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Champs is the first major tournament -- series of tournaments around the world, really -- showcasing a Standard that includes *Champions of Kamigawa*. That means that Champs is your first shot at dueling with the new Legendary Creatures, bashing from the first turn with the Hound of Konda, and summoning the most dangerous Dragons since Rith ruled the sky. You can try out new ideas and add powerful new tools or perfectly fitting new puzzle pieces to your favorite decks. But to be successful, you will have to know what you are up against.

Standard for Champs this year is essentially *Mirrodin* Block Constructed with two additional inclusions: *Eighth Edition* and *Champions of Kamigawa*. Especially given the caliber of decks that came out of *Mirrodin* Block Constructed, that means that you should prepare for the best decks to come out of the last block first.

Public Enemy Number One

For those of you who will make Champs your first sanctioned tournament experience, let me introduce you to the bad guys:



These two notorious villains ruled *Mirrodin* Block Constructed and have been a force in Standard since the release of *Darksteel*. For his part, Disciple of the Vault has been played since Champs *last* year, albeit back then, he was mostly a foil for Affinity-killer Akroma's Vengeance. Today, Arcbound Ravager and Disciple of the Vault make up the finest two-card combination since long unplayable Illusions of Grandeur met the seemingly innocuous Donate in 1999. Both cards are solid alone, but together, they push the Affinity deck over the top.

Affinity is the fastest beatdown deck currently available in Standard. It comes out with efficient first turn plays followed by free 2/2 creatures and near-free 4/4s and 3/2 flyers. Affinity can take your first 10 life points in the blink of an eye with relentless waves of offense or a single successful hit from

Cranial Plating. Once you are at a manageable life total, Standard's consensus best deck can finish you in many different ways. With two sources of black mana in play, Affinity can pass a Cranial Plating onto the only creature you didn't block. With Arcbound Ravager in play, it can move a pile of modular counters onto the same. With both Arcbound Ravager and Disciple of the Vault in play, Affinity can "Fireball" you for however many artifacts it has in play without giving the average blue mage an opportunity to counter.

Affinity originally hit the scene with giant Broodstars pumped forward with Lightning Greaves. Today, it is a much more streamlined offensive deck that comes, typically, in one of two flavors. Though they have many cards and proactive tactics in common, playing against the two builds is quite different.

Kamiel Cornelissen



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
 3 Darksteel Citadel
 1 Glimmervoid
 4 Great Furnace
 4 Seat of the Synod
 4 Vault of Whispers

20 lands

4 Arcbound Ravager
 4 Arcbound Worker
 3 Atog
 4 Disciple of the Vault
 4 Frogmite
 4 Myr Enforcer
 1 Myr Retriever

24 creatures

4 Aether Vial
 4 Chromatic Sphere
 4 Cranial Plating
 4 Thoughtcast

16 other spells

Sideboard

4 Electrostatic Bolt
 1 Glimmervoid
 2 Myr Retriever
 3 Pyroclasm
 4 Relic Barrier
 1 Somber Hoverguard

15 sideboard cards

Aeo Paquette



Main Deck

60 cards

3 Blinkmoth Nexus
 3 Glimmervoid
 4 Great Furnace
 4 Seat of the Synod
 4 Vault of Whispers

4 Chrome Mox
 4 Cranial Plating
 4 Shrapnel Blast
 4 Thoughtcast
 4 Welding Jar

Sideboard

4 Annul
 4 Furnace Dragon
 4 Seething Song
 3 Serum Visions

15 sideboard cards

18 lands

20 other spells

4 Arcbound Ravager
4 Arcbound Worker
4 Disciple of the Vault
4 Frogmite
4 Ornithopter
2 Somber Hoverguard

22 creatures

The above are two versions of Affinity that made the Top 8 of the recent World Championships. Though there are other variations that use cards like Moriok Rigger and Terror, I believe that these decks are fairly representative of what you will see, even with the inclusion of *Champions of Kamigawa*, as neither deck plays cards from *Onslaught* block.

