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Sullivan Library



*Adrian Sullivan · Single-Card Strategies
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It is just about the end of the year, and I'm sure many of you are out there preparing for the holiday season. As the calendar gets close to the end, it can often be a time to reflect not only this past year, but also the past in general. After nearly a year of writing this column and given the upcoming holiday, I thought I'd give myself a little gift and talk about my favorite card of all time, [Sylvan Library](#).



When you first start to make decks, there is generally this painful early stage of failure followed by failure followed by failure. Because of that, many of us start to love the cards that first gave us success. Jeff Cunningham is likely to always have a soft spot for [Wild Mongrel](#) or some other Blue/Green Madness card. Perhaps Yann Hamon and [Cabal Conditioning](#) will be remembered from here until the end of Magicdom. A friend of mine from high school opened up a [Winter Orb](#) and a [Stasis](#) in his first Starter of **Magic**, and until he quit **Magic** Eric Witmerhaus could usually be expected to be playing a lock deck.



For my part, loving [Sylvan Library](#) came early on. It started in November 1996, working on Standard decks and ending up with "Green Machine" - a mono-Green Control deck, and it finally got plated in gold when I [qualified](#) for Pro-Tour Los Angeles with Baron Harkonnen, my Blue/Green Control deck. I'd been playing Sylvan Library in so many decks that Bob Maher started calling it "Sullivan Library" and when I hunted for a name for my column in The Dojo, my friend and co-collaborator John Shuler sent a short response, "Sullivan Library, of course!" [Sylvan Library](#) may look like it lets you choose the best of three cards to draw from every turn, but if that's all there was to the card, I wouldn't love it so much.

On top of it

Of course, the [Sylvan Library](#) does have a lot in common with [Sensei's Divining Top](#). I already dedicated a whole [article](#) to the "New" Sylvan, and much of what was written there carries over. [Sylvan Library](#) is just generally good at smoothing out your draws. When a Sylvan is out, you get to see 3 cards during your draw, just like you get to see 3 cards from a top. Shufflers or cards that let you see new cards, therefore, are good. Cards that let you gain benefits from predicting the top of your library are also very good. Take a glance back at the [Sensei's Divining Top](#) article if you want to recap these lessons, because they apply here, but there's also much more.

One real question is the value of the card selection. Right now, tournament players can only play [Sylvan Library](#) in old school formats like Vintage and Legacy. In Vintage, cards are so incredibly powerful and games can be over so quickly that you might not even have time to take advantage of Sylvan unless you pay incredibly ridiculous amounts of life. There might be a home for Sylvan in Legacy, but that format is still largely unexplored. In [5-color](#) Sylvan Library is hotly debated and yet a regular addition to nearly every slower deck. In that format, a card can be incredibly powerful, but the games will often take long enough for you to be able to use a Sylvan to get to them. In addition, there are so many shufflers in 5-color that you are often able to use the Sylvan to almost perform like a repeatable Impulse. If you play the card casually, ask yourself these two

questions: are my cards important enough that I want help finding them, and will I have *time* to find them. The more you are looking for specific cards, and the more time you have, the better Sylvan gets. Currently, my own 5-color deck runs both 4 **Sylvan Library** and 4 **Sensei's Divining Top**, but I'm crazy.

A couple of small, if obvious, differences between the two cards are present in their costs. **Sylvan Library** only costs mana the turn you cast it, whereas the Top requires continuous little investments, but is cheaper to get out. One is an Enchantment and the other an Artifact. Of course, there is a little more to it than that...

Necro Hut!



At some point in Midwest **Magic** history, someone started calling **Sylvan Library** the Necro-Hut. The comparison is mostly for amusement's sake. You can spend life just like a Necro player, albeit less efficiently, but you get to keep your draw phase, and you also are generally guaranteeing that the card you actually draw is of a higher quality than general. The poor Necro player has to give up the draw phase, and they have no guarantee that they'll be getting a good card! See, they are comparable! (A few of these sentences were designed to anger Necropotence lovers like Randy Buehler and Eric "Dinosaur" Taylor, who both keep a Necropotence in their wallet to gaze at

when times are rough.) The popularity of Sylvan because of players like Bob Maher and Jason Moungey helped keep the phrase "Necro Hut!" being yelled out in tournaments for years whenever people paid life for their cards.

