

Why you won't want to miss this one, plus a preview card bonus! **Betraying the Secrets of the Prerelease**

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• **Brian David-Marshall Archive**

I was looking back through my [author archives](#) last week and I realized that I rarely get to play in as many PTQs as I used to during my [Swimming with Sharks](#) days. I used to play in upwards of four or five a season along with various Grand Prix Trials and cash tournaments. I still manage to squeak one or two out a season but with the coverage gig and other forces in my life I've increasingly found myself involved with the game in other ways.

Don't get me wrong. My passion for **Magic** has not diminished -- not even one iota -- it is just that it has become very challenging for me to clear a block of weekend time to hit the PTQ scene. But there is one tournament that I simply refuse to skip. In fact, I have had a big red circle around next weekend's **Magic** tournaments for as long as I have had my 2005 calendar (which is, admittedly, not very long since I wait for them to go on sale) and have avoided scheduling any conflicts for that weekend. The [Betrayers of Kamigawa Prerelease](#) is one tournament I am simply not going to miss. I am sure that many of you have been to Prereleases and feel similarly. It is the first opportunity to get your hands on the new cards and run them out there under actual battle conditions. If that's you, some of this article is not going to be for you then (although there may or may not be an actual card preview lurking just below the edge of your computer screen), rather it is to try and induce players who have never been to a Prerelease (or, in many cases, never been to a tournament at all) to take the plunge and be on hand for the betrayal of Kamigawa.

There are tons of reasons to play in a Prerelease, even if you have never played in any tournament before. It may seem like a daunting experience but Prerelease tournaments are the easiest, most fun, and low-key events you can kick your sanctioned **Magic** career off with. "Sanctioned" tournaments might have an ominous and officious tone that could put off a casual **Magic** player but all it means is that the tournament is run according to a set of standards set down by Wizards of the Coast to ensure that the tournaments are run uniformly and fairly.

In order to play in a sanctioned tournament you need to sign up for a free DCI membership and be assigned a PIN that will be used to keep track of your matches to determine your rating -- very much like a chess rating. Using your PIN you can check your rating against the rest of the world. You can also see how you rate against other players in your country -- you can even check out how you fare on a local level. There are other benefits as well. I asked Wizards of the Coast Organized Play Community Manager Michael Gills to share some of those perks with my readers.

"Signing up for the DCI and then participating in DCI sanctioned events are the first steps to becoming a member of an active and larger gaming community. By playing in DCI events you get to meet other folks who play the same games you do and test your skills against them. Then, outside of the immediate advantages of playing in DCI sanctioned events (ratings, rankings, event prizes and recognition) Wizards of the Coast offers Player Rewards programs for our most popular games (**Magic**, **Dungeons & Dragons**, **Duel Masters**). Members of the **Magic Players Rewards Program** (which is free to join!) get their DCI number on a special membership card, receive periodic rewards for playing in DCI sanctioned play (unique promo cards for example), and get sent the MPR html newsletter containing unique strategy articles and calendars of events directly to them! We practically pay you to play!"



Michael Gills

Speaking of promo cards... When you sign up for a Prerelease event you get a special commemorative foil card that is exclusive to Prerelease players. What is it? I can't tell you because I don't know yet. It will be a foil rare from the new set. Past foils have featured unique qualities like variant art and a special stamp to commemorate the date. They always trade very well and are cool artifacts of your **Magic** career. I have a couple of binder pages in my collection of cool cards from over the years that are dedicated to Prerelease cards. It's fun to look back at them and remember past sets and Prerelease tournaments.

One note, you can't use that card in your Sealed Deck. It is just a perk that should get tucked away in your trade binder to await the best possible offer. What you do get with the price of admission (generally \$25 - \$30 US) is a *Champions of Kamigawa* Tournament Pack and three *Betrayers of Kamigawa* Booster Packs. This is one more booster pack than you normally get in a Sealed Deck tournament but in order to maximize your exposure to the new set an extra pack is added for the Prerelease tournaments for the last two sets of each block.

