

Scott Wills

Monday, January 17, 2005

The skills you need to be a top limited player are many and varied but the skill of card evaluation is one that is often over-looked by a lot of players. You only need to wait a week or two after a set is released to find people like me writing articles about which cards are better than others and what cards you should be looking to draft from the new set. You might even think you don't really need good card evaluation skills really, as long as there are other people around to tell you what cards are good.

The problem there is that other people aren't always correct, particularly when a set is new. And other people don't necessarily have the same play style as you. There are usually cards that are universally good but if you're most comfortable as an aggressive rather than controlling sort of player then your card valuations might differ from those of other people.

If you know straight away what makes a card good in limited you get a jump-start on everyone else. Early in the life of a format there are some cards that are under-rated by the majority of players. Everyone can usually figure out that cards like Blind with Anger are quite good, but with cards like Soratami Savant or Devouring Greed it isn't as immediately obvious how powerful they are. I'm sure in the early days of *Champions* several players looked at the Savant and thought "Just a 2/2 for 4... and I have to return THREE lands just for a Mana Leak? Okay, but not great". Or perhaps looked at Devouring Greed and thought "It doesn't do anything much by itself and I'd have to sacrifice a bunch of creatures to get a decent effect and I might not even have that many Spirits to sacrifice. Don't think I'll play this."

The same applies at the opposite end of the scale too. Cards like Kami of the Waning Moon or Kami of Fire's Roar were definitely underrated at the start of this block. Now they're played in people's main-decks regularly and often drafted quite highly in the appropriate decks too. On the other hand there may be some cards which look playable initially but which later turn out to not be so great. If you can see which of the late picks in a draft help round out your deck and which should be ignored you'll have a much better overall deck than the player who can't.

If you know straight away what makes a card good in limited you get a jump-start on everyone else.

While everyone else is still figuring out which card to draft you get a few weeks worth of nice late picks in your drafts and you get to spend time figuring out which archetype is best. Then, when everyone else has caught up on the card knowledge you're hopefully still ahead of the game as you've had more time to actually practice drafting the best decks.

What makes a good card


There are a few things you need to consider when looking at each card. In terms of creatures the main things to look at are obviously power/toughness, casting cost, and abilities. Things like creature type and how much coloured mana is in the casting cost also need to be noted though as they can affect how highly you value a creature in different circumstances. With spells you're looking at casting cost and effect, but again the coloured mana is important, as is instant vs. sorcery, whether it has any sub-types such as Arcane, and whether it's Legendary in the case of non-creature permanents such as the Shrines in *Champions of Kamigawa*.

Evaluating Creatures

The best creatures are usually obvious. Is Keiga, the Tide Star good in limited? Yes, that should be apparent to everyone. Deciding how to rate cards like Humble Budoka and Cursed Ronin is a little bit trickier.

In general you'd like your creatures to have a power and toughness equal to their mana cost. One casting cost creatures will typically be 1/1, 2 casting cost gives 2/2, and so on. This only applies to creatures with no abilities (aka 'Vanilla' creatures). In terms of commons and uncommons you'll usually find that the stats are a little lower than this. Order of the Sacred Bell is a good example here. Most creatures usually trade in some point of power and/or toughness for some ability of some kind. Kitsune

Blademaster trades in +1/+1 for both First Strike and Bushido 1 for example. You'll also find that additional coloured mana in the casting cost often gives a bonus to the creature. Grizzly Bears vs. Elvish Warrior illustrates this, as does Dawn Elemental vs. Jeweled Spirit. Both of these two white cards are rare, both are 3/3 and both have similar abilities but because Dawn Elemental requires four white mana to cast it only costs four mana total vs. Jeweled Spirit's five mana cost.

You're usually much happier to trade points of toughness for abilities, rather than points of power. Soratami Mirror Guard costs four mana total, so you might expect something around a 3/3 or 4/4 for that cost. However it has traded in two points of toughness for the Flying ability and for its activated ability. You can see how this is an awful lot better than trading in two points of power; it wouldn't be anywhere near as good if it were instead a 1/3 flyer for .

