

Breaking White Control

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This is a very "Swimming with Sharks-ish" article that I wrote well before I took over this column. I emailed Scott Johns when he joined **magicthegathering.com** as Content Manager and he was interested in my working with him... This article was the result (and now I am a regular columnist). Besides being a good article in and of itself, you might know that I also write for some other gaming websites. The day this came out, another one of my editors called me up to complain that he had run essentially the same article THE SAME DAY... only not as good. Gives you that warm and fuzzy feeling right here. :)

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As far back as 1996, onetime great George Baxter transitioned the Titania's Song deck that he used to claim a spot on that year's US National Team to the monochromatic "White Trash" Prison that bought him a Top 8 at PT Dallas. In *Masques* Block, Mageta the Lion and Blinding Angel proved that a pair of slow five drops could keep the board clean while ensuring the opponent could never counterattack. As recently as last summer players combined the power of Eternal Dragon with the tenacity of Dawn Elemental to punch through Goblins and cycling enchantments both in a fairly successful effort to diversify the *Onslaught* Block's constructed format. For years before Baxter to the present day, White Control has been a favorite for players who want to win using explosive effects to dominate the board.

"I fear Mike McGee may have broken White Control."

-Seth Burn

In pre-*Darksteel* Standard, White Control has once again stepped up as one of the top contenders in a powerful format that includes Goblins, Astral Slide, and Affinity. This version, played by Deadguy Tony Tsai to a recent tournament win at Neutral Ground, was designed by Mike McGee:

Mono-White Control



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Cloudpost
13 Plains
4 Secluded Steppe
4 Temple of the False God

25 lands

4 Eternal Dragon
3 Exalted Angel
4 Weathered Wayfarer

11 creatures

4 Akroma's Vengeance
4 Decree of Justice
2 Gilded Light
4 Mindslaver
4 Renewed Faith
2 Tower of Fortunes
4 Wrath of God

24 other spells

Sideboard

4 Astral Slide
3 Circle of Protection: Red
1 Culling Scales
1 Exalted Angel
1 Gilded Light
1 Oblivion Stone
4 Sacred Ground

15 sideboard cards

The Main Deck

The beauty of the current incarnation of White Control is its ability to power out incredibly expensive spells. Using its superior mana development, this deck can play cards like Mindslaver that dominate wider formats like Extended. If these cards come online, the average Standard deck doesn't stand a chance. White Control's mana advantage also indirectly trumps blue. White control decks have historically been overmatched by permission, but because the best counterspell in the current format -- typically included by both U/W and Affinity -- is Mana Leak, this no longer has to be the case. Mana Leak on a Mindslaver seems pretty silly when you have six lands open.

How does White Control generate a huge mana advantage? Besides the consistency of Eternal Dragon, White Control has a little fellow named Weathered Wayfarer working for it. Because of its low cost, Weathered Wayfarer in the main deck is an incredible threat against other control decks. It slips under every permission spell in the format, and can create a great deal of mischief before the opponent has the mana for Wrath of God. Once it starts grabbing Cloudposts, there is not much that another control deck can do but try to win the game. As most experienced control players know, "trying to win the game" against another control deck often means playing into the opponent's hand by sticking your win conditions out where they can be squashed by a card that might otherwise go discarded or dead.



Though he's not much of a threat against most beatdown players, Weathered Wayfarer is a real pain for the popular land destruction theme that seems to be running rampant in the wake of Plow Under being reprinted alongside the appearance of Molten Rain. Weathered Wayfarer lets the land destruction opponent spend his actual spells on lands while fetching potentially more relevant lands at the same time. Though most land destruction decks have a heavy red component, many of them ironically have no fast way to deal with a 1/1 on the other side. Moreover, because they have to devote so much room to destroying the opponent's lands, these decks tend to be short on threats... meaning that their few creatures are easy pickings for White Control's multitude of defensive sweepers.

