

Two Tournaments, One Deck, One Card Particular

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The sad fact is not that Affinity seems to be the best deck in every format from *Mirrodin* Block Constructed to Standard to Extended, but that a disturbing number of players aren't approaching it correctly. When you have a deck of such sheer power, such boundless *forgiveness*, as Affinity, not playing it yourself can be thought of as a handicap (in making a dissenting archetype choice, you are simply denying yourself the best tools for the job of winning a tournament). That said, it is one thing to object to playing Affinity -- there are certainly other viable decks -- but it is another thing entirely to handicap yourself once you have already chosen the dark path of artifice by not playing the basic cards that everyone else has.

Before I get too far ahead of myself, here are the Top 4 decks from last week's Columbus Last Chance Qualifier:

Bryn Kenney



Main Deck 60 cards

10 Forest
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers
4 Urza's Mine
4 Urza's Power Plant
4 Urza's Tower

23 lands

1 Darksteel Colossus
1 Duplicant
4 Eternal Witness
1 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker
1 Mephidross Vampire
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
4 Solemn Simulacrum
1 Sundering Titan
1 Triskelion
3 Viridian Shaman

21 creatures

3 Oblivion Stone
2 Reap and Sow
1 Rude Awakening
2 Sensei's Divining Top
4 Sylvan Scrying
4 Tooth and Nail

16 other spells

Sideboard

1 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
1 Leonin Abunas
2 Naturalize
3 Oxidize
1 Platinum Angel
3 Plow Under
3 Relic Barrier
1 Rude Awakening

15 sideboard cards



Main Deck

60 cards

10 Forest
12 Island

22 lands

4 Eternal Witness
2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
4 Solemn Simulacrum
4 Viridian Shaman

18 creatures

3 Condescend
4 Echoing Truth
4 Mana Leak
2 Rude Awakening
3 Thirst for Knowledge
4 Vedalken Shackles

20 other spells

Sideboard

2 Bribery
2 Hinder
4 Oxidize
3 Tel-Jilad Justice
4 Troll Ascetic

15 sideboard cards



Main Deck

60 cards

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

20 lands

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

25 creatures

4 Aether Vial
4 Chromatic Sphere
3 Cranial Plating
4 Thoughtcast

15 other spells

Sideboard

1 Glimmervoid
3 Moriok Rigger
4 Oxidize
3 Terror
4 Viridian Shaman

15 sideboard cards

**Main Deck**

60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Aether Vial
2 Darksteel Citadel	4 Chromatic Sphere
2 Glimmervoid	4 Cranial Plating
4 Great Furnace	3 Electrostatic Bolt
4 Seat of the Synod	4 Thoughtcast
4 Vault of Whispers	
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20 lands	19 other spells

4 Arcbound Ravager	
4 Arcbound Worker	
3 Atog	
4 Disciple of the Vault	
4 Frogmite	
2 Moriok Rigger	
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21 creatures	

Sideboard

1 Darksteel Citadel	
1 Electrostatic Bolt	
3 Engineered Explosives	
1 Moriok Rigger	
3 Relic Barrier	
3 Somber Hoverguard	
3 Terror	
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15 sideboard cards	

As you can see, fully half of the PT Columbus invitations were taken by, surprise surprise, Ravager Affinity. More than that, they were taken by decks with Aether Vial. Once upon a time, I thought that it was okay to play different kinds of Affinity decks. I no longer think that. The more I watch this deck play out, the more obvious it is to me that not playing Aether Vial once you have already decided to play an Affinity deck is strictly wrong. What are you going to play instead? Ornithopter? Ornithopter gets in with Cranial Plating once in a while and that can be exciting, but no one lives in fear of Ornithopter. Consider the reverse: Anyone who says that they don't care when the opponent opens on a Darksteel Citadel and Aether Vial is just lying. It was the best opening play in *Mirrodin* Block, the most consistent play in Standard, and just finished proving itself as the kind of play that can totally reverse a nigh-unwinnable matchup in the finals of an *Extended Pro Tour*!