The best activated abilities are those that are useful under all circumstances. These abilities also tend to give you some sort of board advantage in a match. Sparksmith and Timberwatch Elf had weak power/toughness stats, but their abilities made them both very powerful. Recurring damage and being able to significantly pump up a creature are both excellent abilities in a format that is usually decided through creature combat. The other thing that makes both of these creatures so good is that they don't require a mana cost to activate. Once they're in play you can tap out freely and you'll still have access to their ability every turn if you need to.

Adding a point of mana to an ability makes a huge difference. Wild Mongrel wouldn't have been anywhere near as powerful in Limited if you could just Firebolt it when your opponent tapped out. Cephalid Looter would also be a lot weaker if you had to keep mana back every time you wanted to cycle through a card. Just think how powerful a card like Soratami Rainshaper would be if it didn't have a mana cost! You could cast it on turn three and your opponent would basically never be able to target your creatures for the whole game! As you can see, the difference between a having an activated ability be free, and having it cost mana is huge, and should definitely be taken into consideration when evaluating a creature.

It's interesting to see how we've gone from Sparksmith, to Vulshok Sorcerer to Frostwielder in the last few sets but yet the ability to deal repeated damage to both creatures and players is powerful enough that we're still seeing Frostwielder played even when the ability is attached to a four mana 1/2.

The activated abilities that generally get prized most highly are:

- Deal damage directly to a creature or player.
- Destroy a creature.
- Pump up the power and toughness of a creature.



- Reduce the power and toughness of a creature.
- Tap a creature.

In general you'll have to trade in a lot of power and/or toughness to get these abilities but it usually doesn't matter how much. The abilities are so good that only a prohibitively high mana cost attached to the creature or the ability would prevent you from playing a creature that could generate any of those effects.

When evaluating a creature based on its abilities you have to pay close attention to any restrictions an ability might have. Initiate of Blood's ability is very close to that of Frostwielder but the added restriction is huge, and makes a big difference in how highly Initiate of Blood is rated. Even though the Initiate has an extra point of power and the ability to flip into a 4/4, the restriction on its main ability means it isn't rated as highly as Frostwielder.

There are plenty of non-activated (aka static) abilities that you're happy to see on your creatures too. As most limited games are won through reducing an opponent's life total to zero, evasive abilities like Fear and Flying that help your creatures do this are always good. In general a creature will lose +1/+1 or more to gain Flying or Fear. Sometimes you'll see a drawback instead and when this drawback is manageable you've got an excellent creature on your hands; see Nezumi Cutthroat, Cloud Spirit or Skittering Skirge for good examples. Anything that helps your creature in combat is obviously beneficial. First-Strike and Vigilance are both nice to have as they can both make life difficult for an opponent.

So, overall, when evaluating creatures first look at the power/toughness. At one and two mana you really want to see power/toughness equal to the casting cost. At three mana and above you might settle for a power/toughness of one less than the casting cost as long as they're traded in for good abilities.

Some examples from *Champions*:

Kitsune Blademaster – Trades in +1/+1 for both First Strike and Bushido 1. Bushido 1 makes it a 3/3 a lot of the time anyway so it's almost a 3/3 for three mana with First Strike attached. Excellent value.

Callous Deceiver – Has lost +2/+1 and yet gained no static abilities. The activated abilities are expensive and grant a very small effect. Pretty weak overall.

Scuttling Death – At five mana it's only lost a point of power but 3 points of toughness. You'll remember me saying that power is much more important than toughness and indeed this would be a lot worse at a 3/3 or 2/4. As it is you still have two good abilities attached to the four power for only five mana so this is very good.

Deathcurse Ogre – A six mana Vanilla creature should really be a 5/5 or a 6/6 so this has lost at least +2/+2 for a very poor effect that's both situational and hurts you as well. Awful!

