

# Holiday Assortment

Search

Scott Wills

Monday, January 10, 2005

I hope you all had a nice relaxing holiday season and a great New Year too. I also hope that all of you **Magic Online** users were able to take advantage of the awesome "Nix Tix" draft queues over the festive season as I myself did. Drafting for prizes at just the bare cost of the product seems like a fine idea to me and I hope we see it come back again soon.

This is a tricky time for limited strategy as we're on the cusp of two different limited formats right now. *Betrayers of Kamigawa* is just around the corner and its arrival will obviously have a big impact on limited play. On top of that *Champions* has been discussed in depth for over three months now so there's always a danger of duplicating information that's already been examined in depth.

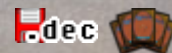
However, *Betrayers* isn't quite here yet (soon!). Feel free to pop over to Mark Rosewater's column for your first taste of one of the new mechanics *Betrayers* will introduce but for the time being it's still *Champions* that'll be the topic here for another week or so.

There's no set topic for this week's column, instead think of this one as more of an informal chat. With all the holiday drafting I encountered a few situations that I wanted to discuss in this column but none of them really warrant an entire column to themselves so instead I'll spend a bit of time on each.

## Samurai!

The first topic relates to a deck I've found myself drafting a few times lately. This is a slightly extreme example of it but it's not far from what the average version tends to look like. A few weeks back I wrote an article on the importance of aggression and this deck is about as extreme an example of that theory as you can get. It looks like it contains a lot of awful cards, but in reality it plays out a lot better than you might think.

### RW Samurai



#### Main Deck

40 cards

8 Mountain	1 Akki Avalanchers	1 Cage of Hands
8 Plains	1 Akki Coalflinger	2 Call to Glory
16 lands	3 Battle-Mad Ronin	1 Hanabi Blast
	2 Brothers Yamazaki	1 Indomitable Will
	3 Devoted Retainer	1 Tenza, Godo's Maul
	1 Hearth Kami	1 Unearthly Blizzard
	1 Kami of Ancient Law	1 Yamabushi's Flame
	1 Kitsune Blademaster	
	1 Mothrider Samurai	8 other spells
	1 Ronin Houndmaster	
	1 Sensei Golden-Tail	
	16 creatures	

The first thing to note is that this deck has a lot of synergy and it uses multiple copies of cards that other people don't ever want to play. Devoted Retainer, Battle-Mad Ronin and Call to Glory are all cards that you can often get passed around really late but they are all fine inclusions in this type of deck. Battle-Mad Ronin is one of those cards that is unplayable most of the time but in this style of deck he has two abilities that are really good. First of all, he's very hard to block in the first few turns of the game. Most opposing three-drops can't stand up to him, and a lot of four-drops will only trade with it at best too. Secondly and more obviously, it's a Samurai. This means Call to Glory makes him into an untapped 4/4 when blocking, giving you ample opportunity to ambush something much more threatening.



It's interesting to note how good the Maul is in this deck. On a humble Battle-Mad Ronin it makes a 4/4 Trampler if they're blocked but with three Legends in the deck it can often give +3/+3 when equipped. Either of the Brothers becomes a big threat as they're 5/4, Trample, Bushido 1 when carrying the Maul.

In this deck mana curve is everything. You want several one-drops with Devoted Retainers and Akki Avalanchers being the best choices. You want a bunch of two-drops, and preferably good ones like Ronins, Kami of Ancient Law and Hearth Kamis over Ember-Fist Zubera. Your third turn plays are ideally Blademasters, Houndmasters and Kabuto Moths. If you have a four-drop at all it should be a good one like Mothrider Samurai or better ideally. You don't want any defensive creatures like Harsh Deceiver. All of your early picks you want to devote to getting the good three drops and any removal spells that come your way. You can usually expect to get the smaller creatures later on in a draft so don't worry too much about those early on.

The above deck played out very well and it also produced an interesting situation that I wanted to talk about. It was my turn, and I had five mana available and my board was:



My opponent was blue-white and was trying to defend with a Kabuto Moth, Soratami Mirror-Guard and a Callous Deceiver in play and two mana available.

It was before my attack phase and I figured I'd attack with everything as I had a Call to Glory in hand and wanted to encourage blocking. Before attacking I used the Sensei's ability to add a training counter to the first Ronin as I imagined that the Avalanchers would die no matter what I did. Even with a Bushido counter the Avalanchers would be a 4/2 at best and they would die to the Deceiver + Moth pump. I figured it'd be worth the sacrifice to get some damage through as my opponent was down to 10 life already.

Spot the mistake there?

The Avalanchers were in fact a potential 5/3 first-striker! Sensei actually has two abilities – in addition to granting Bushido 1, it also turns the creature into a Samurai, which meant that the Call to Glory would pump the Avalanchers again! On top of this the Coalflinger would untap and could be used to give all the attackers first-strike. If I'd put a Training counter on the Avalanchers, they would've gained +2/+0 when I sacrificed a land, +1/+1 from the Bushido ability granted by the Sensei, and +1/+1 from the Call to Glory because the Sensei would've turned them into a Samurai. With the Coalflingers first-strike ability that would've been exactly enough to take down the 2/5 Callous Deceiver even if my opponent had revealed a land to make it a 3/5!

Unfortunately I missed the play, the Avalanchers died to the Deceiver and my opponent managed to stabilise on 2 life and came back to win as I couldn't draw anything to get the last few points of damage in. If I'd noticed the interaction between the Sensei and the Call to Glory then the Avalanchers would've taken out the Deceiver and still been around to get in those last few points of damage.

