

Scott Wills

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After last week's excursion into the world of *Unhinged* we're back to *Champions Limited* again this week. After dealing with the blue-white archetype, and the various types of green decks, this week I'm going to be tackling the last two colours on the wheel: black and red. Fortunately these two colours go very well together in this block and they're becoming one of the more favoured combinations to draft so I've got plenty to work with.

There's a weekly show on TV here in the UK in which two presenters guide a couple through the process of buying a house. Its title comes from the age-old question: "*What are the three most important things to consider when purchasing property?*" The name of the show and the answer? "*Location, Location, Location*".

Why is this relevant here? Quite simply because I believe there's a similar answer to "*What are the three most important things to consider when drafting Champions of Kamigawa?*"

"Aggression, aggression, aggression"

Going Aggro

Why is this so important in this format? Quite simply because the high number of two-power two-drops in *Champions* means that you can find yourself very far behind your opponent if you fail to do anything relevant on the second and especially the third turn of a game. Many games see opening starts like "Turn two Wicked Akuba, turn three Nezumi Ronin" or "Turn two Kami of Ancient Law, turn three Ronin Houndmaster". If you've lost the coin flip and you don't do anything on your second and third turn you've probably already lost. Missed land-drops can be equally painful unless you have enough low-costed creatures or spells to be able to weather the storm until you start drawing into some lands.

The importance of the good two-drops can't be understated. There have been times when I've taken a two-drop over a better, but more expensive card just because of the need to have some. You'll see the effect this has on the red and black pick orders but I thought it was worth stressing this point strongly as I'm sure some of the positions might look a little odd to some people.

Black-red is an archetype that functions best when it's at its fastest. In previous blocks we've often had a red, or occasionally black 'finisher'; i.e. cards like Wave of Indifference and Demoralize which allow you to force through those last few points of damage. These cards let you press home your attack when being unable to do so might mean losing the game. On initial inspection it seemed like there wasn't much in this set that offered this ability. Sure, there was Uneathly Blizzard but, like the aforementioned cards, it has the problem that it had no impact on the game until you actually needed its effect.



There are couple of cards that were dismissed as close to unplayable initially but that are now frequently seeing play in this archetype. Kami of Fire's Roar and Kami of the Waning Moon are the two cards in question and both of these provide a limited evasion effect whilst at the same time actually giving you another body to attack with. They're obviously superior to Unearthly Blizzard because of this and both of them can give you some solid attacking options in the mid-late game where you might otherwise have sat there unable to get through your opponent's blockers.

Both of these cards do require a reasonable focus on Arcane or Spirits and that is usually the way that the better black-red decks end up being drafted. There are a couple of solid Soulshift guys in black and both Glacial Ray and Soulless Revival have nice cheap Splice costs, so shifting the focus of your black-red deck in this way will give you advantages in multiple areas.

Between black and red you have a number of solid two-drops, the majority of which are Spirits. Nezumi Cutthroat is the pick of the bunch with Wicked Akuba trailing just behind. Cruel Deceiver, Hearth Kami and Ember-fist Zuberu are all playable too and all are Spirits and interact nicely with Soulshift as a result. Ronin Houndmaster is your best common third turn play but both Nezumi Ronin and Villainous Ogre are respectable as they deal damage quickly when not blocked and neither can be taken out by an opposing one-power monster.

If you do end up with a lot of Spirits and Arcane spells then both Scuttling Death and Soul of Magma make good choices for the top end of your curve. Scuttling Death is a great card in its own right, but Soul of Magma requires a little more work to make the most of it. It's not difficult to use its ability to get a 'free' kill by triggering it twice in one turn, which is good enough, but it becomes really excellent when you can combine it with some of the other red damage dealers such as Frostwielder, Initiate of Blood or Honden of Infinite Rage. Best of all is doubling it up with a second Soul of Magma as together they make every Arcane/Spirit spell you cast do something really unfair. I don't think I've ever lost a game when I've untapped with two Souls of Magma in play.



Rating the commons

Just as I did for blue-white I'm going to rank the black-red creatures and the black-red spells separately. Once again I'll stress that this is a pick order only for this particular combination. Some picks will definitely differ if you're drafting either colour in combination with something else.

Creatures:

Nezumi Cutthroat
Scuttling Death
Ronin Houndmaster
Wicked Akuba
Frostwielder
Gibbering Kami
Kami of Fire's Roar
Cruel Deceiver
Soul of Magma

Kami of the Waning Moon
Nezumi Ronin
Brutal Deceiver
Hearth Kami
Ember-Fist Zubera
Villainous Ogre
Cursed Ronin
Ashen-Skin Zubera
Sokenzan Bruiser
Battle-Mad Ronin
Akki Avalanchers
Deathcurse Ogre
Rag Dealer
Akki Rockspeaker

Nezumi Cutthroat is definitely your best pick, by a fair margin. You'll be happy to play as many of these little guys as you can get basically. A two-power two-drop that has built in evasion is pretty much unheard of in limited formats and you should definitely be picking him ahead of the other creatures.