Innocence Kami – With its double-white casting cost this should be a vanilla 5/5. So it's traded in +3/+2 for its ability to tap creatures and untap itself occasionally. This is still very playable though which shows just how strong the Tapping ability is.



Evaluating Spells

Spells are a little trickier to evaluate but there are some obvious categories to look for. In limited, almost anything that deals damage to creatures is great. You're really looking for Instant speed, and for the amount of damage dealt to be equal to the casting cost. Anything else is a bonus. Both Glacial Ray and Yamabushi's Flame are excellent examples as they both fulfil these two requirements whilst having additional bonuses tacked on too. Cards like Consume Spirit gain flexibility but cost a lot more to cast and are usually worse as a result. Compared to Glacial Ray you need four mana instead of two to take out a 2/2 creature, and the life-gain drawback isn't as powerful as the Splice ability. Consume Spirit is still good because it can kill creatures and players alike but it's not at the same power level as Glacial Ray. Cards that can only deal damage to players are far, far less powerful as they don't help you out in circumstances where your opponent's creatures are causing you problems. If Lava Spike could target creatures too it would be the most powerful burn spell Wizards has printed in the history of **Magic**, but it doesn't and it's unplayable in the vast majority of circumstances as a result.



In general anything that kills a creature outright is going to be worth playing. You'll usually be quite happy to trade a drawback for a lower casting cost as long as that drawback doesn't stop you killing the creature. Devour in Shadow is great as it kills the vast majority of creatures for the low cost of just two black mana. The drawback on Rend Spirit and Rend Flesh means that you're generally much happier to play Befoul even though it costs more mana and is only a Sorcery. Once again though you need to be wary of drawbacks. As good as Devour in Shadow is, Fatal Blow costs half as much and yet is much, much worse, nearly to the point of being unplayable, simply because it has a massive restriction on it.

Gaining control of a creature, even if only temporarily, is a massive advantage and over the years we've seen cards like Ray of Command, Grab The Reins and now Blind with Anger all be first-picks in their appropriate sets. Taking things permanently is so powerful it's usually restricted to rare cards

like Callous Oppressor, Persuasion or Keiga, the Tide Star.

A lot of limited matches come down to one of two things: who draws the best card, or who draws the most spells. Creature removal can allow you to deal with the first category as most of the time the best cards in sets are creatures. You can negate an opposing Yosei, the Morning Star with a simple Cage of Hands, and you can take out an opposing Kumano, Master Yamabushi with a simple Rend Flesh. Whilst you don't have too much control over how many spells you draw in a game, you can look for cards that have the potential to generate card advantage by themselves.

Both of the main mechanics in *Champions of Kamigawa* can help you out in this regard. Splice Onto Arcane can allow you to get multiple uses from the same spell and the Soulshift mechanic can recur dead creatures, which also puts you up an extra card. When you look at the *Betrayers of Kamigawa* cards for the first time pay very close attention to the Arcane spells, and the spells with Splice Onto Arcane. Cards like Blessed Breath and Glacial Ray have already proved their worth so any card that can be Spliced for a useful effect will probably be a high pick.

There are some cards that generate card advantage in other ways. Cards like Indomitable Will not only save a creature of your own, but they also leave a lasting impact on the game by enhancing one of your existing creatures. Creature enchantments normally have to be very powerful to be played as they leave you open to a potential two-for-one if your opponent can kill the enchanted creature, but

when they can be played at Instant speed, like Indomitable Will and Second Skin, they can be a source of card advantage.

The other source of card advantage can simply be through drawing more cards or being able to choose from a selection of cards. Counsel of the Soratami is fine in this format, and cards like Thought Courier improve your card selection and allow you to exchange extra lands for additional spells. Drawing cards is usually better than forcing an opponent to discard because discard won't always catch the best spell your opponent has, and sometimes it'll be completely wasted if they have nothing useful in hand or if they're able to discard worthless lands to satisfy the effect.

