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Smells Like Team Spirit

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The Week That Was
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It is beginning to look a lot like...Team PTQ season, of course. Of all the qualifying seasons this is always my favorite -- although that is likely due to the fact that it is the only Pro Tour I have ever qualified for.

Seriously, there is no PTQ format more fun than Teams. You get to play with your friends, you have tons of cards to work with, and even I can win a qualifier. In fact, it is the only format in which I have ever won a qualifier. I did earn an individual invite at a four-slot qualifier once, but I am just carbon-dating myself by even mentioning that.

I have actually qualified for every Team Pro Tour except for the first one -- and this is what really makes the format so good -- on rating. Team events use a different system for ratings invites than any other Pro Tour format. While most formats invite the Top 50 previously uninvited players based on DCI rating in the appropriate format, Team Format simply requires that your team achieve a rating of 1750 to secure an invite.

While four-slot individual qualifiers may be a thing of the prehistoric past, I have played in many Team PTQs where multiple teams have qualified based on achieving the ratings plateau. Because so many teams form and reform throughout the season, almost everyone has similar 1600 ratings coming into a tournament so each match can be worth as much as 16 points -- half of the 32K value assigned to PTQ matches. Somewhere between 11-13 wins above any losses can often be enough to earn an invite. Although there may not actually be many PTQs to play in, you can often pile Grand Prix Trials and Prerelease Team Sealed tournaments onto your rating to put you over the top.

I had a chance to talk with Jeroen Remie and Josh Ravitz, two Team Sealed experts, about their success in this format, what challenges playing with all-*Champions* will present, and their takes on how to build decks for this PTQ season.

Jeroen was part of the Von Dutch team (alongside Jelger Wiegiersma and Kamiel Cornelissen) that [won Pro Tour-Seattle](#) in July. He also has two individual Pro Tour Top 8s to his credit and is one of the most popular fixtures on the Pro Tour. Von Dutch will be returning to Atlanta to defend their title, but don't be surprised to some permutation of the team, stretching their legs on the European PTQ scene to garner a little practice.

Ravitz was featured in my column last week for winning his first individual Pro Tour Qualifier, despite having finished in the Top 10 of two Team Pro Tours with two different teams. Most recently he put the paddles to the flatlined **Magic** careers of Chris Pikula and Igor Frayman and dragged them kicking and screaming back to Pro Tour-Seattle (or was that screaming actually emanating from Chris's wife?) Thanks to their high finish they will be getting the band back together for Atlanta -- much to Yoko Pikula's dismay, no doubt.

A writer's dilemma?

A couple weeks ago, I wrote about Jon Becker's Pro Tour-Nagoya dilemma of choosing between attending Pro Tour-Nagoya on Wizards of the Coast's dime or cashing in the invite he won at a Maryland PTQ in hope of winning enough to offset the travel cost. Jon grudgingly (he does everything grudgingly, to be fair) has decided to remain in front of the camera doing coverage instead of starting out behind the eight-ball.

Hopefully, I will have a similar dilemma to face come Pro Tour-Atlanta -- although it is a little easier to eat the travel cost. I am going to be playing in a Team PTQ this weekend alongside Michael J. Flores and Tim McKenna.

You may not have heard of Tim, but the only thing you need to know is that he is better than either of his teammates and I saved his life once. We T'd together for the last Boston event and I chose to play rather than do coverage.



Wiegiersma, Remie and Cornelissen (left to right) after winning Pro Tour-Seattle.

BDM: What was the key to your success in the Team Sealed portion of Pro Tour-Seattle?

Remie: We went over to New Jersey before the PT to test draft and Kai's team insisted we do a bunch of Sealed Deck practice as well. This turned out to be a good thing since practicing Sealed Deck with 12 of the best players in the world does give you a nice bit of insight. We didn't find out what to do in all circumstances, but more what NOT to do. Like in that format building a blue-black deck meant it would lose all the time. That was a nice thing to know. So I would say, the practice is what paid off for us.

Ravitz: Lots of practice, both with my team and without, was most certainly key here. We had a large group of foreigners in town to practice with us for that event and despite Kai's 'great' performance -- or if you ask him he'll say Marco's...0-6? -- it really did help. When I eventually got to practice with my teammates, knowing the cards was good but more importantly for that format, knowing which cards were required to create the great synergies required by the mechanics and design of the *Mirrodin* Block was even better.



BDM: How much of your strategy was due to the unique nature of *Mirrodin* Block? How much was universal to the format?

Remie: In Team Sealed we do not have a set strategy. You just look at the card pool and build the best decks. We always try and build three decks that all have a good way to win themselves. We never sacrifice a deck or make one deck super good and the rest worse. Three equal decks. You can't go into Sealed Deck building with set preferences, that's ridiculous.

