me at least two matches.

As you can see, my deck lacked any legitimate bombs. As such, I had to build on a curve. *Nezumi Graverobber* was very good, but half the time, it just ended up trading for a 3/3 while I tried to pedal for position against a vastly superior deck. I played several 2 power creatures for 2 mana, including the aforementioned *Nezumi Graverobber*, the superb *Nezumi Cutthroat*, and the dangerous *Wicked Akuba*. One of the really great things about this deck was that I played *Orochi Leafcaller* -- a card that many players would simply overlook -- that let me get in for three free damage game after game. The *Leafcaller* is one of the best mana fixers in the history of Limited **Magic** -- peer, in its own way, to the vaunted *Nomadic Elf* from *Invasion* -- that allowed me crazy curve draws that followed up with *Wicked Akuba* on turn two, and snuck in *Yamabushi's Flame* and *Cage of Hands* out of nowhere, that no opponent could have have seen coming. The mana fixing element of this deck was clearly strong, with double *Kodama's Reach* allowing me to play *Yamabushi's Flame* with a lone *Mountain* and side in strategic off-color answers.

As this deck was forced to play on a curve, fighting against better cards round after round, I had to rely on finishers like *Strength of Cedars* and *Devouring Greed* to win games. Careful turn management allowed me to make Top 8 with a 5-1-1 record, even in the face of three opponents with *Blind with Anger* *plus* a *Dragon*, and two decks with *two* *Dragons*. In round five, at 4-0, I lost my fifth straight game one when my opponent tapped out for *Jugan the Rising Star* with *Ryusei, the Falling Star* already in play (!), me on eleven life, and him on nine. I desperately topdecked my ninth land and slammed down *Kuro, Pitlord*, paying all ten life immediately to wipe his *Dragons* on my own turn (my opponent had already showed me that he was holding a *Kodama's Might*). It was not enough. He had two guys in his hand, one 1/3 to chump, and one 2/1 to fly over the *Humble Budoka* I had left after all those monsters.

In round six, I played against a double *Dragon* deck once again, and lost the first game once again to *Ryusei, the Falling Star*. I pulled out the match by hitting him with *Stone Rain* and *Rootrunner*. The turn I won with *Strength of Cedars*, my opponent was stuck on five lands, holding the aforementioned six drops.

Whew.

In the Top 8 I drafted a strong U/G *Splice* deck, but ultimately petered out in the quarterfinals.

After smashing game 1, my opponent destroyed me with *Zev Gurwitz and "MikeyP", US Nationals '02* the inimitable *Hanabi Blast* in game two; I stalled in game three. After taking huge tempo advantage and reducing the opponent to two life with an opportune *Strength of Cedars*, I was never able to do the last couple of points as he clogged the board. My opponent started drawing two cards a turn with *Jushi Apprentice* while I drew land after land. After several turns of doing nothing, I eventually got destroyed by *Kami of Fire's Roar* and a flyer with double *Uncontrollable Anger* attached. I had several ways to immediately win in my deck, but unable to block, I died in four swings.

I was pretty sure that I wouldn't have been able to beat Zev Gurwitz's W/R beatdown deck in the finals anyway. Zev was getting wheels like Isamaru, Hound of Konda + Indomitable Will, and had four Kabuto Moths. He easily breezed through the Top 8 without dropping a game, eschewing even the customary prize split in the finals.

I learned a lot in that first *Champions of Kamigawa* Sealed Deck PTQ. The first thing was that super rare / mega bomb decks are beatable. It ain't easy. You end up sitting there for long turns, waiting to draw the Devouring Greed that might just bite it on the end of a Sideswipe while the other guy starts showcasing his 5/5 flyers. It's all about managing your resources as best you can. Eke every point out of your Splice cards. Smash with even a non-lethal alpha strike when you see an opening, because if you don't pull the trigger while you have a chance, you will end up biting it to Blind with Anger, or Sideswipe, or an actual rare card. If your deck isn't quite as good, you'll end up sweating a lot, but the enemy can be beaten and you can make Top 8, even without a Dragon on your team.

Part II: Champs Primer

Champs is a Standard tournament -- series of tournaments, really -- that is held annually in or on States, Provinces, Territories, and Islands around the world. If you want to participate in Champs, you may be required to provide proof of residence in the specific geographic region wherein you are trying to compete.