Likely the more common version of Affinity you will face is based on Aether Vial. This deck is remarkably steady, robust, and resilient. Though it lacks the pure explosiveness of "speed" Affinity, this group of Affinity decks has a tremendous advantage generated by the card Aether Vial. Aether Vial is a perfect foil to Wrath of God (the card with the most notable impact out of *Eighth Edition*). Where most offensive decks will wither against that powerful defensive sorcery, Aether Vial can pump out a creature at the end of turn, after Wrath of God has resolved. With a Cranial Plating in play, this allows Aether Vial Affinity to set up a lethal turn out of nowhere.

While all Affinity decks take advantage of the mana benefits afforded by the Affinity for Artifacts mechanic itself, Aether Vial Affinity also plays an abnormally high concentration of 1- and 2-drops. This lets the deck pump out creatures with Aether Vial with greater consistency (consider the difficulty of using the card to deploy Somber Hoverguard or even Moriok Rigger). Among its 2-drops is Atog. While Atog seems like a much worse Arcbound Ravager that is not an artifact (and therefore does not contribute to Affinity for Artifacts), has a non-permanent boost effect, and requires colored mana, Atog is also a tremendous threat against decks with red and green removal. While many opponents seek to overwhelm Affinity with cards like Shatter and Oxidize, those cards have no effect against Atog... except to make it a little bigger.

Speed Affinity is capable of incredibly explosive starts. Its best first turns will see multiple threats in play, which will be complimented by Cranial Plating and Myr Enforcer in short order. Though this school of Affinity lacks the consistency and lasting power of Aether Vial, the speed decks play a cheater's game. Speed Affinity generates mana from Chrome Mox on the first turn whether or not it has been imprinted, and hits with Cranial Plating with great frequency because of its diverse flyers. While most decks need to reduce the opponent to 0, the speed decks only really need to do 15 damage – and in some games only 10 – because of the presence of Shrapnel Blast. No deck in the Standard format has a better best draw than this one.

Fighting the speed Affinity decks can be very annoying because of Welding Jar. The deck wins a ridiculous amount of games by sacrificing its board to Arcbound Ravager, dumping all the counters on an Ornithopter, and swinging a couple of times while hiding behind the Jar. You may have noticed that some successful decks – from Brian Kibler's otherwise mono-white deck at US Nationals to Brock Parker's otherwise mono-red deck from the World Championships – play Oxidize. Many of you might think this is a strange choice. Wouldn't Naturalize at just one more mana be more flexible? In a

sense, Naturalize is a stonger card for its ability to fight enchantments, but conversely, Oxidize can rip through a Welding Jar defense while Naturalize barely slows Affinity down.

The Limiting Factor

The next biggest deck to come out of the *Mirrodin* Block is Tooth and Nail. Tooth and Nail (called "TwelvePost" at that event) came on the scene at the Block Pro Tour early this year, and nearly took home the top prize. While the game's finest designer had to settle for second place in Kobe, Gabriel Nassif's performance at the Pro Tour helped propel him to Player of the Year.



The core of Tooth and Nail is Sylvan Scrying and a set of entwine sorceries – Reap and Sow and Tooth and Nail itself. The goal of the deck is to generate a ton of mana and then entwine the latter sorcery for a ridiculous effect. What actually comes down is to some extent irrelevant... most of the time a resolved Tooth and Nail is the death knell. The end can take the form of two copies of Darksteel Colossus, ready to trample over for 22, invulnerable to Wrath of God or other sweep. It can be the team of Platinum Angel and Leonin Abunas; one ensures victory while the other prevents its partner from being removed. Victory can take the form of Triskelion and Mephidross Vampire... a couple that sweeps the board of offending creatures on the other side of the table. Colored mana requirements are irrelevant once Tooth and Nail is within range.



The original Tooth and Nail decks, being limited to *Mirrodin* Block, relied on Cloudpost for accelerated mana. Later variations in Standard moved to the Urzatron – Urza's Tower, Urza's Mine, and Urza's Power Plant – strung together via the aforementioned Sylvan Scrying and Reap and Sow. While technically more powerful than their Cloudpost predecessors, the Urzatron decks typically had to rely on Talisman of Unity for early mana because, with at least twelve colorless lands, they could not reliably hit their green mana on time. This has become a generally inferior design paradigm for two reasons: First of all, people run a lot of Oxidizes for Affinity opponents, and including cards like Talisman of Unity just lets them play target practice. Moreover, *Champions of Kamigawa* and *Eighth Edition*

provide some fantastic cards that do the same job as Talisman of Unity, but block Affinity creatures at the same time.

