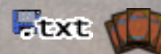


Mike Flores

Wednesday, November 24, 2004

**W**hat do these decks have in common? Look closely:

## Michael Strunk



### Main Deck

60 cards

18 Mountain  
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep  

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19 lands  
  
4 Arc-Slogger  
3 Kumano, Master Yamabushi  
4 Slith Firewalker  
4 Solemn Simulacrum  

---

15 creatures

3 Chrome Mox  
2 Demolish  
4 Electrostatic Bolt  
4 Molten Rain  
2 Pulse of the Forge  
4 Seething Song  
3 Shock  
4 Stone Rain  

---

26 other spells

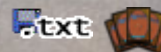
### Sideboard

4 Detonate  
3 Hearth Kami  
1 Pulse of the Forge  
4 Shatter  
3 Zo-Zu the Punisher  

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15 sideboard cards

## Kris Goding



### Main Deck

60 cards

3 Blinkmoth Nexus  
18 Island  
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge  
3 Stalking Stones  

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25 lands  
  
3 Keiga, the Tide Star  
2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror  

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5 creatures

3 Annul  
3 Condescend  
3 Echoing Truth  
4 Hinder  
4 Mana Leak  
2 Oblivion Stone  
3 Relic Barrier  
4 Thirst for Knowledge  
4 Vedalken Shackles  

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30 other spells

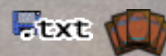
### Sideboard

1 Annul  
3 Bribery  
3 Jushi Apprentice  
3 Last Word  
4 March of the Machines  
1 Relic Barrier  

---

15 sideboard cards

## Alex Nastetsky



### Main Deck

60 cards

3 Blinkmoth Nexus

1 Eiganjo Castle

16 Plains

---

20 lands

4 Auriok Champion

3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda

4 Lantern Kami

4 Leonin Skyhunter

4 Samurai of the Pale Curtain

4 Suntail Hawk

---

23 creatures

4 Bonesplitter

2 Chrome Mox

4 Glorious Anthem

4 Raise the Alarm

3 Roar of the Kha

---

17 other spells

### Sideboard

3 Arrest

3 Ethereal Haze

4 Otherworldly Journey

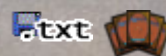
4 Purge

1 Roar of the Kha

---

15 sideboard cards

## Adrian Sullivan



### Main Deck

60 cards

2 City of Brass

11 Forest

7 Mountain

1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers

1 Pinecrest Ridge

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22 lands

4 Birds of Paradise

2 Duplicant

4 Eternal Witness

3 Hearth Kami

4 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker

3 Rootrunner

4 Commune with Nature

4 Magma Jet

2 Sensei's Divining Top

---

10 other spells

### Sideboard

3 Arc-Slogger

3 Cranial Extraction

1 Duplicant

3 Electrostatic Bolt

3 Plow Under

1 Rootrunner

1 Swamp

---

15 sideboard cards

4 Sakura-Tribe Elder  
4 Viridian Shaman

---

28 creatures

## 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

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15 sideboard cards

I don't know if it counts to say that "none of these decks are Affinity", but I guess that is technically accurate. All of these non-Affinity Standard decks also did well recently, but not all of them are State or Provincial Champions, even if most of them are finalists, at least. Bryn Kenny's deck, the only one not drawn from a Champs Top 8 link, is especially special because we already looked at it back in Two Tournaments, One Deck, One Card in Particular. The weekend of PT Columbus, Bryn not only picked up his first Pro Points by way of the Columbus Last Chance Qualifier, but, according to the Professional Events Services website, he also fought past 102 opponents to finish in the Top 8 of the \$2000 PT Columbus Amateur Challenge with *exactly the same deck*. Well, not exactly... Between the LCQ and the \$2000 PT Columbus Amateur Challenge, Bryn cut Boseiju, Who Shelters All from his sideboard for the fourth Plow Under.

