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Well, the 2005 Extended PTQ season is over. More or less. There were some straggler PTQs last weekend and the American Northeast will be blessed with three bonus PTQs in the next three weeks, but last week's article, I'm told, will have been the last one wherein TOs everywhere will submit their proud local champions, freshly pinned, for the "Extended Top 8 Decklists" link. Go ahead and click that. You know. For old time's sake:

This great new feature was brought to you not by yours truly, but by dutiful tournament organizers around the country and the world, Greg Collins, and Brian David-Marshall. Contrary to what my readership seems to think, if email responses are to be believed, I didn't do all the work, or any of the work in fact. I didn't submit or input or even name the decks. I just got to take advantage of the coolest feature available to PTQ players EVER.

## All Those \*s and 1s

The Extended Top 8 Decklists was cool to begin with because it "broke the story" on new and innovative decks. From the very first week, we learned about Michael Pinnegar's Teen Titans deck at a Columbus PTQ.

Michael Pinnegar / "Teen Titans" Reanimation

## 1st Place - Ohio - Columbus - 1/29

This deck showed itself to be a powerful weapon, enriching basic Extended Reanimator strategies by drawing on one of Vintage's most feared one-drops. Teen Titans could play like the Szleifer deck from Pro Tour-Columbus, using Careful Study or Cabal Therapy to dump something or other in its graveyard and then set up a big threat...

The only difference was Bosh or Platinum Angel wearing Akroma's "ridiculous creature that you never actually **play**" shoes, but was most abusive when it went down the Goblin Welder + Sundering Titan road. Michael's deck played not a single basic land, so it was not hurt by the Sundering Titan. On the other hand, that Welder + Sundering Titan gave it crazy draws where two-color opponents in particular got swept and chump blocked into permanents-free positions... all while cracking with a seven-power threat.

Ultimately, this deck was the format's first really influential rogue deck. Top pros such as Gabe Walls chose Teen Titans for Grand Prix-Boston, the first big event of the season, and Keith McLaughlin scored Top 8 with a version.

## The Tools of the Metagame: Now with More Destiny Control

More important than showing us the new decks, the Teen Titans and infinite mana engines of the format, the Extended Top 8 Decklists gave us TRENDS. A PTQ player is really only going to be interested in this feature for one of two reasons -- to copy one of the powerful new decks (if you can't beat 'em, join 'em), or to try to figure out what his opponents are going to be playing *next* week. The early data showed us that, yes, everyone was paying attention when Shuhei Nakamura made the finals of Columbus -- Red Deck Wins was out in force. This data helped players make good decisions.

If you wanted to make Top 8, Red Deck Wins was a good choice. If you wanted to *beat* Red Deck Wins to actually *win* an event, well...

Over the course of many weeks, we saw Mind's Desire and Aluren show themselves to be good choices to actually *win* a PTQ, even if they were outnumbered by the Red Decks. Old, or merely established, decks got facelifts in the PTQ season as well. The Rock, the most popular -- and almost universally unsuccessful -- deck of Pro Tour-Columbus, refused to die at the amateur level, despite the fact that reigning Player of the Year and recent Pro Tour Champion Gabriel Nassif couldn't manage to win with it. PTQ adherents around the world twisted and tuned the black and green cards, adding elements as disparate as Rancor, Mesmeric Fiend, and Sword of Light and Shadow for a very different look indeed.

NO Stick, Nick West's Scepter-Chant deck, didn't wilt, either. While NO Stick was rogue at the Pro Tour, the danger of a larger field was that knowledgeable opponents would see what was coming, making them able to better prepare for the blue-white control deck with a crazy combo lock . . . sort of, anyway. Scepter-Chant players around the world tackled this problem a number of different ways. Nick himself removed many of the true control elements of his deck, leaving only the permanents-based utility elements, and opted for a Draco-Explosion kill at Grand Prix-Eindhoven.

Topdeck

## **Nicholas West**

This deck supplemented Draco's 16 damage with a more consistent burn plan via Tendo Ice Bridge, Battlefield Forge, Shivan Reef, and Reflecting Pool, the inclusion of Magma Jet, and, let's be honest, the opponent's Polluted Deltas and Vampiric Tutors.

My favorite change to Scepter-Chant, though, was to add a different combo to the deck. Rather than a combo kill that actually killed someone, the Solitary Confinement version just picked a different defensive lock! The reason I liked this change so much is that it paid direct attention to the needs of the Scepter-Chant deck. Scepter-Chant was strongest against combo opponents like Aluren, which it could beat with a single Meddling Mage and a little Counterspell backup.

The weakness of the deck came specifically from beatdown decks like Red Deck Wins. Nakamura beat West with ease in Columbus, besting two big Exalted Angels in one game. The Orim's Chant combo was not meaningful against a deck that could deal instant speed damage via Magma Jet, Cursed Scroll, and Grim Lavamancer; on the other hand, the Solitary Confinement/Squee draw was very difficult to beat. In addition, Compulsion/Squee gave this deck an extra layer of power against other control decks. As strong as Nick's original NO Stick was as a rogue option, it needed its permanents to resolve and was a little light in a Fact or Fiction shootout.

Kazuki Kurashima / Scepter Chant

## **4th Place - Japan - Osaka - 2/12**

This column showcased other small changes that ended up being very important. Aether Vial was successfully added to Life, a change that ended up almost universal... and contributed to the Grand Prix monster Cephalid Brunch.

But over the past couple of weeks, the real story has been the rise of Goblins.

