

Scott Wills

Monday, November 29, 2004

Now that everyone has settled into drafting *Champions of Kamigawa*, I'm going to be going through a draft pick or two so you can all see how your opinions match up against everyone else. The first of these was presented last week so I hope you were all paying attention! For those that missed last week's article here's the pick I'll be discussing today:





Not a bad selection to choose from certainly. There are good cards in most of the colours; even the rare and the uncommons are playable here. In my mind, there's nothing in this pack that immediately jumps out and says "Pick me coach!" but that will hopefully make for an interesting discussion. The reader poll reflected this as well, with five different cards getting around 10% or better. Here's how the readers saw it:

Which card do you draft?		
Sakura-Tribe Elder	2554	23.4%
Kitsune Blademaster	2228	20.4%
Honden of Cleansing Fire	1183	10.9%
Time Stop	1045	9.6%
Blood Rites	1041	9.6%
Ronin Houndmaster	747	6.9%
Scuttling Death	432	4.0%
Time of Need	428	3.9%
Mothrider Samurai	357	3.3%
Mystic Restraints	337	3.1%
Order of the Sacred Bell	183	1.7%
Midnight Covenant	134	1.2%

Floating Dream Zuberá	99	0.9%
Desperate Ritual	85	0.8%
Pious Kitsune	44	0.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10897</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

## Thinning the Field

As this is still a fairly new set I'll spend a paragraph or two talking about the cards that I would instantly remove from consideration.

Desperate Ritual is the most obvious of these. One shot mana accelerators are rarely worth playing in limited; Pentad Prism was the most worthy in recent sets but this was largely because it provided acceleration and colour fixing whilst simultaneously speeding up your Affinity cards and giving you an artifact you could later sacrifice for a useful effect. Desperate Ritual is far less flexible and you should not be spending a card just to generate an extra mana for one turn.

Pious Kitsune is just far too weak for its casting cost. A power/toughness of 1/2 means it'll never be particularly useful in combat and its ability can only realistically gain you one life a turn, which isn't enough to make a big impact on the game. If it cost just one mana it might be okay (even then, perhaps not) but at three it's just way, way too expensive.

Midnight Covenant is a card I might consider playing in a mono-black deck but in general it's not something you want to include in your decks. Creature enchantments typically have to be very powerful – such as Rancor or Armadillo Cloak – or function as a combat trick – such as Indomitable Will or Uncontrollable Anger – in order for them to be considered decent. Midnight Covenant does nothing unless you pump mana into it turn after turn and because you can't play it as an Instant it'll never function as a combat trick either. Playing it as a Sorcery leaves the enchanted creature vulnerable to both bounce and removal before you even get a chance for the Covenant to impact the game.

Time of Need is a perfectly playable card but only if you happen to have already drafted a target for it. The powerful Legends tend to get drafted very highly so if you haven't opened one in this pack it's unlikely you'll get one passed to you. If you've drafted a Dragon or Kumano, Master Yamabushi then by all means go ahead and draft that Time of Need highly as most of the time it will function as a duplicate of that Legend. There'll be times when you might draw the Time of Need *and* the Legend you want to search for, but usually the power of the Legend will make up for the fact that you've got a dead card in hand. Time of Need is a fine card; just make sure you have a target before setting your sights on this card.

The last card to get cut immediately is Floating-Dream Zuberá. Some of the other choices in the pack such as Blood Rites vs. Ronin Houndmaster are worth talking a bit more about but Mystic Restraints should definitely be drafted ahead of the Zuberá and as such there's no need to include the Zuberá in the list of possibles.

## Same-colour choices

There are a few cards in this pack that require you to choose between two cards of the same colour. If you wanted to draft blue, should you take the Time Stop or the Mystic Restraints? Is the Blademaster, the Mothrider or the Honden the better white pick?

These selections are all worth discussing a little more as it will provide a little insight into card evaluation and into the things you need to think about even this early in a draft.

