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Champs 2004 has come and gone. Normally, at this time, Swimming with Sharks would unveil and then dissect a major event Top 8... But this time around, as I write this, the **magicthegathering.com** crew has already provided you with, well, damn near ALL the Champs decks (go take a look here, study, and grow strong)! Since you can check out all the tech that worked, both new and grandfathered, I am going to concentrate on just one really cool one this week, instead.




Contrary to my original plans, I didn't actually get a chance to play in this year's Champs... but that doesn't mean that I didn't show up to Neutral Ground, the original Mecca of **Magic**, for the 2004 New York State Championships. During the day, I played mostly 40 card decks, drafting the *Champions of Kamigawa* packs I earned at the recent Sealed Deck PTQ along with Team Sealed teammate and The Week That Was columnist Brian David-Marshall, former New Jersey State Champion Paul Jordan, and a host of other players. If all in attendance, not to mention those reading this column, are wizards of Dominia, Paul is some sort of planeswalking traveler archmage. I got a call mid-morning from the aforementioned Stalking Tiger, Hidden Gibbons standout, asking if it was "worth it" to show up to hang out at Neutral Ground. After I indicated that it was in fact worth it, Paul made the trek all the way from his native New Jersey State Championships to hang out with friends at Neutral Ground! He spent the day going 3-0 undefeated in team draft after draft (does rooming with a PT Champ rub off on mortals mere?)... and losing something like 3 or 4 of them due to poor teammate performances (I guess Paul doesn't get to keep Osyp's luck).

Over the course of the day, I watched many games of both Limited and Standard **Magic: the Gathering**. For the most part, the decks that I thought would stand out did well. Affinity ruled most of the Swiss, and represented fully half of the New York Top 8. Behind that most fearsome of decks was Tooth and Nail, an updated G/R deck, and the new G/B deck, all powered up by what has recently been called the best new constructed card in *Champions of Kamigawa*:



But what really wowed me was the appearance of a new mono-black control deck -- the coolest deck I had seen all tournament -- piloted to the finals by young Josh Sandler. All the 2004 New York deck lists can be found here. Here's the deck Josh used:

Josh Sandler		atxt 	
Main Deck		Sideboard	
60 cards			
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Barter in Blood	3 Boseiju, Who Shelters All	
20 Swamp	3 Chrome Mox	3 Cranial Extraction	
<hr/>		2 Echoing Decay	
24 lands	3 Consume Spirit	3 Horobi, Death's Wail	
	3 Death Cloud	4 Relic Barrier	
	4 Distress	<hr/>	
	4 Guardian Idol	15 sideboard cards	
3 Kokusho, the Evening Star	2 Persecute		
4 Solemn Simulacrum	3 Phyrexian Arena		
<hr/>			
7 creatures	3 Sensei's Divining Top		
	<hr/>		
	29 other spells		

In last week's pre-Champs primer, mono-black control was not a deck that I previewed. Honestly, I assumed mono-black aggro -- exemplified by the Rats theme deck -- would just be better. But Josh proved that the control deck has a lot of play, and made use of several weapons that interact beautifully in the current Standard environment.

Now there have been many attempts at building a Death Cloud deck since the appearance of that card in *Darksteel* last year, with most of them having gone green for mana acceleration. Josh's deck borrows Jens Thoren from last spring's B/G Death Cloud decks, but replaces fundamentally green effects like *Birds of Paradise* or *Vine Trellis* with artifact-based simulacra.



Chrome Mox is an almost universal inclusion that works very well with Death Cloud specifically. Though at first blush, we think of Chrome Mox as being "card disadvantage", that is, a spell that costs us an extra card for the same general effect as a basic Swamp, its interactions with Death Cloud itself are very attractive. The extra card from hand doesn't matter that much, because a lot of the time, players play Death Cloud for many more cards than they are actually holding; it doesn't matter if you have three cards or four, for example, if you plan to Death Cloud for five "X". But as much as Chrome Mox *acts* like a land, it doesn't actually *count* as one. Artifact cards like Chrome Mox will continue to produce mana long after Death Cloud has crippled the opponent's land base.

More interesting than Chrome Mox is Josh's more unique inclusion -- Guardian Idol. As I said before, Chrome Mox is a pretty basic inclusion. I had it in my sample Rats deck, and Sol Malka mentioned

playing it in his B/G Death Cloud build (you can review either listing in last week's edition of Swimming with Sharks). Guardian Idol does nearly everything Chrome Mox does in a deck like this... but does many other things even better. Like Chrome Mox, Guardian Idol continues to function after a Death Cloud; it is no more affected by that powerful sorcery than the previous mana accelerator. Yet Guardian Idol yields no automatic disadvantage... If Guardian Idol were to be hit with an Oxidize, the opponent does not automatically go up a card.

While Chrome Mox is very good in a mono-black Death Cloud deck, Guardian Idol is essentially perfect. Though it lacks Chrome Mox's pure speed, Guardian Idol doubles as a creature threat that doesn't actually count as a creature to sacrifice for Death Cloud's purposes. It accelerates mana so that the mono-black deck will likely be ahead on the board, helping a deck like Josh's annihilate the opponent's land base, while helping to preserve mana of its own. But more than any of that, Guardian Idol is a two mana card that consistently sets up four mana on turn three.