Four life is a hefty price to pay, but sometimes, you just don't care. Many decks are not going to damage you all that much, and when they win, it usually isn't going to be because you have four or even eight less life, but rather because they have gained control of the game. At other times, losing four life can actually be like "pseudo-lifegain"! Imagine looking at the top of your library and finding a **Wrath of God** and the fourth mana you need (and don't have yet) to cast it. Losing four life might not seem like such a bad deal.

At other times, the actual loss of life isn't something that you actually care that much about. Life gain can be a potent weapon against some decks, especially if it is coupled with board control like **Wrath of God**. However, one big problem with life gain is that it only really hurts people who are playing decks that are trying to win from fast damage. You can play the life gain, but against a control deck or most combo decks, it is simply a dead spell. The Necro Hut, however, converts that life gain into something valuable: more cards. A **Gerrard's Wisdom**, for example, easily can turn that life into plenty more cards which can help get more Wisdoms, which can get plenty more cards, which can...

Some of the newer cards are also surprisingly good with **Sylvan Library**. **Reverse the Sands** is expensive, but a great way to turn that lost life into a problem for the opponent. My favorite way to exploit the loss of life, however, are two of the Pulses: **Pulse of the Forge** and **Pulse of the Fields**. In either case, you losing four life makes each of the Pulses one full step closer to being able to be returned to your hand. Expect to see mana-burn from your opponent if you get Sylvan/Pulse going!

Draw tricks

If you don't do anything tricky, a **Sylvan Library** works like this: You draw your regular card and then the Sylvan lets you draw two more – but you have to put two of those cards back. The process, though, is more complicated than that.

At the beginning of your draw phase, the rules require that you draw before anything else happens. Then, **Sylvan Library** can be put on the stack along with anything else that triggers during the draw phase. This means that you can do other things in there besides just do all of the Sylvan at one time. Finally, when you put cards back, you can put back *any* of the cards you've drawn this turn. I'll repeat it: you can put back *any* of the cards you've drawn this turn.

In 5-color, this often means that people choose the best 2 cards out of 4, or the best 3 cards out of 5, usually by sacrificing a **Jeweled Bird**, **Mind Stone**, or **Phyrexian Furnace**. The same trick can apply in any format. Any draw card effect during your upkeep works the same way. If you drew cards during your upkeep from a **Psychic Vortex** or **Arcane Denial**, if you draw cards with a **Jushi Apprentice** during the draw step, however you draw them, you get to keep the best of *all of them*, putting two back if you want to avoid losing some life.

Let's say, on the other hand, that you aren't ready for a card yet. Maybe you aren't ready to cast that **Treachery** or **Haunting Echoes**, but you want to keep it handy. After you've looked at it with **Sylvan**, put it back on top of your library. On the following turn, draw the card during your draw phase, and if you want to, use some effect in your deck to shuffle or rearrange the library. Sacrifice a **Wayfarer's Bauble**, activate a **Thawing Glaciers**, or cast a **Gifts Ungiven** before you activate the **Sylvan Library**. When you activate the **Sylvan**, if you still decide you aren't ready for that card you've saved, put it back on the top of your library and you can do the same thing again another time!

The Replacements

Perhaps the most famous **Sylvan Library** trick involves exploiting the "replacement" effect. **Sylvan Library's** wording is somewhat odd; in essence, if you fail to draw cards, from a **Possessed Portal** for example, activating the **Sylvan Library** does *not* make you lose eight life. If you activate **Sylvan Library**, you lose life if you don't put back two of the cards you've drawn so far this turn. If you activate **Sylvan Library** and you never end up successfully drawing the cards, you won't lose life.

Enter **Abundance**. **Abundance/Sylvan Library** is one of the most potent card-drawing engines out there. What does it do? Well, **Abundance** can be activated to replace your draw with its own effect. Therefore, if you activate **Abundance** for each of your draws (including the two **Sylvan** draws), you never actually *draw* a card. Instead, you get to reveal a card with the **Abundance** three times and keep all three without losing life. Most people name "Land" once and "Spell" twice when they get out the combo, but I'll let you name what you want.