## Time Stop vs. Mystic Restraints

Here we basically have expensive removal vs. expensive Counterspell and/or trick. I've played Time Stop a couple of times in a draft and although it is pretty expensive what has impressed me about it is its flexibility. Sometimes you use it just to take a virtual "Time Walk"; you just cast it during your opponent's upkeep and they don't get to draw a card, they don't get to cast spells and they don't get to attack you. They do get to untap all their creatures though so they might be able to block next turn but sometimes you'll be racing their ground guys with your Flyers and that extra turn's worth of attacking is all you need. Time Stop can also function as a simple Counterspell. Cast it in response to an opponent's spell and the turn ends before they get a chance to resolve whatever it was they were casting. You can also use it as a simple Fog. There'll be times where you don't want to cast it during your opponent's upkeep because you want them to tap their creatures first. In these situations you have to let them draw their card, and then declare their attackers before ending the turn. Luckily, people usually cast spells after their attack phase so you can often prevent them from summoning any potential blockers as well.



Although it is very flexible it's not quite as good as Mystic Restraints. That extra two mana means a lot in limited formats and given that almost all limited games come down to creature battles having removal is obviously important. Restraint is expensive removal but it does have the advantage that it can be cast as an Instant if needed and, because it leaves the creature in play, it prevents any annoying Soulshift triggers. Restraint is the pick if you're looking to draft a blue card from this pack, and I suspect if we ran this same poll a couple months from now this would be reflected more in the readers' choices.

## Honden of Cleansing Fire vs. Kitsune Blademaster vs. Mothrider Samurai



If any of you read my blue-white draft article a few weeks back you might remember that I ranked Kitsune Blademaster a few places ahead of Mothrider Samurai for that archetype and I think overall that ranking is still applicable. It's much closer when you are black-white or white-red but I think the reduced mana cost of the Blademaster still puts it ahead of the Mothrider.

When I'm drafting white I find myself going towards blue-white a lot of the time and in that particular combination there is an abundance of common flyers, but a distinct lack of aggressive three-drops. Even in the other colour combinations the Blademaster is a nasty attacker and a very efficient defender too when you need it to be. There aren't many creatures in the set that can attack into three points of first-strike damage without assistance.

The real question then becomes Blademaster vs. Honden. The white Honden is a fine card, and even without assistance of other Hondens I'd consider it playable. Two life per turn doesn't sound like very much but it will usually half, if not completely negate, the amount of damage opposing creatures do to you. However, by itself, I don't think it is as high a pick

as Kitsune Blademaster. If you already had additional Hondens then it might be worth taking it over the Blademaster but as a first pick it just isn't as good. Kitsune Blademaster is one of the best white commons and it's the best of these three choices. If you're planning on being the white drafter you should also remember that if you were to take the Honden over the Blademaster your neighbour may well take the Blademaster second pick leaving you fighting for one of your colours in the second pack.

### Sakura-Tribe Elder vs. Order of the Sacred Bell vs. Honden of Cleansing Fire

Didn't we already deal with the Honden? Well, yes, but only as a white card. Many green decks can happily run three or four colours and as a result are best placed to take advantage of any additional Hondens that might turn up later in the draft. If you are heavy white-black it might hurt your mana to splash for that Honden of Life's Web, but if you have access to cards like Sakura-Tribe Elder and Kodama's Reach then playing an extra colour to take advantage of the cumulative Honden effects isn't too much trouble.

I think most people would accept that the Elder is better than the Order. Your four mana slot isn't too hard to fill if you're the green player as you can usually find enough Orders, Burr Grafters and Feral Deceivers if you need them. Having the acceleration and colour-fixing is very important though and that's why the Elder is a much better early pick. Later on in a draft you can make an informed decision as to when to take the mana acceleration and when to take the big creatures, but at this point the Elder is favoured, especially because it allows you to splash cards from other colours more easily.



If a green deck is your favoured archetype then it may be that taking the Honden is the best card for you. You have another 44 picks to make and the chances of opening, or being passed, another Honden are much higher when you aren't too fussy about which colour Honden it is you are able to play. Taking the Honden with a view to drafting a multi-colour green deck is a bit of a gamble really, but it's definitely one that could pay off. At the end of the day, even if it doesn't you could still end up drafting blue-white. Even if you do draft green it's just a lone Tribe Elder you missed out on, not Jugan, the Rising Star or anything.