Because of that, I recommend going back to the Cloudpost versions. Tooth and Nail will win most long games against most decks; the trick is to weather early beatdown, and the ability to block while accelerating mana can go a long way.

In addition, *Champions of Kamigawa* also gives us a powerful new Legendary creature that fits right into Tooth and Nail:



Kiki-Jiki is a perfect tag team partner to Sundering Titan, a creature many Tooth and Nail players were already using. Against a two color deck, Kiki-Jiki and Sundering Titan will typically take out six opposing lands on the first turn, and go lethal on the next.

Tooth and Nail is the Limiting Factor because even though testing against Affinity is the most important, few decks can beat both Affinity *and* Tooth and Nail. Practicing against Tooth and Nail after becoming comfortable against Affinity is an important key to tuning a deck that you believe can be successful at Champs. Control decks especially find Tooth and Nail a difficult opponent. Adding Boseiju, Who Shelters All to the mix only makes matters worse for blue mages.

The Champion

The deck that actually won the *Mirrodin* Block Pro Tour rounds out the grandfathered decks. Big Red can come in multiple flavors, even as a block strategy. On the one hand, you have an artifact-hostile deck like Kuroda's:

Kuroda Masashiro		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Barbed Lightning	4 Echoing Ruin
4 Darksteel Citadel	4 Damping Matrix	3 Furnace Dragon
16 Mountain	4 Detonate	4 Molten Rain
-----	4 Electrostatic Bolt	2 Talisman of Impulse
24 lands	4 Fireball	2 Talisman of Indulgence
	4 Pulse of the Forge	-----
	4 Shrapnel Blast	15 sideboard cards
4 Arc Slogger	-----	
4 Solemn Simulacrum	28 other spells	

8 creatures		

On the other hand, you will see decks that are far less dedicated to beating artifacts:

Champs Big Red – Osyp Lebedowicz



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
4 Great Furnace
14 Mountain
2 Swamp

24 lands

4 Arc-Slogger
2 Kumano, Master Yamabushi
4 Solemn Simulacrum

10 creatures

4 Damping Matrix
4 Electrostatic Bolt
4 Magma Jet
4 Molten Rain
3 Pyroclasm
3 Shrapnel Blast
4 Talisman of Indulgence

26 other spells

Sideboard

4 Cranial Extraction
3 Pulse of the Forge
4 Shatter
4 Stone Rain

15 sideboard cards



The preceding deck is an updated Big Red listing by former Block PT Champ Osyp, GP Orlando '04 Osyp Lebedowicz. While Kuroda's deck ran Detonate main *and* brought in Echoing Ruin *and* Furnace Dragon out of the board, Osyp's deck concentrates more on being able to beat more, different, decks. While Kuroda, playing a *Mirrodin* Block deck, knew that he would have to beat Affinity time and again, Osyp's listing has main deck land destruction for Tooth and Nail, and comes prepared for a variety of responses, using far flung answers like Pyroclasm for small creatures and Cranial Extraction for big cards or combinations.

Either strategy is entirely defensible. Arc-Slogger goes a long way. Few decks can reliably deal with Arc-Slogger main deck, and even the anti-artifact Block versions can mow over green decks with a single 4/5 Beast and very little backup.

I find Big Red to be a tough opponent to test against. While Affinity is known for the strength of its aggression and Tooth and Nail has a big sorcery to squash almost any opponent in almost any situation, Big Red has *burn*. Burn hasn't gotten any friendlier in the last ten years: in a deck like this one, it plays equal parts creature defense and straight-to-the-head endgame kill. Burn can help Big Red come out of even a losing situation with a flurry of Shrapnel Blasts, Pulses, and Arc-Slogger activations to abruptly reduce an ostensibly healthy opponent to ash.

Old Dogs, New Decks

Champions of Kamigawa has bolstered some existing decks and given rise to archetypes we haven't seen in some years. The B/G Death Cloud decks get a big lift from *Champions*, in the form of Sakura-Tribe Elder (and, to a lesser extent, Kodama's Reach). Searching up basic lands really helps these

decks manage their difficult  and  mana requirements while at the same time pumping out a land advantage for Death Cloud itself.