Another popular take on the Weathered Wayfarer in Standard is to build with *Eighth Edition's* Urza's lands (Urza's Mine, Urza's Power Plant, and Urza's Tower) in mind. I believe that McGee's take with the Cloudposts and Temples of the False God is superior for a couple of reasons. For one thing, even with Weathered Wayfarer helping out, the Urza's lands represent a three-card combination that doesn't actually win the game. That is an awful lot of work just to set up mana. Moreover, destroying just one Urza's Tower can potentially de-value all of the rest of your Urza's lands. Contrast this with Cloudpost and Temple of the False God:

Every single Temple is going to have the power of a fully stacked Urza's Mine or Urza's Power Plant. All it needs is to be in the company of some other lands; Temple of the False God doesn't even care which ones. Because you can assume that Eternal Dragon will keep your Plains flowing if nothing else, this makes every Temple of the False God more consistent than any Urza's land except, arguably, for Urza's Tower (and even then only if the rest of your game is already assembled).



While any individual Cloudpost is less powerful than any individual Urza's land, playing with Cloudposts instead gives you several advantages. For one, dedicating only eight slots to power mana rather than twelve opens up the number of Plains you can play. This not only makes your Eternal Dragons stronger going into the midgame, it also helps out your mana costs. Just because White Control has amazing mana production and a good number of colorless costs doesn't mean that the deck doesn't need to play Wrath of God on turn four at 2*** against that oncoming Goblin rush. If it doesn't get that second Plains, it's just as dead as any other, less mighty, build.

Another thing is that Cloudpost, when it is going, *really* gets going; it's more powerful than the Urza's lands. With one copy of each Urza's land in play, you can make seven colorless mana. With three Cloudposts in play (arguably just as easy to assemble given Weathered Wayfarer), you can make nine. The next incremental Urza's Tower gives you ten mana, whereas the last Cloudpost gives you twelve. The optimal eight Urza's lands will give you twenty mana, while a full set of McGee's lands will give you a whopping twenty-four. But what about having all twelve Urza's lands in play? Doesn't that give you twenty-eight mana, while having only eight Cloudposts and Temples tops off at twenty-four? Why don't we count apples to apples and give the Cloudpost deck four more lands as well? In the unlikely case that you have assembled a mana engine of this magnitude and have not already demolished your opponent under the combined heels of Decree of Justice, Mindslaver, and Tower of Fortunes, then giving this build four Plains for twelve land parity would also yeild twenty-eight mana (including several vital white, I might add), with a good deal less work.



But what about Tower of Fortunes? Isn't that two-of an odd card choice? Tower of Fortunes is your closer in this deck. It's your Morphling. In a sense Draw-Go players of the past didn't like having to play with closers because their decks were such beautiful meshes of instants and lands and they didn't like to let their toes touch the same ground as beatdown players, having to rely on the brute force of a creature to win. They made an exception with Morphling due to its sheer, perfect, ridiculousness. Tower of Fortunes is similar when applied to a board control deck. It doesn't have the speed of a Renewed Faith, the triplicate utility of Eternal Dragon, or the proven pedigree of Mindslaver. What Tower of Fortunes does do is give White Control inevitability against other control decks. It powers enough Renewed Faiths into your hand to fight off even a second turn Lightning Rift. It makes sure that you draw more Decrees of Justice than the other guy. It takes up the torch Weathered Wayfarer bore in the early game, giving you something to spend all that mana on.

The other two-of in this deck is a brilliant one, if subtle. If Mindslaver is the best card, isn't it reasonable that someone else might try to win with it? U/W Control might be able to counter one, but what does White Control do about an opposing Mindslaver? Easy. It also counters one! Gilded Light can stop a Mindslaver activation as easily as it can stop a Mind Sludge. Against fast decks that don't target, it cycles. If anything, I'd want more of this guy in my deck.