## Splice to victory

In limited formats you often find that the decks that focus heavily on the main mechanics within the block tend to be quite powerful when they're drafted properly. In *Mirrodin* block we saw this with Affinity. In *Onslaught* block a lot of the Tribal effects were very powerful. In *Champions* we've already seen the black-red Spiritcraft decks become popular as well as the ultimate mechanic deck: Dampen Thought.

Recently I've started trying to abuse the Splice mechanic a bit more in other decks. It used to be routine that you would have your six or seven spells and maybe five or six of them would be Arcane if you were lucky. Abusing the Splice mechanic wasn't very likely. Lately though, I've tried a couple of blue-white decks where I focused on drafting the Arcane card drawers over the mediocre creatures that usually filled up the deck, and then combining these with a few cards that I could grab with the Splice mechanic.

The resulting decks are typically quite creature light, but they play a much more controlling game, which is something I like. The creatures you do have tend to be of higher quality and you can gain a big advantage if you're able to Splice a few spells successfully.

This is what a typical deck looked like for me:

**UW Splice** 

**Main Deck**  
40 cards

1 Cloudcrest Lake	2 Floating-Dream Zubera	1 Blessed Breath
8 Island	1 Kitsune Blademaster	1 Blind with Anger
2 Mountain	1 Mothrider Samurai	1 Candles' Glow
7 Plains	1 Nagao, Bound by Honor	1 Consuming Vortex
18 lands	1 Samurai Enforcers	1 Eerie Procession
	1 Soratami Cloudskater	1 Ghostly Prison
	1 Soratami Mirror-Guard	1 Glacial Ray
		1 Honden of Cleansing Fire

2 Soratami Rainshaper

1 Teller of Tales

11 creatures

1 Reach Through Mists

2 Sift Through Sands

11 other spells

This deck split the finals of the draft quite handily, including one game where my Mothrider Samurai and Kitsune Blademaster faced off against an opposing Kitsune Blademaster and Yosei, the Morning Star. We both started this battle on 15 life, but getting repeated uses of Candles' Glow and Consuming Vortex alongside the white Honden meant that my 2/2 flyer was eventually able to outrace the 5/5 even though I didn't really draw any more threats to speak of.

This deck is obviously creature light but it has some card drawers in there so you'll usually see a couple of creatures in the first few turns of most games. The advantage this deck gains is obviously through the various Splice spells it has. Casting one Glacial Ray or Candles' Glow is nice enough but when you can cast them three or four times in a game you'll gain a huge advantage. It's difficult to get a lot out of the Splice mechanic when you only have five or six Arcane spells in your deck. It takes a list like that with eight or more Arcane spells before you really start to get the most from your Splice effects.

## Evaluating all the factors

The next situation is a simple draft pick that I thought was a very tricky choice, and one that also illustrates the importance of knowing the cards in a set along with how people value them.

It was a standard triple Champions booster draft in the MTGO 8-4 queue. First pick, first pack, I took a Glacial Ray over Moss Kami, Soratami Mirror-Guard and Wicked Akuba. That's a pretty easy choice. The second pack was the tough one as it presented me with the choice of the following cards:



(There was a Mothrider Samurai, Kami of the Hunt, etc in the pack too, but the choice was obviously between Horobi and the Flame.)

Horobi is a tricky creature to evaluate. In some decks he can be extremely powerful. If you have Mirror-Guards or Kabuto Moths and Kitsune Diviners which can target your opponent's creatures then he be devastating. There are other times when you might not want to play him simply because he can

give your opponent the advantage if you have no way of targeting your opponent's creatures cheaply and they do.

I generally quite like it though, but in this situation I would ordinarily take the Flame over Horobi because it kept me drafting red and it would stop my opponent from taking the Flame and drafting one of my colours. Yamabushi's Flame is a card that is always excellent, unlike Horobi, so it would definitely be the better pick if there were nothing else to consider.

However, in this situation I had to think to myself what the player to my right had drafted over the Horobi. I noticed there was an uncommon missing from the pack so I did a quick mental run-down of the powerful uncommons in the set to see what I'd take over Horobi.

My list of uncommons for consideration included: Blind with Anger, Nagao, Bound by Honor, Strength of Cedars, Honden of Infinite Rage, Hideous Laughter and Honden of Seeing Winds.

Neither Strength nor the two Hondens seemed powerful enough to take first-pick over Horobi to me. I also didn't think Hideous Laughter would be taken over it as well as it was the same colour, sent an awful signal, and probably isn't significantly more powerful anyway. Taking the Flame and passing both Horobi and the Laughter would've been the best choice there. So that left only Nagao and Blind with Anger.

I personally would take Nagao over Horobi, but on **Magic Online** Horobi is worth two or three tickets and I think most people tend to rate it more highly as a result. I don't think the majority of drafters would take Nagao over Horobi. With all this in mind I decided that the most probable card to be taken from the booster would be Blind with Anger.



With that in mind, the Yamabushi's Flame becomes a lot less attractive as you don't really want to be sitting to the left of another red drafter in this format. It should seem fairly obvious but Horobi is often best in white-black decks where Kabuto Moth, Kitsune Diviner and Kitsune Healer can all be used to target your opponent's creatures without requiring you to spend any mana. I remembered that I hadn't passed any good white cards in pack one and I also figured that the player on my left would almost certainly take the Flame as a his third pick and so likely wouldn't end up playing white, meaning there was a good chance I could get a white-black deck.

So with these factors in mind I went with Horobi over the Yamabushi's Flame. This is a very close pick but I thought it was a nice one to talk about as it does a good job of illustrating almost all of the important factors that should influence your choices early in a draft. It's decisions like these that give you the chance to rise above simply taking the "most powerful" card and instead set yourself up positionally for a better overall draft.

That's it for this week. Good luck to any of you attending the last few team PTQs this weekend - it's your last chance to qualify for Pro Tour-Atlanta so don't miss out!

