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Editor's note: Regular columnist Scott Wills is taking a three-week break for his wedding and honeymoon. In the interim, Matthew Vienneau will be filling in on Limited Information.

There are few complaints more pervasive at a Limited **Magic** tournament (both in real life and online) than "I was so unlucky" or the related "they were so lucky." Often it is said with quite a bit of vigour and may be accompanied by the ripping up of decks or the very un-sportsmanlike slinging of insults at an opponent. But "mana-screw" – not enough lands, too many lands, lands of the wrong type – are the excuses used to cover up the real problem:

Inferior Deck Construction.

...and occasionally, bad decision-making. I'm going to start off my first of three guest columns with 10 quick "Mana Maxims" that should be especially helpful for beginner players. Then we'll take a look at an online draft I encountered a week ago, followed by a listing of some recent Limited PTQ Top 8 decks.

How To Rule The Land: 10 Ways To "Get Lucky" At A Magic Tournament

1. Always Play 40 Cards.

Before we go anywhere we have to agree on one thing – 40-card decks. Always play 40 cards. Never more, and certainly never less. No matter how tempting or necessary you think it is to put that 41st card in, whether it's that spell that you just can't live without, the Terashi's Grasp that is your only answer to Hondens or Jitte; if it's that important, take something else out. People playing decks with more than 40 cards not only have no right to complain about getting unlucky, they will likely get actively mocked by more serious players if they attempt to do so.

THE 10 RULES

1. Always play 40 cards.
2. Always play 15-18 lands.
3. Only play two colours or two colours and a small splash.
4. When splashing one card, have at least two land or three mana sources of the appropriate type.
5. When splashing two cards, have three land or four mana sources of the appropriate type.
6. Always mulligan six-land opening hands.
7. Always draw first in Sealed Deck.
8. Be able to survive with only three mana.
9. Be able to take advantage of 10 mana.
10. Consider mana vulnerability when sideboarding.

The reasoning is simple – the fewer cards you have in your deck, the more likely you are to draw the best cards, or the card you need in a particular situation. If you desperately need your Cage of Hands to deal with a sixth-turn Kokusho or your Marrow-Gnawer to go with your Throat Slitter, it's better to have a 1 in 27 chance of drawing it (40 cards minus 7 opening cards minus 6 cards drawn) than a 1 in 28 or 1 in 30. And why put in extra cards that aren't as good as the ones already in the deck? Unless you're playing against a Dampen Thought deck and have no other answers, you shouldn't have

to worry about running out of cards. In 10 years of playing Sealed Decks and Drafts, I have never started with more than 40 cards, and I have sideboarded in a 41st card less than a handful of times.

Corollary – Always double-check that you've written down 40 cards on your deck sheet. Add up each column of cards on the deck sheet and make sure it totals 40. People get game losses for incorrectly recording their deck all the time but then blame their fifth-round mana screw for knocking them out of contention for Top 8, don't be one of them!

2. Always play 15-18 lands.

Just last week a player in the *Magic Online* draft room was complaining publicly about not drawing any of the 14 land in his deck. When questioned as to why he played 14 he responded, "because my 45-card decks get mana-flooded at 17 lands". Needless to say, he did not find many sympathetic ears.

You always want to play 15 to 18 lands, but within that small range there's a lot of theory and discussion over exactly the right number. Generally you want up to 18 mana sources, with no fewer than 16 of them being actual lands because spells just aren't as reliable and often won't do you any good without at least two land in your opening hand. In blocks such as *Mirrodin*-only with lots of cheap cantrips and mana sources, you can go as low as 15 lands but any lower and you have too high a risk of having to mulligan. Play 18 lands when it's really important that you don't miss a land drop in the first four turns. You never want to play 19 lands, although 19 mana sources can be justified at times.

Cheap spells that provided mana such as Iron Myr, Vine Trellis or Rampant Growth should be considered half a land when doing land counts, keeping in mind the lower limit of 15 lands. The exceptions are Llanowar Elves or Birds of Paradise in a heavy green deck, as you can keep an opening hand with a single Forest if you also have a Bird. Spells that cost three should count as a third of a land, while spells costing four or more (Ur-Golem's Eye, anyone?) shouldn't be considered at all.

Corollary – Pure non-cantrip colour-fixers such as Orochi Leafcaller and Viridian Acolyte should not be considered mana sources and played only when desperate or risking a four- or five-colour deck (not suggested for beginners). If you need to spend a card just to change the colour of your mana, you probably need to re-examine your deck and change the spell balance as per Maxim No. 3...

3. Only play two colours or two colours and a small splash.

6/6/6 is what I call "Sealed Deck Mana" because when Sealed Deck was first played, you were restricted to the lands that came with the sealed deck so you'd often be forced to play six lands of each type because that's all you had available. In these more civilized days, you can get as many lands as you require and so you want to optimize your draws by minimizing the colour requirements – no one should ever after play 6/6/6 again. No splash is best. Small splashes of one or two cards are okay, and anything more is a bit awkward.