I detailed in a previous column, *Across the Room, Across the Ocean*, some of the reasons you might want to play Aether Vial. But more than its speed, more than its ability to trick the opponent and force mistakes, I now have another reason: Aether Vial fixes your colored mana. That's it. Affinity is the most powerful deck. It is perhaps held in check only by its greatest advantage: artifact lands. The artifact lands make the Affinity mechanic go. They make Thoughtcast cost one mana and Frogmite

cost less; more than that, they power up non-Affinity cards like Arcbound Ravager and Disciple of the Vault. Our resident development guru, Aaron Forsythe, even pointed to the artifact lands as the "real culprits" behind the deck. Though the artifact lands are the problem *behind* the deck, they are also its greatest limitation.

The artifact lands are clunky on the colors. You can't really play more than four copies of any color-producing lands. You are limited to four, say, Great Furnaces. That is why it is foolish to do something like making a two-colored Affinity deck for purposes of "color consistency." It is actually *MORE* color consistent to play lots of colors and spread out the colored cards. Limiting yourself to not playing Thoughtcast, for instance, is pure folly. People rightly cringe when Thoughtcast is played for that lone blue in the midgame. We think of Kiki-Jiki as the Mirror Breaker, but methinks that Thoughtcast has quietly ended more games than any other spell in recent months.

That is not to say that the mana of a three- or even four-color Affinity deck is not a ponderous proposition. It is. You will see lots of hands with Great Furnace and Disciple of the Vault or Tree of Tales and AtoG. But that is where Aether Vial comes in!

I watched Pierre Canali play all weekend. As soon as Pierre locked his spot in the Top 8, I called this rookie as the eventual champion. He led the Pro Tour on Day One and ran through the Top 8, sweeping his worst matchup 3-0 in the finals. Most critics credit Canali's innovations to the Affinity deck -- those same changes that make it look much like a Dump Truck deck -- as the reasons he was able to do so well. It's hard enough to cast a regular colored spell, but Canali had cards like Meddling Mage supported by two lonely Ancient Dens. Do you think that he would have done so well without those Meddling Mages? Do you think they would have hit the table without Aether Vial?

Pierre Canali, PT Columbus '04 Champion

Pierre Canali



Main Deck

60 cards

2 Ancient Den
2 Blinkmoth Nexus
1 City of Brass
4 Darksteel Citadel
2 Glimmervoid
4 Seat of the Synod
4 Vault of Whispers

19 lands

4 Arcbound Ravager
4 Arcbound Worker
4 Disciple of the Vault
4 Frogmite
4 Meddling Mage
3 Myr Enforcer
3 Somber Hoverguard

26 creatures

4 Aether Vial
4 Chromatic Sphere
3 Cranial Plating
4 Thoughtcast

15 other spells

Sideboard

3 Cabal Therapy
3 Chill
1 City of Brass
3 Engineered Plague
3 Kami of Ancient Law
2 Seal of Removal

15 sideboard cards

Pierre's deck looks an awful lot like a basic Affinity deck that you might see in Standard or even Mirrodin Block. Besides Chris Pikula, Pierre didn't play a single non-Standard card in his Affinity deck. He could have played Shrapnel Blast in a format that is known for its speed. But he didn't. He saw the consistency of Aether Vial as a better choice than the potentially greater explosiveness of a quick kill spell. It's just like my Top 8 commentary partner Osyp Lebedowicz said... I can't believe that there are still Affinity players out there not playing Aether Vial in their Affinity decks.


Blatant self-promotion aside:

Speaking of the Top 8 commentary, the webcast hits the archives of Pro Tour-Columbus today. If you didn't get a chance to view the live webcast, I invite you to check it out.

End aside and back to Aether Vial.