Like rocket fuel for your hand.

Another big replacement combo is **Pursuit of Knowledge**. Replace your three draws with three study counters, and get *seven* cards instead! From **Onslaught** block comes the many "Words" spells, though the Red and White Words are definitely the most potent. With a **Words of War**, spend 3 mana and do 2 damage to three targets. With **Words of Worship**, spend 3 mana and gain 15 life!

One caveat: the **Sylvan** tries to accomplish as much as it can. If you do attempt to go about this replacement effect, you'll need to avoid drawing *any* cards and go "all in" with your replacement effect. The **Sylvan** knows when you draw cards, and if you don't put any back, it hurts you for failing to do so.

On the other hand, multiple **Sylvans** can mean more and more replacement effects. So, two **Sylvan Library** and a **Words of Wilding** can add up to 5 Bears a turn, if you want to spend the mana. Two **Sylvan Libraries** does *not* add up to looking at *five* cards and then choosing to put back four. **Sylvan Libraries** go on the stack one at a time, and you can't do anything while they are resolving (just like any other ability). You can certainly activate two of them, but you'll need to either pay life on that first **Sylvan** or manipulate the library before the second one goes off if you want it to get much out of it.

Wrap up

With all of that in mind, here is a fun Casual deck using **Sylvan** in a whole slew of ways... The deck is a kind of puzzle, and it really involves putting a bunch of pieces together.

Puzzle-Sylvan, a Casual deck

60 cards

3 Thawing Glaciers
4 Windswept Heath
4 Island
4 Forest
4 Plains
4 Brushland

23 land

4 Eternal Witness
4 creatures

4 Sylvan Library
3 Enlightened Tutor
1 Mystical Tutor
3 Intuition
3 Gaea's Blessing
4 Impulse
2 Wrath of God
1 Hail Storm
2 Words of Worship
1 Teferi's Moat
1 Abundance
1 Pursuit of Knowledge
1 Ghostly Prison
1 Test of Endurance
1 Words of Wilding
1 Honden of Cleansing Fire
1 Honden of Life's Web
1 Honden of Seeing Winds
1 Mox Diamond

33 other spells



Here, you're generally going to use **Ghostly Prison**, **Wrath of God**, **Hail Storm** and **Teferi's Moat** to help keep yourself alive. Life gain from **Honden of Cleansing Fire** can seriously help here. Once you get a Sylvan out, the **Words of Worship** can be used to quickly gain a ton of life.

Much of the rest of the deck is just hunting. A Sylvan can not only be combo-rific with Words and **Abundance**, but it can also be great at helping find answers to stay alive, or setting up Hondens for yet more advantage. Other shufflers (mostly Blue) can help keep the Sylvan fresh with new cards, and when it comes to an end game, the deck has a lot of ways to win. With enough life gain, the **Test of Endurance** can win, a **Words of Wilding** can be used to make a large amount of bears (especially if you replace all of the draws of, say, a **Pursuit of Knowledge**), or a **Honden of Life's Web** can make creatures well with enough other Hondens to help.

Each of the other Hondens complement the Sylvan nicely as well, and the abundant library manipulation can make it easy to get things going. Don't forget to use **Intuition** with both **Gaea's Blessings** to trigger a reshuffle of everything back into your library if you need to, or to use with **Eternal Witness** to seek out exactly the card you want to finish off just the right piece of the puzzle. This is the kind of deck that does best by being able to sit back awhile in a group game, so if you play something like this, keep your head low so that people don't notice you getting set up. I would offer more words of advice here on this kind of thing, but I know that Anthony Alongi has beaten me to it so many times I couldn't possibly count them all. Overall, I think there are a lot of fun things going on here.

One final note on real words and "scry". My silly MS-Word marked scry as a non-word, and I foolishly believed it. That, and I could have sworn I remembered Zvi making fun of scry too. Really. But maybe I'm imagining things... To make matters worse, normally Scott Johns would have saved me there, but he thought I was just joking about it not being a word. Anyway, you get the idea. I hope you find this week's deck a blast to play and that, for newer players, you got a chance to see some of the many reasons I'm so fond of this card. Have a great holiday season and New Year!



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