Corollary - Mono-colour is an option but it's very rare that you can get 23 quality cards in one colour or 23 cards that are better than anything in your sideboard or that you might have drafted. Drafting Ashen-Skin Zuberia over Pain Kami just to stay mono-black is a very poor decision. It's very easy to splash a few cards in a second colour and the Kami is a much better card.

4. When splashing one card, have at least two land or three mana sources of the appropriate type.

When splashing a single spell such as a Worship, Blind with Anger or even Cleanfall, you want at least two mana sources and preferably three. What you don't want is three lands – that will interfere with

your main colours. Playing one spell and one land is also risky as the spell may be removed or required to get a different type of land, thus leaving you with only a small chance of playing your splash card. It's safer with mana sources such as Kodama's Reach or Journeyer's Kite that can get multiple types of land and are difficult to counter or remove, but even then most mana bases can handle a two-land splash. Two land and a Kodama's Reach is superior as it almost guarantees reasonably smooth mana.

Corollary - Only splash spells with a single mana requirement. Much as you want to fit Kokusho (4BB) into your red-white deck, it's not worth the effort. You need six mana sources to reliably get two of the same in a reasonable amount of time and most decks can't squeeze in those kinds of numbers.

5. When splashing two cards, have three land or four mana sources of the appropriate type.

The general theory on card counts is that if you have four of a card then you're likely to draw it in your opening hand. Three of a card means you'll likely draw one each game. Thus, three off-colour mana sources is the minimum number to ensure you don't strand two splash cards in hand. Three land is fine, though three land and a colour-fixing spell is better. Two land and two spells works as well.

Corollary - Don't splash early-game cards or mana fixers. Splashing Orochi Sustainer or Sakura-Tribe Elder is never a good idea as they won't show up early enough to accelerate your mana, and by the time you can play them you should already have all three colours. You also want your splashes to be non-creature spells (Glacial Ray) or late-game creatures such as Ryusei, not Ronin Houndmaster or Battle-Mad Ronin. If it's only good in the first four or five turns, leave it in the sideboard.

6. Always mulligan six-land opening hands.

There is a lot to say about your opening hand and when to mulligan. Recent **Magic** Invitational nominee Eric Taylor wrote what I feel to be the seminal piece on the mulligan back in 1999. Rarely has a single article affected my game more with its mathematical analysis of the probabilities involved. One of key pieces of information was to always mulligan a six-land opening hand because after eight draws there is only a 45 percent chance of having seven spells and eight lands - and a 45 percent chance of getting a mediocre draw is a very bad deal. It's more likely you'll get a 10-land, 5-spell draw which generally leads to much complaining.

Corollary - Opening hands with early double-mana casting cost spells are not that good either. If you don't start with any Forests, you only have a 30 percent chance of being able to play that Gnarled Mass by turn four.

7. Always draw first in Sealed Deck.

This is a contentious point that is well known among the top players but is slow to trickle down to newer competitors. Sealed Deck is the slowest of all formats so you don't have to worry as much about an opponent getting an early tempo draw that wins before you can set up your defences. You also tend to have more difficult mana bases where an additional card can really help get that Ogre Marauder out on turn three. And Sealed Deck is the format that most often comes down to drawing off the top of the deck (or "top-decking"). Starting with an additional card is an important advantage that far outweighs the cost of some early damage.

There have been exceptions to this rule, most notably the extremely aggressive *Champions of Kamigawa*-only environment where it wasn't always possible to survive the early game. *Onslaught* block, where whoever morphed first often had a dominant advantage, is the only other time where I've consistently played first. In Sealed Deck, card advantage is king.

Corollary – Drawing first in a Booster Draft can be a good idea when playing black-red with lots of kill (especially the mirror) or any sort of controlling deck with lots of removal or a good defensive early game. If you know the game will go long, the extra card really helps.

8. Be able to survive with only three mana.

A lot of players get very upset when they are stuck at three or even four mana while holding lots of expensive bombs. It's important that your deck can survive a prolonged early game, even while your opponent is playing the bigger spells. If your opponent has six land to your three, then that means you have three more spells than she does so you're not quite as bad off as you might think.

Make sure you have at least a few early creatures if only to buy time until you draw the land you need. In a recent top 8 draft I included a mostly useless Teardrop Kami in my expensive control deck because I knew I would need time to develop my game. Of course, the best defence is a good offence – if you can keep your opponent on the defensive with early attackers and removal then you might not even notice the missing land.

Corollary – Make sure your expensive spells are really worth it. I've seen a lot of Pus Kamis hit play recently and while I won't deny they are reasonably effective once activated, I wonder how often their owners have lost while holding them with only six mana available?