Ravitz: As I am trying to remember my previous Team Pro Tour experiences one thing certainly stands out...The nature of removal in the *Mirrodin* Block was such that most colors had access to the equivalent of creature removal, since creatures were generally artifacts, and thus you could get away with white-green equipment decks or white-blue flying decks -- decks that could not exist without some kind of removal (*Stasis Cocoon*, *Altar's Light*, *Arrest* and *Blinding Beam*). So the uniqueness of the format and the fact that all colors could generally find an answer for creatures (a rarity) definitely had a lot to do with the way decks were built or even considered.



Josh Ravitz (center) as part of *The Max Fischer Players* in Seattle.

BDM: Can you talk a little about what players should anticipate as far as an all-*Champions* card pool? Also, what do you see as some of the strategies and color combinations?

Ravitz: Due to the splashy nature of the overpowered cards and the abundant mana-fixing in green (well, there's some, and some more if you really want it -- *Orochi Leafcaller*) I could definitely see the Sealed (bear in mind that I haven't done any practice yet . . .) reverting to an *Invasion*-style green-X-Y, black-X, and white-X but mostly it just depends on what cards you open. *Devouring Greed* will push you in direction where you can hopefully put your Shrines into the green deck and build a leftover deck that doesn't suck. Three *Dampen Thoughts*, a *Long-Forgotten Gohei*, and four *Ethereal Haze* might push you into another less conventional direction. Cards have always dictated builds and while this set is different, it is not really that different.

Remie: You can go in wanting to make a green-black deck but then if you have no drop before turn 4 in green or black, you just can't build that deck . . . and you can't know in advance what you are going to do.

Ravitz: Like I said, if you get an average card pool without anything great and without too much unplayable stuff I think you should look at what you have and where you can go from there. As a general guideline, I imagine black-blue spirits will dictate whether or not your card pool is any good, for a tournament field as diverse as Sealed Deck I'd be hesitant to build a white-blue deck -- barring an overload of *Moths*, *Cages* and *Blademasters* -- considering what you're likely to face. If your blue has what it takes to support the black then you can build white-red and green-X-Y. That is what I think you should use as a guideline.

BDM: Do you think that the *Dampen Thought* deck is something teams may try to pull off in the Sealed Deck qualifiers? How valid a strategy will that be assuming you have at least two *Dampen Thoughts*?

Remie: I don't like the *Dampen Thought* deck at all -- not even in draft. Too many things need to go right for it to work, and I don't think it's possible to get all this in a Sealed Deck and then it is still easy to hate. But once again it's all about the card pool, if it supports it, just build it.

Ravitz: I'd say it's a poor idea to go with anything but the nuts here -- three *Dampen Thoughts* or two and an *Eerie Procession*, four *Hazes*, etc. The reason for this is simple. Every team in the PTQ will have some answers to the deck and if those cards are spread out between the sideboards of all three decks then you will not have good odds against prepared teams playing the deck. I would say avoid it unless your card pool is begging you to do so.

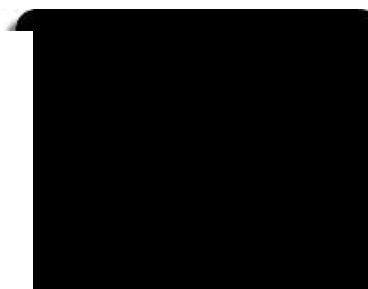
BDM: What are the cards your team wants to see in multiples in the commons?

Remie: In this format there is no dominating card. No *Spikeshot Goblin*, no *Timberwatch Elf*. The closest you get is maybe *Kabuto Moth*. What we would like to open is obviously as many of the good commons but have them spread across the board so you can build three solid decks. Single cards do not win matches in Team Sealed . . . you just want a bunch of good solid commons.

Ravitz: *Glacial Ray*, *Kabuto Moth*, *Devouring Greed*, *Teller of Tales* and *Kodama's Reach*. I'd say those are the five most important commons that will impact your deck-building decisions as well as your in-game decisions.

BDM: Any insight into triple *Champions* Rochester draft?

Remie: We haven't tested this yet, and we don't really have to given the fact that the format will change before the Pro Tour. On first glance it looks to me like you want a base black, a base green and a base white deck and distribute the other colors according to the packs. We have always



been very flexible in draft though, which has been our strength.

Ravitz: Knowing that each of the three packs will contain exactly the same cards is both helpful and hurtful. Color positioning is not as important as it was in the last few blocks. I think matchups are much more important for this format than they may have been in the past.