The split between Ronin Houndmaster and Scuttling Death is a lot closer. I prefer the Scuttling Death as it can often put your opponent in a position where they can't avoid trading two guys for it. The Soulshift ability is also nice as it allows you to 'chain' down to your Gibbering Kami and then to a second Spirit when the Kami dies. The Houndmaster is excellent on turn three and still fine later in the game too but you have other options for your third turn play if you don't get one.

You don't normally want multiple Kami of the Waning Moons but I rank it higher than the other three drops simply because the others (Nezumi Ronin, Villainous Ogre, Brutal Deceiver) are all fairly interchangeable and you can usually pick up one or more of them comparatively late in a draft. You do need either Kami of the Waning Moon or Kami of Fire's Roar in order to be able to force through additional damage throughout the game. Both of these cards make it difficult for your opponent to predict when they'll be in a position to block and when they won't, and that can throw off their math considerably.

Spells:

Glacial Ray
Befoul
Yamabushi's Flame
Rend Flesh
Rend Spirit
Devouring Greed
Devouring Rage
Soulless Revival
Pull Under
Uncontrollable Anger
Waking Nightmare
Distress
Yamabushi's Storm
Crushing Pain
Lava Spike
Unearthly Blizzard
Midnight Covenant
Unnatural Speed

Stone Rain
Desperate Ritual

Glacial Ray is the best spell as it's cheap, efficient, Arcane, and has an excellent Splice cost too. Befoul and Yamabushi's Flame are a little ahead of the two Rends simply because they deal with the majority of creatures, instead of merely half of them. Rend Flesh definitely gets the nod over Rend Spirit simply because it has the Arcane sub-type. Being able to trigger one of your creature's abilities and being able to Splice a relevant spell onto it makes it a better card.

Rating the two Devouring cards is difficult as they're obviously very dependent upon the number of Spirits in your deck. In general, early in the draft I'd pick them as listed, but their ranking could go up and down as the creatures that will be played are chosen. Devouring Greed especially has received a lot of hype and I think this gets over-drafted a little right now. I've seen people run it in decks with only five or six Spirits and that just isn't correct. There's no guarantee you'll be able to keep your Spirits alive as you may well need them to get involved in combat, and then ripping your Greed when you've got at most one Spirit in play is a pretty weak draw.

If you do get the deck with ten or more Spirits though – and that is usually where your priorities should be – Devouring Greed is excellent and probably jumps ahead of the two Rends. Devouring Rage is occasionally better simply because it deals more damage but it's dependence on you having an unblocked attacker is its Achilles heel (at least in this particular archetype).

Uncontrollable Anger is one of those cards I seem to like more than most. In black-red your opponent frequently throws their 2/2s in front of your Nezumi Ronin and Villainous Ogres on turn four and dropping an Anger to save your guy then leaves you with a very powerful threat on the table. Even if they do have an answer straight away you still rarely lose any card advantage as they use two cards (the dead blocker and their answer) to deal with your two.

Distress and Yamabushi's Storm are two cards that I don't normally like to play main deck but they get a nod as they can be useful sideboard cards in some situations. Anything below these two on the list though I wouldn't normally consider playable. Unearthly Blizzard is a possibility if you do have an aggressive deck and you have no way to gain evasion or win from any sort of stall situation. I would try to avoid it whenever possible though.

Merging the creatures and spells will show you how the creatures compare to the spells. Here's how I personally would rate the top ten black-red commons:

Top Ten

1. Glacial Ray
2. Befoul
3. Yamabushi's Flame
4. Nezumi Cutthroat
5. Rend Flesh
6. Scuttling Death
7. Rend Spirit
8. Devouring Greed

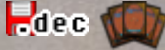


- 9. Ronin Houndmaster
- 10. Wicked Akuba

Like all pick orders, a lot of the rankings here are a little dependant on what you've already got. Paying close attention to your mana curve is important and will frequently affect what card you draft. In this colour combination it is important to get off to a good start so you should ideally have 4-6 plays on turn two with a similar amount for turn three. You always want to come out of the blocks fast with this archetype and you need to modify your picks sometimes to make sure you have a deck capable of doing that.