## **Controlling Your Destiny WITH CONTROL Itself**

The version of Goblins that made Top 8 at Pro Tour-Columbus had very little impact on the PTQ metagame. Rather than the Burning Wish deck that was so successful for Olivier Ruel, PTQ players either went the DeRosa/Fabiano route with Aether Vial and Cabal Therapy, straight red for more consistent Goblin Ringleaders, or touched green for enchantment/artifact removal (this last option was something we didn't dwell on as an Internet community as a whole, but was maybe an important route given the shape of the late-format combo and rogue decks). As a group the little red men were big movers, jumping the once ubiquitous Red Deck Wins as not only the most popular red deck, but the most popular archetype overall.

Information like this was really helpful to players who paid attention. Say you wanted to qualify in a field you knew would be defined by Goblins, but wanted to have game against other decks as well? What would you pick?

This player chose a deck that was already a rising star in the metagame, but tweaked it to have a better chance against decks like Aluren (his own previous Weapon of Choice)... and absolutely CRUSH Goblins.

Michael Clair / Psychatog

### **1st Place - New Jersey - South Plainfield - 3/19**

#### **The New Face of Counter-Sliver: Adding Control to Aggression**

Most recently, we saw a new deck, Blue-red Fish.

Marshall Arthurs / Blue-red Fish

### **1st Place - Ohio - Columbus - 3/20**

Mark Kelso / Blue-red Fish

### **2nd Place - Ohio - Columbus - 3/20**

Marshall Arthurs and Mark Kelso were the only two players to run this archetype at the last PES PTQ . . . and met each other in the finals. When I first pointed out Blue-red Fish last week, I didn't really know what to say. Sure, it was reminiscent of a Type I deck, but how did it fit into the Extended metagame?

Fish's opponents had some really interesting things to say:

Eric Taylor, most recently on the Road Warrior and Fan Favorite **Magic** Invitational ballots, lost to Blue-red Fish at the Columbus PTQ. He was running a version of Psychatog, and said that he could not easily beat this deck. One of the fundamental weaknesses of Psychatog is that, despite being (at least arguably) the best true control deck in Extended, it has poor board-control elements. Unlike the Standard decks of the past, modern Extended Psychatog decks don't play cards like Aether Burst, Repulse, or Smother. As such, they have big problems with Aether Vial, Grim Lavamancer, and Voidmage Prodigy -- basically, any successfully resolved creature strategy that can't be trumped by Dr. Teeth himself in a fight.

Think about it. Outside of decking the opponent, the only way that Psychatog can win is to attack with an enormous Psychatog for the kill. Now how is Psychatog supposed to come down against Kai Budde? With Aether Vial in the mix, 'Tog **can't even counter** the Voidmage Prodigy! Between Grim

Lavamancer and Voidmage Prodigy itself, Fish has eight outs against 3-4 'Togs . . . those aren't the best of odds for the control player.

Some years ago, I wrote about the folly of testing rogue deck against rogue deck, but it might be interesting to see if Fish still crushed 'Tog if Engineered Plague were in the mix for those 1/1 and 2/1 Wizards...

Jason Williamson made Top 8 of Fish's same Columbus PTQ with -- you guessed it -- Goblins.

Jason Williamson / Goblins

## **5th Place - Ohio - Columbus - 3/20**

Jason played Mark and Marshall in the Columbus Swiss, and beat them both. Jason's Artifact Mutations made Marshall's Masticores pretty bad ("my rogue deck was no match for his rogue sideboard," said Arthurs); Jason credits the Fish deck with being strong, especially against 'Tog and combo decks -- but he also says that if you know what's coming, careful play will be rewarded. This is a case where the rogue factor of the deck is where most of its wins come. Against an informed opponent -- say, someone facing Fish after last week's decks went up -- the deck is less difficult to best. Jason's success came because he played around an opponent with few truly significant threats and no hard counters. When the real threat did come, he just turned it into a handful of buddies for his own team. 1/1 Saps are pretty savage against a deck based on 1/1 and 2/1 ACTUAL CARDBOARD, after all.

Mark Kelso split with Marshall in the finals. According to Kelso, the best card in the deck is Cloud of Faeries. The versatile Faeries promotes the fastest starts, and helps set up the midgame against aggressive decks like Goblins. Mark and Marshall have known each other via the same local store for about three years now.

The winner himself had the best quote about the Fish deck, though.

"I can't explain it, the deck is just good," said Arthurs. "Nobody knew what was going on either... In two PTQs I was Cabal Therapied for Psychatog, Goblin Warchief, Goblin Piledriver, and Isochron Scepter... People would look at my hand and be like 'what the hell?'"

And then he'd beat them.

Many players think that Blue-red Fish is going to be a contender after the rotations eliminate current juggernauts such as Aluren, Mind's Desire, or any deck, really, that relies on Vampiric Tutor or the Urza's Block untap mechanic, so don't forget.

Last but not least, Matt Walker of Tucson didn't forget . . . Jesse Marczyk? Jesse played almost the same Fish deck back at Grand Prix-Boston, the first major event of the season. Credit where credit's due:

Jesse Marczyk B. D.

Some of the details are different, but the Aether Vial/Standstill and Voidmage Prodigy/Grim Lavamancer elements are all there. Sharp eyes, Matt!

Though it's possible that I'll do another recap for the remaining PTQs and/or the Philadelphia Last Chance Qualifier in the coming weeks, for now, we are closing the book on 2005's Extended PTQ season. For upcoming PTQ information, look to Scott Wills's Limited Information column. The age of Sealed Deck is once again upon us!

And from Swimming With Sharks? Starting next week, the previous column returns. See you then.

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