B/G innovator and former strategy writer Sol Malka shared an initial look at B/G with me. Here is how The Rock's daddy would initially approach the competing – and complimentary – forces of Life and Death:

B/G Death Cloud

Main Deck
60 cards

11 Forest	4 Birds of Paradise	4 Chrome Mox
9 Swamp	4 Eternal Witness	4 Death Cloud
20 lands	4 Nezumi Shortfang	4 Night's Whisper
	4 Phyrexian Plaguelord	4 Oxidize
	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	16 other spells
	4 Solemn Simulacrum	
	24 creatures	

Sol would consider removing the Chrome Moxes depending on the format's interactions, and would swap out the powerful Nezumi Shortfang for the faster Ravenous Rat in a field overrun with Affinity and other beatdown. In case you were wondering, Sol distrusts playing Kodama's Reach on turn three against an aggressive opponent, so he doesn't run that powerful sorcery main deck. If you want to play a deck with powerful cards, and you don't want to go the route of Affinity or Tooth and Nail, you may enjoy B/G.

Champions of Kamigawa also brings with it a renaissance of Rats. Never before have Rats been as strong as a team. Though it lacks the pedigree of some of the other decks discussed in this article, I think that a dedicated Rats deck may have some virtue in the new Standard:

Rats

Main Deck
60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Chittering Rats	4 Chrome Mox
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Horobi, Death's Wail	4 Echoing Decay
15 Swamp	4 Nezumi Graverobber	4 Night's Whisper
20 lands	4 Nezumi Shortfang	4 Relic Barrier
	4 Ravenous Rats	4 Rend Flesh
	20 creatures	20 other spells

There are some clunky choices, notably Relic Barrier... but I figure if a Goblin deck can afford to play Oxidize, then a Rats deck can afford to play Relic Barrier. Relic Barrier is in fact amazing in combination with Horobi, Death's Wail. Horobi shuts down Affinity's Cranial Platings and Modular counters all by itself; in concert with Relic Barrier, this Legendary Spirit can set up an artifact bloodbath.

The rat deck can get a quick advantage in cards, then mop up the opponent's poor luck with Nezumi Graverobber. It can lock down a control deck with Nezumi Shortfang, then go immediately lethal with its flipping Rack effect. It can block early with the many Rats, then go long with Horobi, Death's Wail and Night's Whisper.

That said, the sideboard will be very important. I am guessing Persecute will remain strong against dedicated Red and Green decks, while additional disruption and removal waits in escrow for control and creatures, respectively.

My favorite deck right now, though, is U/G Control. Another holdover from *Mirrodin* Block, U/G Control makes arguably the best use of new cards Gifts Ungiven and Sakura-Tribe Elder.

U/G Control 

Main Deck
60 cards

14 Forest	4 Eternal Witness	4 Gifts Ungiven
10 Island	4 Molder Slug	2 March of the Machines
24 lands	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	4 Oxidize
	4 Thought Courier	4 Plow Under
	4 Viridian Shaman	2 Rude Awakening
	20 creatures	16 other spells

Gifts Ungiven is a tricky spell to play. In concert with U/G's Eternal Witness, it hits much more reliably, and can set up the cards it needs to win the game with great frequency. This version has strong game against Affinity with its multiple fronts of anti-artifact cards, and can break up Tooth and Nail's mana base with Plow Under. It is not particularly strong against Big Red.

If You Can't Beat `em...

The Champs format is extremely diverse. Even though there is a known "best deck" in Affinity, players will show up with threats and answers of all five colors, and no overview will be able to adequately represent every possible opponent. Your foes will attack with white creatures and green, counter spells, shuffle their decks with Beacon of Destruction, and finish you off with Disciple of the Vault. Success at Champs will require a little ingenuity on your part, but more than that, a strong working knowledge of what you are up against, and how to fight each of the different potential opponents.

This article is intended to be a primer for what kinds of decks you might face across the table, something to help you prepare yourself and your own creations... but as my old friend Worth Wollpert

taught me many years ago, "*If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.*" Worth and I both adopted popular Necropotence strategies in our early Pro Tour careers, and today, he has gone all the way to joining Wizards of the Coast's R&D team!

Good luck this weekend, and don't forget: If you can't beat Affinity... You know the rest.

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