Why is having four mana on turn three particularly important?



Josh chose to run Horobi in the sideboard, but whether he showed up in game one or two, this new *Champions of Kamigawa* threat terrified Affinity players from one end of Neutral Ground to the other. Not only is Horobi a 4/4 flyer for four mana, efficient almost to a fault, but its "drawback" can actually be an incredible boon in the current environment. Think of cards that scare most players and most decks: Cranial Plating. Arcbound Ravager. Cranial Plating can't equip without killing the creature it is supposed to boost, and Arcbound Ravager no longer recoups lost power with its modular ability. And at the end of the day? Blinkmoth Nexus will stay a tiny 1/1.

In addition to Horobi, Death's Wail, Josh ran its perfect compliment.



The young finalist played this great defender on the first turn against Mike Clair, and slowed the eventual champion down considerably. Relic Barrier can slow down the opponent's mana like a Rishadan Port or hold off almost any attacker. While Relic Barrier is fantastic by itself, with Horobi, Death's Wail in the mix, Relic Barrier is like a two mana Visara the Dreadful!

Speaking of giant six mana 5/5 flyers, Kokusho, the Evening Star also served Josh well. A tremendous threat for its cost, Koshuko is potentially half of a two card kill with this deck's signature card. Five damage from Kokusho goes a long way, and two hits represents certain death. Ten in the air followed by a five-point Death Cloud adds up to 20 life pretty quickly, given this Legendary Dragon Spirit's triggered ability!

And speaking of life loss, Phyrexian Arena may have finally found a home in a tier one deck. Originally conceived of as the "fixed" Necropotence, Phyrexian Arena has never lived up to the legacy of the original Best Card Drawing Engine in the History of **Magic** (tm). But in a deck like Josh's, Phyrexian Arena seems quite strong. Complimented with Consume Spirit, Phyrexian Arena's drawback is lessened, while as an enchantment, it is yet another card that survives a Death Cloud. In a deck like this one, Phyrexian Arena's continued work post-Death Cloud helps the deck re-establish its mana base while the opponent is forced to topdeck lands the old fashioned way.

Maybe the coolest measure of this deck, and how different it is from what was expected, is to compare it against the field, to look at its *lands*, in relation to everybody else's.



A tier one card at last?

The Top 10 Lands that made 2004 Champs Top 8

Card	Top 10 Position by Deck	Position Number Overall	Number of Copies	Number of Decks
Forest	1	1	2228	203

Blinkmoth Nexus	2	3	656	199
Great Furnace	3	4	703	191
Seat of the Synod	4	5	716	182
Vault of Whispers	5	6	678	179
Glimmervoid	6	15	298	136
Darksteel Citadel	7	22	299	99
Mountain	8	24	919	96
Island	9	25	837	91
Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	10	27	88	88

Josh's Swamps fell behind not only these cards, but Tree of Tales, too! Can you believe that more decks ran Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers than basic Swamp?

BDM and I thought that there would be a six-way tie for the most popular cards in the Champs deck lists (Arcbound Worker, Arcbound Ravager, Disciple of the Vault, Frogmite, Seat of the Synod, and Vault of Whispers), but apparently we underrated the popularity of green. Forests led both in frequency and in the number of decks that played them; there were all kinds of green decks that did well, after all. Blinkmoth Nexus is of course played in decks from Vial Affinity to the one we are looking at today. The big surprise, though, is Great Furnace. It is many times played behind the other artifact lands in Vial Affinity decks... we forgot that Red Decks like the Great Furnace too, for their Shrapnel Blasts and Furnace Dragons.

In case you were wondering, the second most popular card at 2004 Champs was Eternal Witness (not surprising given the popularity of Forest and that it is green's best creature). There were 574 Oxidizes in all sideboards but only 345 Oxidizes in all main decks; nearly twice as many decks sideboarded Oxidize than played it straight up (which probably helps to explain Affinity's continued success).

All in all, I think that Josh Sandler's deck is a great starting point for what might be one of the dominant decks of the next year of Standard. With a strong game against Affinity, and a card, in Death Cloud, that can single-handedly erase any advantage that Tooth and Nail can muster, this deck will walk into any tournament on better than even ground. If I were to make some changes to this listing, it would be to remove Persecute and Sensei's Divining Top from the main deck. Persecute is an all-star against some decks, but completely irrelevant against Affinity and decidedly sub-par against Tooth and Nail when compared with Cranial Extraction. Despite Adrian Sullivan's recent comments to the contrary – and Top 8 performance in Wisconsin – I don't think that Sensei's Divining Top is a particularly good constructed card. That said, not only did it appear in Josh's mono-black deck, but in numerous successful decks throughout the 2004 Champs. Defending New York State Champion Jay Mangold played Sensei's Divining Top in his Tooth and Nail deck, and Utah's State Champ (also with Tooth and Nail) liked the Top so much that he would cut his fourth Oxidize in order to play the maximum copies. The jury is still out.

In place of these cards, I would like to see Horobi, Death's Wail main deck. As mentioned before, it is one of the most efficient offensive creatures in the current Standard, as well as being one of the best

cards overall against what remains the format's best deck.

Up Next: Pro Tour Columbus and the Last Chance Qualifier

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