If all you want is a good deck list that doesn't automatically pack four copies of Aether Vial, Arcbound Ravager, and Disciple of the Vault, all of these decks are tournament proven... but that doesn't exactly make them unique.

So what ties them together? The above decks casually play cards like:



These lands are for almost all intents and purposes much better than their corresponding basic lands, more so than almost any lands to have seen play since the original dual lands back in Revised. If these cards aren't "strictly better" than basic lands, they are about as close as R&D is going to get for the foreseeable future. When we say that one card is strictly better than another, we mean that for its cost, its size, whatever, one card is empirically superior to another by some specific metric without giving anything else away. For example, both Suq'Ata Lancer and Ronin Houndmaster are vastly superior to Gray Ogre. All three creatures are 2/2 for 2, but Suq'Ata Lancer and Ronin Houndmaster have Haste, not to mention a relevant combat ability each. We can't really say that Ronin Houndmaster is strictly better than Suq'Ata Lancer, even though if they ran into each other, Ronin Houndmaster would walk away if he initiated the brawl. There are certain times that Flanking is relevant where Bushido is not, even if it seems that Bushido is relevant twice as often. By these rules, we cannot say that Goblin Warchief is *strictly* better than Goblin Chariot, even though we intuit that it is, in fact, superior.



The difference between a card that is strictly better than another and one that is just usually better is really easy to see with certain lands. Take basic Mountain and Taiga. It ain't hard to see that one of them is vastly better than the other; twice as good, as a matter of fact. Now compare basic Mountain to Shivan Oasis. For most intents and purposes, Shivan Oasis is also vastly superior to basic Mountain, especially in a deck that wants early Birds of Paradise *and* to pay the 2 on Kiki Jiki, Mirror Breaker. Shivan Oasis would have made a fine addition to Adrian Sullivan's Wisconsin State Championship deck... except that it comes into play tapped, and therefore -- especially in a deck with only 22 lands -- has rather poor synergy with first turn curve components like Birds of Paradise and Commune with Nature. The synergy is so poor, in fact, that Adrian chose to match his singleton copy of Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers with a singleton copy of the frankly abominable Pinecrest Ridge in Shivan Oasis's stead. We again intuit that a card that starts a turn tapped once is much better than a card that starts a turn tapped many times, but again, it is impossible to say that Shivan Oasis is *strictly* better than Pinecrest Ridge, for requirements exactly like the ones we see in Adrian's deck. When we decide a card is strictly better or worse than another, we do not typically take into account outside interactions. It would be foolish to say that Taiga isn't strictly better than basic Mountain

because it can be hit by a Wasteland... that would be like saying that Great Furnace is strictly better than basic Mountain because it doesn't set off Warmth.



So, back to the decks. When I say these decks "casually" play certain cards, I mean that each of the above players tosses in a lone copy of a Legendary Land that, for the most part, has no strategic value in his deck. That is, for the most part, Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep is better than basic Mountain. It does exactly the same stuff that basic Mountain does... it counts as a land drop, makes exactly  $\{2\}$ , doesn't come into play tapped, doesn't cost you any life when you use it, doesn't give your opponent 1/1 spirit creatures, or disappear. It's better, fine. But unlike lands that make lots of different colors of mana, or accelerate out double mana, or search through your library, Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep doesn't really do much for Florida's 2004 Champion.

Sure, a third turn Kumano straight into the Red Zone after a first turn Slith Firewalker, second turn Stone Rain, and third turn Seething Song is incredibly sexy... but is a haste-driven Master Yamabushi really the play you want to bank on? In

some cases, the interactions imply strange draws. Like Alex Nastetsky's deck really wants Isamaru, Hound of Konda -- its only Legendary Creature -- on turn one. But it strategically doesn't want to activate Eiganjo Castle on turn two, even if it *is* generating short-term card advantage by using its Legendary Land. None of the decks I listed play more than one copy, and the only deck of the bunch that can actually search up a Legendary Land -- Bryn Kenney's -- would rarely, if ever, want to do so... especially since it plays the fewest Legendary Creatures of any of the decks, a card that it can't technically cast.