### Blood Rites vs. Ronin Houndmaster

The two red playable red cards in this pack are both very nice cards to have, and both would easily make the cut into your main deck. They're both very different cards though so they can't be compared easily, except in raw power terms. The Houndmaster is one of the more efficient creatures in the set and in the black-red and white-red archetypes he's one of the best three-drops you can have. Red-green likes to accelerate into bigger creatures on turn three ideally and red-blue might prefer to have a Soratami Rainshaper perhaps.

Blood Rites is excellent in red-green as you've often got some left-over accelerators that you don't need late in the game. You also might have Dripping-Tongue Zuber(s) or a Soulshift theme running through the green cards, which also helps increase the power of Blood Rites. In general I don't like Blood Rites very much in black-red unless I have a good number of Soulshift creatures. Black-red is often a little more creature-light than some of the other combinations as those colours tend to have better spells than creatures. Indeed, if you take a look at the black-red top 10 from last week you'll see four of the top five are spells.

Blood Rites does give a very powerful effect though and if you pick it early it's not too difficult to make sure you have the creature base to support it. In this world of Soulshift and Zuberats it's easy to get a little extra out of your sacrifices and this early in the draft I think Blood Rites has to be taken ahead of the Houndmaster simply because you'll be able to draft around it.

## The Final Five

Taking all of those above decisions into account I think we can safely narrow the choices down to:



Overall, I'd say those cards are all fairly close together in terms of power. The Honden is the weakest alone, but has the potential to become the best if it sees play alongside another Honden. The Mystic Restraints probably comes in behind the remaining three cards as they are all higher picks in their appropriate archetypes than the Restraints typically are.

For me this particular decision comes down to the signals you will be sending to your neighbour with the pick you make. Although Blood Rites is perhaps the most powerful card in the pack it does have a

double-red requirement and will need a heavy commitment to that colour if you play it. Red has some of the best commons but it's also quite a shallow colour and this means that red is often drafted by more people than it can realistically support. Quite often you'll take a Glacial Ray early and simply end up splashing for it. That won't be an option with Blood Rites. Also, because the best red commons often get first-picked, it may well be the case that your neighbour sees the second pick Houndmaster and takes it over the other cards to go alongside their first pick Yamabushi's Flame. If that happens you could be in trouble in pack two.

A similar thing might occur if you took the Blademaster. A neighbour who first-picked a Kabuto Moth or Cage of Hands might think that the Mothrider Samurai makes a fine on-colour second pick and take that over the other cards.

The one card in the pack immune to this possibility is Scuttling Death. I've written a little about this guy but he really is very powerful a lot of the time. There was a card in *Invasion* – Annihilate – that was a pretty high pick and Scuttling Death often functions similarly. You'll just outright kill a Soratami Mirror-Guard right away or trade the Death for a decent creature and then get to “draw” the best Spirit from your graveyard. There are times when an opponent will get completely shutdown by it. You'll have a Spirit in your graveyard and your opponent will be looking at their board of Nezumi Cutthroat and Nezumi Ronin and their hand containing a Glacial Ray and just think they're miles ahead. You drop Scuttling Death and they basically have no answers! They can Ray it, at which point you kill the Ronin and get back another guy – a nice 3-for-1 trade for you. They can attack, at which point you block and sacrifice after damage is on the stack for another 3-for-1 trade. There really is nothing an opponent can do to get around it.

Scuttling Death is the only playable black card in the pack and even if the guy on your left first-picked a Rend Flesh they aren't going to be seeing anything on-colour for their second pick. If you can cut the black cards in the next few packs you'll probably keep them out of black altogether and this will mean that you'll get a better quality of picks in the second pack. Black is one of the stronger colours in the set anyway and if you can manipulate the situation such that you'll be getting black passed to you then you'll be in a great position for the rest of the draft.

The more I play with Scuttling Death the more I like it and I think it's a great card in any of the black-x archetypes. Note that the reader poll only had Scuttling Death at #8, but when you take into account how you're potentially positioning yourself for the rest of the draft I think it gives you the best chance of quality picks from here on out.

---

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