9. Be able to take advantage of 10 mana.

Every turn that you don't tap all your land is a wasted opportunity. You want to be able to use all your land, even in the late game, but you don't want too many expensive spells (see the corollary to this point). It is very frustrating to have seven land in play and nothing to use them for, only to then draw another land.

Every time I build a deck, I try to make sure it has a couple of cards that can take advantage of late-game mana. Cards that turn lands into spells, such as Merfolk Looter, Soratami Cloudskater, the various Genjus and even a spliced Torrent of Stone, are excellent solutions. Also helpful are permanents with repeatable activated abilities, such as Orochi Eggwatcher, Cursed Ronin, various equipment or the Kamis that gain abilities when you reveal the top card of your deck to be a land. The Moonfolk abilities can also allow you to take advantage of extra mana. Even cheap activation costs can help – using a Sensei's Divining Top, regenerating a Carrion Wall or tapping a creature with Innocence Kami means less mana goes to waste each turn.

Repeatedly drawing extra cards (or the equivalent) is the optimal solution to almost any problem, including this one. Honden of Seeing Winds, Phyrexian Arena or Jayemdae Tome should have no trouble keeping your mana tapped as you play out the extra spells. Buyback, Splice and even Soulshift simulate card drawing by giving you additional uses for extra lands. The most powerful examples of each are the spells that have cheaper options that are still very useful, such as Whispers of the Muse and Glacial Ray.

Corollary – Don't go overboard! Decks with six Moonfolk that are also trying to splice Soulless Revival or Torrent of Stone on Petals of Insight every turn while activating a Callous Deceiver aren't going to be able to get it all done, and as a result each card will be less effective than it could be. Vanilla permanents and one-shot spells definitely have a place!

10. Consider mana vulnerability when sideboarding.

There's nothing like losing two Myr to Wail of the Nim to realize that not all mana sources are the same. Lands can't be countered and most people don't have any way of destroying them. Little 1/1 artifact creatures, on the other hand, are the most vulnerable permanent in **Magic**. When going to

the sideboard, and even when building your deck, it is important to understand the vulnerability of your mana. In the *Mirrodin* block I would routinely switch Myr for lands or Talismans if my opponent had shown two or more cards from the lengthy list of Lose Hope, Vulshok Sorcerer, Wail of the Nim, Viridian Longbow, Krark-Clan Shaman or Granite Shard. Not only might it drastically hinder my early game if they were killed, but in the late game every Myr would be a dead card – worse than a land. And needless to say, if your opponent ever uses land destruction, especially in the first game, you should reach for that land pile!

Corollary – Get aggressive on your opponent’s mana when the opportunity presents itself! In a recent tournament, my opponent noticed that not only did many of my spells (Horobi’s Whisper and Forked-Branch Garami came to mind) require two mana of the same colour, I was also splashing two mountains for Glacial Ray and Honden of Infinite Rage. As a result, she sideboarded in a Stone Rain that destroyed one of my two Mountains and used Yamabushi’s Flame on my early Orochi Sustainer. She nearly won as a result.

Hopefully by heeding these rules, players will complain less about getting unlucky and more about losing to opponents with better decks that played well.

Next Week

I recently had an interesting draft set of draft choices that I want to offer up to the masses as I’m pretty sure I did the wrong thing. This is a multi-pack problem that we’ll revisit next week, but here’s the set-up...

It’s late at night and you’ve foolishly begun an online draft while not at your mental best. It’s the first pack of a *Champions-Champions-Betrayers* booster draft and you are presented with the following options:

Which card do you draft? He Who Hungers Kashi-Tribe Reaver Reciprocate Student of Elements Mothrider Samurai Nezumi Cutthroat Ember-Fist Zubera Quiet Purity Ragged Veins Burr Grafter Counsel of the Soratami Soul of Magma Kabuto Moth Gibbering Kami Kami of the Hunt Explain your pick in the forums or email me directly! Then come back next week and I’ll reveal the pack that was passed to me and we’ll move on to a very intriguing pick No. 2 (along with trying to predict what was previously picked from that pack).

Top 8 Decks

I’m heading off to the Costa Rican rainforest for a week to visit some active volcanoes so I won’t have a chance to comment on last week’s Limited PTQ Top 8 decks, but that doesn’t mean you can’t take a look and see what you can learn. Try to determine why the winning decks won and how they played. Are they aggressive or controlling decks? Do they lean toward specific colour combinations? Are they splashing a third colour? Do they have themes/archetypes such as ogre/demons, spirits/arcane, ninjas or lots of spice? Or do they just toss together the best cards in the colour and make it work? Were their colours under-drafted at the table? And of course, do they follow the 10 maxims I listed above?

I often find it interesting to look at the sideboard as well. Are there cards in the sideboard that I would have played main deck? Why did they choose to leave them out? Inversely, are there cards in the main deck that I never play? Comment on what you find interesting in the forums and I’ll try to bring it together next week.

Until then, have fun drafting and thanks for reading!

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