Here's a 3-0 draft deck from a recent MTGO draft as one example of what I believe a good black-red draft deck should look like:

Champions of Kamigawa MTGO Draft



Main Deck
40 cards

<p>7 Mountain</p> <p>10 Swamp</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>17 lands</p>	<p>2 Cruel Deceiver</p> <p>1 Cursed Ronin</p> <p>1 Gibbering Kami</p> <p>1 Kami of the Waning Moon</p> <p>1 Nezumi Cutthroat</p> <p>1 Nezumi Graverobber</p> <p>1 Nezumi Ronin</p> <p>1 Pain Kami</p> <p>1 Ronin Houndmaster</p> <p>2 Scuttling Death</p> <p>1 Villainous Ogre</p> <p>2 Wicked Akuba</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>15 creatures</p>	<p>1 Devouring Rage</p> <p>1 Glacial Ray</p> <p>1 Rend Flesh</p> <p>2 Soulless Revival</p> <p>1 Swallowing Plague</p> <p>1 Uncontrollable Anger</p> <p>1 Waking Nightmare</p> <hr style="width: 50%; margin: 5px 0;"/> <p>8 other spells</p>
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Next week I'll be kicking off the first of what will hopefully be numerous *Champions* draft-pick articles. So, as has always been the case, here's the pick I'll be discussing next week. Please take the time to let me know your pick from this pack via the poll at the end. Remember, please choose your pick solely based on the quality of the cards, not on how much they might be worth. Just pretend like you're playing in a draft where you are playing to win all of the cards that were opened.

It's a triple *Champions of Kamigawa* booster draft and you open the following first pack:



Instant

End the turn. (Remove all spells and abilities on the stack from the game, including this card. The player whose turn it is discards down to his or her maximum hand size. Damage wears off, and "this turn" and "until end of turn" effects end.)

—Scott M. Fischer

Sorcery

Search your library for a legendary creature card, reveal it, and put it into your hand. Then shuffle your library.

"When the kami attacked the monks' sacred shrine, a mournful toll for help echoed through the forest. Thus began the Battle of Suk, which would last six years."
—Great Battles of Kamigawa

—Dany Orizio

Enchantment

1 ♀, Sacrifice a creature: Blood Rites deals 2 damage to target creature or player.

"The threat of the kami was made worse by the blood rituals of the ogres, who freed terrifying oni to invade Kamigawa unkindred."
—Observations of the Kami War

—Pablo Ferez

Honden of Cleansing Fire

Legendary Enchantment — Shrine

At the beginning of your upkeep, you gain 2 life for each Shrine you control.

To the sorrows of all, its fire was turned toward those who worshipped it.

—Greg Staples

Scuttling Death

Creature — Spirit

Sacrifice Scuttling Death: Target creature gets -1/-1 until end of turn.

Soulshift 4 (When this is put into a graveyard from play, you may return target Spirit card with converted mana cost 4 or less from your graveyard to your hand.)

—Thomas M. Bata

Desperate Ritual

Instant — Arcane

Add 3 to your mana pool.

Splice onto Arcane 1 (As you play an Arcane spell, you may reveal this card from your hand and pay its splice cost. If you do, add this card's effects to that spell.)

—David L. Rind

Floating-Dream Zuberu

Creature — Zuberu Spirit

When Floating-Dream Zuberu is put into a graveyard from play, draw a card for each Zuberu put into a graveyard from play this turn.

When the Honden of Seeing Winds was forgotten, its attendants swarmed Kamigawa to uncover mortal secrets.

—Shishiraru

Kitsune Blademaster

Creature — Fox Samurai

First strike

Bushido 1 (When this blocks or becomes blocked, it gets +1/+1 until end of turn.)

Those kitsune trained in the blade preferred to fight with a blade-catching jute in the off hand, buying them just enough time to deliver the first deadly cut.

—Keith Garlick

Sakura-Tribe Elder

Creature — Snake Shaman

Sacrifice Sakura-Tribe Elder: Search your library for a basic land card, put that card into play tapped, then shuffle your library.

There were no tombstones in onchi territory. Slain warriors were buried with a tree sapling, so they would become a part of the forest after death.

—Carl Critchlow

Midnight Covenant

Enchant Creature

Enchanted creature has "♣: This creature gets +1/+1 until end of turn."

"Not all mortals fought the kami. The ogres revered the oni, while some humans made pacts based upon empty promises."
—The History of Kamigawa

—Neil Spicer

Ronin Houndmaster

Creature — Human Samurai

Haste

Bushido 1 (When this blocks or becomes blocked, it gets +1/+1 until end of turn.)

Some samurai fall so far out of grace that only dogs would keep them company.

—Edward P. Beal, Jr.

Pious Kitsune

Creature — Fox Cleric

At the beginning of your upkeep, put a devotion counter on Pious Kitsune. Then if a creature named Eight-and-a-Half-Tails is in play, you gain 1 life for each devotion counter on Pious Kitsune.

♣, Remove a devotion counter from Pious Kitsune: You gain 1 life.

—Anthony S. Waters

Mystic Restraints

Mothrider Samurai

Order of the Sacred Bell



Which card do you draft?

- Time Stop
- Time of Need
- Blood Rites
- Honden of Cleansing Fire
- Scuttling Death
- Desperate Ritual
- Floating Dream Zuberu
- Kitsune Blademaster
- Sakura-Tribe Elder
- Midnight Covenant
- Ronin Houndmaster
- Pious Kitsune
- Mystic Restraints
- Mothrider Samurai
- Order of the Sacred Bell