The Sideboard

The last words on this build should be dedicated to the last cards in the deck list: the sideboard. Note that the deck Tony played has both Circle of Protection: Red and Sacred Ground. That is a lot of sideboard cards against red, but they are necessary. While a beatdown deck can ignore the opponent's cards to a large degree (they can kill the opponent before his plan is online), a control deck does not have that luxury. A control deck with no permission is in an even more demanding position. A U/W deck can Mana Leak a Flashfires. White Control can't. If Flashfires resolves, all of the work that White Control has put into developing its mana engine will be lost. Many times this card will not just eliminate Plains, it will take Temple of the False God offline. Stopping Flashfires is therefore of paramount import. Even if the opponent only sideboards three copies, four Sacred Grounds are there to answer. You want Sacred Ground down on turn two, every time. Besides fighting Flashfires, it will also put the hurt on less drastic mana denial, from Stone Rain to Creeping Mold.

Even though you have Sacred Ground for Flashfires, you cannot discount a red deck's primary attack: small packets of damage. Whether that damage takes the form of a Goblin rush or a stack of burn spells, Circle of Protection: Red will leverage your mana advantage to a life advantage. Keep in mind that many a red foe will try to use Sulfuric Vortex against you. If he has even a slight life advantage in the early game, an unanswered Sulfuric Vortex will be difficult to race for your damage-poor deck. It's not like your general stalling tactics with Renewed Faith or Exalted Angel will do much good. If you have Circle of Protection: Red in play, though, the Sulfuric Vortex will just kill your opponent, which is always convenient. Thank goodness Flaring Pain is no longer an issue!



The coming of *Darksteel* is not going to be pleasant for White Control. Indestructible artifacts on the other team may demand that you play with Altar's Light. That being said, a lone Darksteel Colossus might be a great addition. It makes White Control difficult to deck while providing a threat that few other decks can reasonably cast. The more dangerous card is Skullclamp.

Skullclamp is the kind of equipment that takes a mediocre deck like White Weenie and lets it contend with a powerhouse like White Control. Where White Control could, in the past, kill creatures at its leisure, this new artifact means that it is possible for the opponent to recoup card advantage lost to Wrath of God. I think that the best solution is to stack up on sweepers in the hopes of taking out Skullclamps at the same time you kill Whipcorders. This will at least help to limit the number of cards the opponent is able to recover. Increasing the number of Oblivion Stones in the sideboard is a good start, if not moving some to the main. I think there will be fewer control decks (people will either be running scared from, or trying to themselves play, Skullclamp), so it might be permissible to remove Gilded Light or one Tower of Fortunes for more defense. Like against Affinity, Akroma's Vengeance (especially on the fifth, rather than the sixth, turn) seems your best bet here.

The other main deck card I would change is Exalted Angel. These seem really out of place to me. They are rarely that relevant against other control decks, except, perhaps, as time-release Duresses, and just tend to get cast in the late game when you are trying to bleed out the opponent's sanction in order to force through a real kill card. It seems to me that they don't quite fit, which we can kind of tell by the fact that McGee only relegated three spaces to this usually amazing threat. By the same token, they seem pretty good at racing Goblins, and devoting your third and fourth turns to Angel mana while developing your board might be an effective way to restrict the amount of time an



opponent can try to work you over with Skullclamp. My guess is that these ladies either go to four or leave the main deck altogether.

Last, but not least, I think that I would swap Circle of Protection: Red with Story Circle. While a little more difficult to play and use than Circle of Protection: Red, Story Circle has the added bonus of working against black. It is cheap enough to slide under a Persecute, and will keep Greater Harvester at bay, if not in your opponent's grip where it can't hurt anyone anyway.

The bad news may be that *Darksteel* is giving everyone else dangerous toys that White Control will have to either deal with or lose to. The good news is that I just heard Astral Slide volunteering its four slots in the sideboard to make room for the cards that this deck needs to continue to stay one of the top contenders in Standard come Regionals.

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