When you get your cards you should separate them by color and then alphabetize them. You will be handed a checklist and asked to mark off what cards you received. This literally consists of writing the numeral "1" in a box next to a printed card name. Occasionally you will need to write a "2" and even the rare "3" but that is the extent of the work you need to do. You will mark down all the cards you receive and you will probably not keep the cards you register.

This can sometimes be a bit of a hurdle for the novice player to clear. In Sealed Deck Tournaments it is common practice to have players register a deck and then have the organizer gather up the registered decks and redistribute them. This is so there is a record of the cards that players receive and to assure the integrity of the tournament. Say you come up against a player with an absurd card pool... This way you can know that player had someone else verify the contents of his/her deck beforehand. The easiest way to think of the registration process is that you are registering someone else's deck and someone else is registering yours, and you just haven't seen yours yet.

Once the cards have been registered and the decks have been swapped it is time to build your 40-card minimum deck. You can build a deck that contains more than 40 cards but it is not advisable. If you feel you must play with more than 40 cards please make sure and adjust your mana ratio to accommodate the extra cards. As a general rule of thumb you want to play with 23 creatures and

spells with 17 lands. I like to have 17-18 creatures with the rest of the cards being good removal or combat tricks. I also try very hard to stick to two colors. If I play a third color it is almost always for one or two removal cards that only require one color specific mana in the casting cost. In other words I might build a blue-white deck that splashes black for Rend Spirit, Rend Flesh, and a Pull Under. I would almost certainly not play a Befoul or Devouring Greed in that deck since I would only be playing two or three Swamps to support those cards, making their extra black mana requirements prohibitive.

Saturday School headmaster [John Carter](#) offered the following *Betrayers*-specific-advice for when you build your Sealed Deck. "*Betrayers* takes splice to a whole new level. Take your time to read the cards, pay attention to what is and isn't Arcane, and think about the timing of announcing and paying for spells."

Perhaps John had something like this card in mind when he offered that advice.



This is a great example of a card that isn't removal per se but is a potent combat trick that you should be looking to use this weekend -- and also be on the lookout for. What is great about this card is that you can use it while tapping out for another spell. During combat you could tap out to Pull Under a nasty Moss Kami and tap your blocking Kami of Ancient Law to splice Hundred-Talon Strike to take down a Ronin Houndmaster.

My guess, based on John's advice, is that there will be a variety of alternate splice costs, which will open up all sorts of possibilities that were not available in all-*Champions* limited formats. Make sure you take the allotted amount of time and read all your cards carefully when building your deck.

Betrayers also introduces the mechanic of Ninjutsu into *Champions* block. I asked one of the set's two developers to explain the impact of the new mechanic on game play. Randy Buehler was more than happy to accommodate, as he was particularly excited about the mechanic that Mark introduced to readers of this site [last Monday](#).

"Throughout the history of **Magic**, it's always been safer to just let an attacking creature through for damage than to block. Your opponent's morph creature might be a huge fatty, better not block. Your opponent has untapped mana so he might have a combat trick so you better just take 2. Your opponent seems to have sent his guy in on a suicide mission, what's he up to? Better not risk it ... Etc. etc. etc. The thing I like most about ninjutsu is that it forces players to re-evaluate this truth. I was delighted to conclude, while testing *Betrayers*, that most of the time the right play is actually to risk it and block every random attacker. I've always wished we had had more morph creatures that punished you for not blocking and now with Ninjas I think there are enough of them that this will be a real factor (when your opponent is playing blue or black, anyway)."

"The other really cool thing I remember from testing *Betrayers* is that Battle-Mad Ronin is awesome with ninjas!" Randy added with a grin.

In addition to being a rules guru and collector of fine pins, John Carter is also a Prerelease veteran with more sage advice for the novice player.

"Prereleases are mostly run in flights/pods. You can get there early, but you can also make a day of it with friends and stay the whole day. Sleep in for a bit and bring a cooler with lunch and drinks. This way you can enjoy playing in multiple flights without quitting because you're tired or hungry. I recommend packing the car the night before so all you have to do is load the cooler and climb in. Encourage friends to sleep over or meet you at your place or at your local store if you're the driver."