For the most part, the interactions that the Legendary Lands provide are positive ones, even if they are low percentage. Most of the time, it doesn't matter if you play your first turn Birds of Paradise with a Forest or an Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers... what matters is that you have an untapped green source that doesn't cost you a life and will untap reliably the next turn. That said, there are certain things, both good and bad, that have to be considered for even casual inclusion of the *Champions of Kamigawa* Legendary Lands:

How likely is it that the Legend Rule will screw me?

This is probably the most important question for this exercise. For example, in Kris Goding's Top 8, there was one additional Control Blue deck, as well as a U/G deck that also played Minamo, School at Water's Edge. Right now, the most likely non-basic blue source is probably going to be Seat of the Synod, so this is less of an issue than it might be in certain formats, certain metagames. But nevertheless, the Legend Rule is something that players will have to take into consideration.

If you are playing Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers for the small percentage of the time that it will save your Kiki Jiki, Mirror Breaker from an Electrostatic Bolt, you've got to be prepared for that same small chance that its presence will give your opponent the opportunity to Wasteland you... You certainly don't want to bank on this land as your only early green source in the mirror match.

Speaking of Wasteland, how likely is it that you will face non-basic land hate?

In Standard, there is no Wasteland (thank goodness), but this small question implies why we don't see the *Champions of Kamigawa* lands splashed as casually in Extended. The White Weenie deck that got so much attention in Columbus played Isamaru, Hound of Konda just like Maryland's Nastetsky...

but they didn't want to play Eiganjo Castle just to give Red Deck Wins target practice... There was plenty of that going on without the help.

On the plus side, how likely is it that I face off against this guy?



One of the best reasons **to** play the *Champions of Kamigawa* Legendary Lands is the fact that the opponent might have a relevant Legend by the name of Death's Wail. Horobi is the kind of creature that will utterly destroy a deck with no kill, that plans on giving a bird a battleaxe to win the game. In this case, Eiganjo Castle will be happy for even the small percentage chance of granting the opponent's 4/4 a damage prevention shield in order to get its own flyer through for three.

Once in a blue moon, it becomes debatable that a particular Legendary Land is even the right call in a deck. In our work on the mono-blue control archetype, my group did not include Minamo, School at Water's Edge. The reason is that we relied heavily on Vedalken Shackles for permanent control. Given the speed of the format every Island is relevant, and as fast as you can play it.

That said, Minamo, School at Water's Edge is getting more and more advocates moving forward -- primarily recent PTQ winner Joshua Ravitz -- but not for the reasons you might expect. After winning Game One, Brian-David Marshall keeps running into decks with four Boils and four Chokes in the sideboard, powerful cards that give blue mages fits, but have no power over this particular Legendary Land. Moreover, we keep beating opposing green decks with a lot of must-counter spells via pre-emptive Bribery. Minamo, School at Water's Edge is even more exciting when it is untapping the opponent's Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker than when it is readying Keiga, the Tide Star for a block that the opponent should have seen coming.

*Champions of Kamigawa's* Legendary Lands are strong tools that can give decks of all five colors a small edge over their basic counterparts. Their automatic inclusion in decks, even as singletons, is something that we might not be able to assume in future formats. Just as in Extended, where Wasteland Splash Damage prevents their inclusion, shifting dominant archetypes will demand new cost benefit analyses. It may be all well and good to



run Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers when everyone else has Tree of Tales, but what about a few months from now when you can expect more mirrors. Do you want to be caught with Okina as your only green source, staring at nothing but Urzatron? For that matter, do you want to concede Okina superiority by not playing it yourself? These are the questions you must ask yourself when making even a small, single-card decision in a future deck.

... And I bet you thought getting some non-Affinity options was going to make everything all better.

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