Despite its complete and total dominance this past weekend, I don't know that Vial Affinity is a legitimate problem in the sense of Tolarian Academy or Necropotence. Affinity is quite beatable in Standard. It's the best deck, but every color besides white has excellent tools for Affinity containment (which is only fair, given that white used to have the single best anti-Affinity card). Moreover, Canali would be the first to tell you that he was a great beneficiary of everyone else being under-prepared for his archetype. He figured out how to beat Pernicious Deed, while the rest of the hate -- Energy Flux, Meltdown, Pulverize, even Powder Keg -- just didn't show up in great enough numbers to beat him. If players want to beat Affinity in Extended, they can. They just have to devote the space... something that few pros did this past weekend.

Aether Vial makes the best decks better. It gives them greater speed and smoothes out mana draws. We think of Aether Vial as an Affinity card, but it can go in many decks (once I heard about the White Weenie deck of Gabe Walls, Neil Reeves, and Jelger Wiegiersma, I thought about trying it with Aether Vial... too bad about that Pernicious Deed card). Columbus Top 8 competitor Olivier Ruel didn't play Aether Vial in his Red Army-style Goblin deck, but many other teams did. While most of Team TOGIT played Psychatog, a couple of their top players ran a b/R Goblin deck with Aether Vial:

Gerard Fabiano – Goblins		
Main Deck		Sideboard
61 cards		
4 Bloodstained Mire	4 AEther Vial	2 Flametongue Kavu
9 Mountain	4 Cabal Therapy	3 Fledgling Dragon
3 Rishadan Port	8 other spells	2 Powder Keg
4 Sulfurous Springs		4 Pyrostatic Pillar
2 Swamp		3 Terminate
		1 Wasteland
22 lands		15 sideboard cards
3 Goblin Goon		
3 Goblin Matron		
4 Goblin Piledriver		
3 Goblin Ringleader		
1 Goblin Sharpshooter		
4 Goblin Warchief		

4 Mogg Fanatic
4 Mogg Flunkies
1 Siege-Gang Commander
3 Skirk Prospector
1 Sparksmith

31 creatures

Note how a deck with a high number of two drops can really break Aether Vial. Turn one Aether Vial, turn two Mogg Flunkies (or Goblin Piledriver) plus a one-drop off the Vial, turn three Goblin Warchief plus another two-drop will pump a ridiculous amount of damage. In the worst-case scenario where the two-drops are "only" Mogg Flunkies, the opponent is looking at an attack for nine on turn three, and if they are both Goblin Piledrivers, we are talking about something on the order of 17 on turn three.

The Red Army-style Goblin decks have a lot of play, and Ruel's Burning Wishes humiliated opponents with plays like Reanimating their Akromas, as well as baffling the eventual champ through five games in the quarterfinals so the jury is still out. But for a beatdown Goblin deck? Aether Vial seems a lot better than Seething Song to me.

As sharks, we are all trying to get ahead. We try to get a line on the best tech, the secret tech, the next deck that will help us win FNM, PTQs, Regionals, and even premiere events. Sometimes we can identify a great card, add it to the deck we love, and come out ahead with the next generation. But we too often concentrate not enough about just not falling behind. If we want to succeed, we need to *hit*

***If we want to succeed,
we need to hit the
minimum...***

the minimum before we go reaching for that elusive next level. Just before last year's US Regionals, before Relic Barrier was re-released, before Aether Vial started dropping Uktabi Orangutans in a big way, Brian David-Marshall devoted an entire episode of this very column to Hirata Tatsuya's Affinity deck, specifically his sideboard. For Tatsuya, Seething Song and Furnace Dragon was tech, was brand new, was innovative. It led him to an admirable second place finish in his Kanto Regionals. But for everyone else, by the very next week, that sideboard combination became the minimum.

Want to qualify for the Pro Tour like Bezrukov and Day? Want to take it on your first try like Canali?

Don't bring a knife when you know you are walking into a gun fight. Don't be the guy with nothing more impressive than Shatter when everyone else is ready with Seething Song. If you want to get better, meet the minimum before you go running off... don't "tech out" your deck by cutting the best cards. Swim with the sharks but devour everyone else. Study and grow strong.

Next week: Phelddagrif