Team Qualifying in Session

While I am just getting my Team PTQ season started this Saturday, many players had the chance to kick things off last weekend and we are happy to present the winners from four of those events. People always approach me at events and ask why certain PTQ Top 8s don't make it into my column. The answer is simple, your TO has to report the tournament by Monday for us to get the info in time. Bug your TO if you make the Top 8 and want to see your name in this column. Although, due to the unique nature of Team PTQs we will only be presenting the top two teams from each event.



Event City	Event Date	Event TO	Team Attendance
Charlotte, N.C. (PT Qualifier)	12/4/2004	Jim Bailey	15
Finish: 1. never undervalue good spells (Michael Krzywicki, Bryan Schofield, J. Sawyer Lucy); 2. the alliance (Li-Cheng Weng, Nick Tung, Kc Wong)			
Oshawa, Ontario (PT Qualifier)	12/4/2004	Marvin Paguirigan	19
Finish: 1. 3 Card Monty (Chris Langford, David Felske, Jeremy Kunkel); 2. 1001 (Elijah Pollock, Matthew Vienneau, Steven Wolfman)			
Lincoln, Neb. (PT Qualifier)	12/4/2004	Merlin Hayes	12
Finish: 1. Inspiration (Nick Mohon, Brandon Scheel, Kyle Mechler); 2. Prerelease Champs (Ben Hartmann, Tyler Brennförder, Justin Klein)			
Kansas City, Kan. (PT Qualifier)	12/4/2004	Steve Ferrell	17
Finish: 1. Tcg (Greg Waldeck, Troy Spillman, Ryan Morgan); 2. Magic Johnson (Oren Gamble, Robert Irons, Evan Thomas)			

One of the teams that won this weekend stood out due to the quality of their opposition. 3-Card Monty, consisting of Chris Langford, David Felske and Toronto PTQ legend Jeremy "The Kunkler" Kunkel, won the PTQ and in the process earned the first Pro Tour invitation of any kind for all three team members. What makes this surprising is that the team they defeated was made up of two-thirds of 2020, with the David Rood role being understudied by tempo master Matt Vienneau. 2020 reached the [finals of Pro Tour-Boston](#) in 2002 and the [Venice Masters Series](#) during the 2003 season, and although they have not been as serious about their tournament careers as they once were, they are certainly not the team you want to see blocking a path to your first Pro Tour berth.

"The draft was very hard. None of us had Team Rochestered before and the other team had a lot of experience at this," explained Jeremy Kunkel, who called his team's draft. "I had read as much info as I could on how to draft but you never realize how hard it is until you're doing it."

Kunkel ended up with two players on his team drafting black and at some point sacrificed their matchup against Matt Vienneau's deck and put David to the task of weakening the opposition decks by counter drafting.

"My green-black ended up with eight two-drops and was all about winning fast," Kunkel said. "I had only three removal spells but had nothing but spirits and two **Devouring Greed** for finishers. David's deck was white-blue but splashed red for the hate drafted **Glacial Ray** and **Yamabushi's Flame** that I had him draft away from Elijah."

Kunkel went on to reveal that Chris had drafted red-black and that things went according to plan with he and Chris winning while David got run over by Vienneau's deck.

"I did not think going into the top 4 that we would make it to the Finals, then in the Finals I did not think we could keep up in the draft with them let alone beat them. I was just glad to have gotten that far," Kunkel continued. "Winning the PTQ was a dream come true. I have been playing **Magic** for the last 10 years of and on and never thought I'd get a chance to play in a Pro Tour."

It is always exciting to earn your first Pro Tour berth. It is only made sweeter by overcoming formidable opponents and Jeremy was grateful and excited about his long-awaited opportunity. Kunkel concluded by expressing gratitude to his local **Magic** community.



"I want to thank all the people who have helped me become a better **Magic** player, from Steve Wolfman, who taught me how to play 10 years ago, to John Park from 401 Convenience, who taught me how to learn from my mistakes even when I did not want to hear it. To my card pool friends Susan Edwards and Cory Conrad, who both have put up with my strange deck ideas over the past three years. And of course my fellow teammates, Chris Langford and David Felske who trusted my understanding of the format and let me build the decks and lead the draft for us."

As always, congratulations to everyone who qualified last weekend. To find a Pro Tour–Atlanta qualifier near you, [click here](#).

Firestarter

Getting into the team spirit, this week's firestarter wants to know how you tackle Team Sealed. In discussions with your teammates, what color combinations do you expect most teams will implement? What commons will have the biggest impact? Take part in the discussion by clicking on the Discuss link below.

*Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is Top8Magic.com, the publishing house that is releasing Michael J. Flores: Deckade.*



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