Mike Guptil is the head honcho of [Professional Event Services](#) -- PES for short. PES runs multiple prerelease events for each set and runs some of the best tournaments in the world. Who better to give an example of the variety of events you can expect at a Prerelease event?

"One of the best parts about a prerelease is that there are a wide range of events for you to compete in. This allows you to make the best use of your time possible and gives you the ability to not only play in events and see the new cards, but to take a few minutes to trade or eat. At the PES prerelease events, we offer 4 different types of events; one large Main Event, many 32-player Flights, a 3-player team event and booster drafts."



Mike Guptil, Grand Prix Columbus '01

"The Main Event is our largest event at each prerelease and it has the best prizes. First place gets two *Betrayers* booster boxes and 2nd – 8th each get 1 booster box. Players finishing 9th – 16th receive

0.5 booster boxes of *Betrayers*. We run one of these events at 10:00 AM and if you can't stay for the better part of the day, I don't suggest getting into this event."

"If you have less time to spend at the Prerelease, one of the best events you can jump into is a 32-player flight. These events start very frequently and run in far less time than the Main Event so you can play in more than one a day if you want. Prizes are still pretty good, with the winner walking away with a booster box of *Betrayers* and the rest of the top 8 don't do so poorly either: 2nd = 18 booster packs, 3rd - 4th = 9 booster packs of *Betrayers of Kamigawa* and 5th - 8th = 6 booster packs. We will start 32-player flights before 8:00 AM at all of our prerelease sites, with the first flight often starting at 7:15 AM!"

"Scott Larabee touched on the uniqueness of playing in a 3-player team event, so I won't cover it more except to say that this is one of the best events to play in over the weekend and a really good option for families."

"Booster drafts start later in the day and fill up very quickly. These events are nice and short, and still give you a chance yo get some of the new cards, even though they don't offer a Prerelease card. At our prereleases, we have prizes to the top 2 for booster drafts with the winner getting 9 *Betrayers* packs and second getting 3 boosters."

He is right. There are tons of events for you to play in all day long. Multiple Sealed Deck flights as well as booster drafts, and even Team Sealed events. Wizards of the Coast's DCI Program Manager **Scott Larabee** is a big proponent of three player team events.

"The Team sealed deck events are especially cool. You get all the cool things about a

Prerelease tournament (playing with the new set, exclusive premium cards, etc). In addition, players can play with their friends or families, so everyone can enjoy the prerelease together. The strategy of building decks together from a limited card pool is an experience that player may find new and interesting."



Scott Larabee, Grand Prix San Diego '99

Plus, for you PTQ veterans out there... These are sanctioned team events so if you find yourself a few points short of the mark to qualify for the Team Pro Tour in Atlanta -- you need a 1750 minimum rating to Q -- you might just have one last chance to boost that rating before everything changes over to the Extended format the following weekend. There have to be better than 100 teams within shooting distance of a ratings invite if they are shooting from a Prerelease event.

Whether you are a grizzled veteran of the Pro Tour Qualifier scene or a novice player nervously dipping your toes into sanctioned waters for the first time you should find an event to suit your particular needs. If you are going to your first tournament I strongly suggest you look into the event you will be attending beforehand to assess the unique aspects of your local tournament. Sometimes

organizers will have guest artists or will post buy lists of single cards they are buying at their events. You can find your local event by checking [here](#).

If you do decide to attend your first event this weekend, introduce yourself to the person running the event and let them know you are playing in your first tournament. I am sure they will take the time to answer any questions you might have and make sure that your first experience goes as smoothly as possible. It never hurts to let the organizer know that you are a new potential customer who might attend additional events in the future if you have a good time!

Also, don't be afraid to talk to some of the other players around you. Making friends is one of the best parts of playing tournament **Magic**. Some players fear that any time they step foot in a tournament site that they will be fresh meat in a sea of predatory sharks. For the most part the atmosphere at a Prerelease is pretty casual and friendly. You will find many more experienced players willing to take out some time and talk to you about your deck, offer play advice, or engage in trading.

If you are at the New York City event on Saturday keep an eye out for me and be sure to say hello. See you there!