When evaluating a spell it's also important to note *exactly* what that spell does. The difference between "target creature gets +3/+3 until end of turn" and "Target creature gets +3/+3 and gains Trample until end of turn" is a fairly small one but it's significant. The additional Trample ability granted by the second example could win games that the first spell might not and that spell would definitely be rated higher as a result.

Here are some examples from *Champions*:

Distress – Although it only costs two mana, it's double-black and will never take more than a single card. It's acceptable, but not exciting.

Kodama's Reach – In finding two lands you're basically getting two cards for the price of one, but this provides two other bonuses too as it functions as both an accelerant and a colour fixer. You have card advantage and two extra effects for the low price of three mana so it's easy to see why this is such a high pick.

Midnight Covenant – Unlike Indomitable Will and Serpent Skin this can't be played as an Instant so there's no potential for card advantage here. It also has no effect without you pumping in additional mana. Two mana for no real effect, the loss of a card, and the potential for card disadvantage means this one should always be in your sidebar.



Yamabushi's Storm – Creature removal but with a large drawback in that it will only kill one toughness creatures. The secondary drawback of dealing damage to your own creatures shouldn't be ignored either. As this stands a very good chance of doing nothing, this is often best left in your sidebar until you know you'll be facing creatures that are vulnerable to its effect. When you do know that though, this can become a very playable little card.

Evaluating Future Cards

With *Betrayers of Kamigawa* just around the corner and card previews already out there'll be plenty of opportunities for you to put your card evaluation skills into practice over the coming weeks.

To get you started, we're going to do another small Limited Pointing exercise on the *Betrayer's of Kamigawa* cards that have already been previewed on this site. Hopefully most of you will remember Pointing from the last time it was covered in this column, but if you don't you can check out the explanation there or just follow the guide below. I want you to rate these eight *Betrayers* cards for *Limited play only*. Please, don't consider them for constructed or for how much you think they might be worth monetarily or anything like that. The scale you should use is the same as before and looks like this:

- 5.0:** *I will always play this card. Period.*
- 4.5:** *I will almost always play this card, regardless of what else I get.*
- 4.0:** *I will strongly consider playing this as the only card of its color.*
- 3.5:** *I feel a strong pull into this card's color.*
- 3.0:** *This card makes me want to play this color. (Given that I'm playing that color, I will play this card 100% of the time.)*
- 2.5:** *Several cards of this power level start to pull me into this color. If playing that color, I essentially always play these. (Given that I'm playing that color, I will play this card 90% of the time.)*
- 2.0:** *If I'm playing this color, I usually play these. (70%)*
- 1.5:** *This card will make the cut into the main deck about half the times I play this color. (50%)*
- 1.0:** *I feel bad when this card is in my main deck. (30%)*
- 0.5:** *There are situations where I might sideboard this into my deck, but I'll never start it. (10%)*
- 0.0:** *I will never put this card into my deck (main deck or after sideboarding). (0%)*

Here are the *Betrayers* cards previewed so far:

- Figure, the Still Wind
- Fumiko the Lowblood
- Toshiro Umezawa
- Tallowisp
- Genju of the Cedars
- Patron of the Orochi
- Cunning Bandit (previewed today in Mark Rosewater's column).
- Hundred Talon Strike (previewed today in BDM's feature article).

Take a few minutes to review those cards and decide how good you think they'll be. When you're ready click below to rate them! (You may also want to write your results down so you can reference them next week.) I'll be including the results in next week's article. Hope to see you all then!

Figure, the Still Wind	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text" value="0.0"/> ▼
Fumiko the Lowblood	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text" value="0.0"/> ▼
Toshiro Umezawa	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text" value="0.0"/> ▼
Tallowisp	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text" value="0.0"/> ▼
Genju of the Cedars	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text" value="0.0"/> ▼
Patron of the Orochi	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text" value="0.0"/> ▼
Cunning Bandit	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text" value="0.0"/> ▼
Hundred-Talon Strike	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text" value="0.0"/> ▼