Champs does not feed into the summer season the way that Regionals feeds into Nationals which then feeds into Worlds, but it remains an important event every fall. Besides the title of State (or Provincial or Territorial or Island) Champion, tournament organizers often sweeten the pot with valuable prizes that keep paying off down the line. Many TOs offer their respective Champions free PTQ entry for the rest of the year, and some of them even recognize the titles of Champions from neighboring areas! These prizes can add up to hundreds of dollars per year.

More than what you, personally, can take away from any given tournament prize offering, for **Magic** fans and students of the game Champs often serves as a great predictor for the year to come. In 1999 for instance, tournament players first saw the dominance that would be Tolarian Academy at State Championships, as well as the debut of Morphling in Sol Malka's Survival of the Fittest deck. More recent Champs events have shown us the first Upheaval/Psychatog decks, and emerging Equipment beatdown and Affinity decks, months before the release of Arcbound Ravager, Skullclamp, or Cranial Plating.

Champs is a great gateway tournament and an ideal first shot at Standard constructed for aspiring sharks. Most of your opposition will be players from PTQ regulars to other first timers, but you will also have a rare opportunity to compete against even the cream of **Magic's** crop. Before he won a Pro Tour, Player of the Year title, Masters, and Invitational, Bob Maher was a State Championships finalist, and well after he was a Grand Prix Champion and PT Top 8 celebrity Dragonmaster, Brian Kibler earned the title of State Champion himself. The opportunity to go up against a new crop of players, not to mention some of the best in your area, can only improve your game. You will learn, you will be forced, to sharpen your deck design, and will probably get a critique or two on your play.

In the coming weeks, we will take a deeper look into what you might see across the table at this year's Champs, but this week, we are going to keep it basic.

First of all, we've already said that Champs is a Standard tournament. What does that mean?

Standard is exactly what it sounds like. It is the *standard* tournament format. Originally designated "Type II" (to distinguish it from the former "Type I"), Standard is a format that is less about owning powerful rares that have been out of print for ten years and more about an even playing field, at least

in terms of card availability. Standard is designed to be an evergreen format, blossoming anew every year, culling and incorporating new sets as they are released.

This year's Champs Standard will include cards from the in-print *Eighth Edition*, the three sets of the *Mirrodin* Block, and, of course, *Champions of Kamigawa*. That means that you will only need to be familiar with five sets worth of cards in your opponents' decks, rather than the countless thousands you might have to prepare for in a wider format. Moreover, it is easier to get hold of the cards you will need to build the best deck you can yourself. Unlike in a Vintage tournament, where a new player has to contend with cards like Time Walk and Black Lotus, at Champs, the most dangerous card you will have to beat is a 1/1 common creature from *Mirrodin*.

Standard Constructed conforms to certain formal rules of deck design. Every deck you will face will be 60+ cards -- usually 60 -- and have a 15 card sideboard. Decks can play only four copies of each card between deck and sideboard (not counting basic lands, which have no limit), and the cards can be chosen only from the aforementioned legal sets. After game one, players can interchange cards from the main deck with cards from the sideboard at a 1-for-1 basis, such that they always have 15 cards that are NOT in their decks.

Now even though Standard is theoretically a format that uses a smaller pool of readily available cards, that does not mean that some cards are not just better than others. You will find that many opponents will choose from only a small group of spells. For instance, artifact-based decks, red decks, Tooth and Nail decks, and even some control decks may all play Electrostatic Bolt. Ditto on Mana Leak. White decks, green decks, artifact decks, and mono-blue decks can all be expected to run this two mana Counterspell replacement. Because of that, it is useful to think about these kinds of cards when designing your own deck: be prepared for different cards than you may typically see in your local play group.

The last idea I want to introduce is that of an archetype. We talk about archetypes week in and week out as if everyone who visits **magicthegathering.com** speaks the same secret language, even though there is no guarantee that this is true. In **Magic**, archetypes refer to similar decks that are commonly seen in tournament play. For example, when we refer to the deck archetype "Affinity", we tend to be talking about an aggressive artifact-based deck with about 16 artifact lands and several cards with the Affinity for Artifacts mechanic, such as Frogmite, Myr Enforcer, Thoughtcast, and Furnace Dragon. The most dangerous card in the Affinity deck is either Disciple of the Vault or Arcbound Ravager, depending on who you ask.

Over the next few weeks, we will refer to archetypes with increasing frequency, and list many Standard decks along the way. These decks will hopefully represent the kinds of decks you can expect to face, and therefore will be the kinds of decks you should prepare your own Weapons of Choice against in anticipation of your own participation at this year's Champs.

Good luck in both *Champions of Kamigawa* Sealed Deck and the exciting new world of Standard!

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