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Tuesday, April 26, 2005

For those of you tuning in expecting Matt Vienneau again this week – sorry to disappoint, but I'm back already. I'd like to thank Matt wholeheartedly for providing some quality Limited Information in my absence. Sorry Matt, but I have no plans to get re-married quite yet, so it might be a while before I hand the reins over again!

Sincere thanks also go out to all the readers who sent me their best wishes and congratulations. The wedding went extremely smoothly, and just to clarify a bit of confusion a lot of readers had regarding the wedding being in Canada and my comment about "sitting on a sunny beach" – the wedding was in Canada, but our honeymoon took us to Portugal and Morocco, where I'm happy to report there was plenty of sunshine.

Anyway, enough of that, time for this week's **Magic** content. One thing that's been on my list of "things to do" for a long time is an article aimed at those thousands of players out there who have never even played a limited format before. I've had regular requests for such an article since I started writing, and as Matt has finished up with two quite in-depth articles, I don't think it'll hurt to devote this week to the players out there who are keen to make the move to Limited formats, but who simply don't know how to or what to expect. This also ties in quite nicely with the last half of the PTQ London qualifiers, and my hope is that this might inspire some of you less experienced Limited players to take your shot at making it to the Pro Tour via a Limited PTQ for a change.

I'll try to spend some time talking about some more advanced concepts as well, so there'll be something here for the more seasoned Limited players amongst you too.

Sealed Deck – what is it?

Sealed Deck is easily the most common Limited format used when people play real-life Limited **Magic** (in **Magic Online**, draft is probably more common although the large numbers of Sealed Deck leagues would certainly make it close).

The way it works is very simple. Each player in the tournament gets a number of cards that are still sealed in their original packaging. You open up those packs and then build a deck using only the cards contained within. In most other **Magic** formats, you would build a deck before leaving to go to the tournament but in Sealed Deck you are restricted to using only the cards that the organiser of the tournament gives you. This is typically one tournament pack and two booster packs, but not always. You pay for the product (although often at a reduced rate) but you get to keep all the cards you open. You own them; you take them away with you at the end of the day. This small set of cards is usually referred to as your "Sealed Deck pool" or your "card pool."

Once you've opened up your packs, you then have a set amount of time to construct a deck using those cards. This obviously means you are very heavily restricted in the deck you can build, as you would normally only have 75 spells (45 spells from the Tournament Pack, 15 each from the two boosters) from which to build your deck. Fortunately, to make this a little easier, you only need to make a 40-card deck instead of the standard 60-card one for Constructed events.

At a PTQ you will often find that the decks are "logged." This basically means that the packs have been opened by the tournament organiser before the tournament and the contents have been recorded. You still get the same cards, and you still get to keep them, you just get them already

opened. This might seem strange at first, but it's just done to prevent cheating. It's illegal to add any cards to your card pool you previously owned, and any cards not opened in the packs won't have been recorded by the tournament organiser. A simple deck check will show up any cards that have been added, so don't be tempted!

Sometimes the tournament organiser might utilise the players to log the decks. This is quite normal and is very easy, as it just involves filling out a checklist to detail what cards make up the card pool for that sealed deck.

Choosing your spells

Once you have your cards, you then have to decide how to build your deck. The most obvious thing you have to do is decide which cards will go in it! This requires you to utilise probably the most important skill to have in Limited **Magic** -- card evaluation. All this means is basically being able to tell the good cards from the bad ones. You don't need to play all of the spells you open – indeed you shouldn't do so – so you need to have an idea which ones are worth playing and which ones aren't. Cards which are good in Constructed aren't always good in Limited, and there are some cards which are great in Limited but wouldn't necessarily make your Constructed decks. Knowing which cards are good in the Limited format is important so check out some of the many articles I, along with many other writers, have written on this topic. My comments on the *Betrayers of Kamigawa* set can be found here and here, and check through the archives for *Champions* articles.

Due to the reduced deck size of 40 cards, you'll really only want to play 22-23 of your 75 cards (the remaining 17-18 cards will be lands – we'll get to that shortly). You will rarely have enough cards to make a mono-coloured deck so you can expect to have to play cards from two colours at least, and sometimes three.

When deciding which colours to play, you will usually base this choice on which colours contain the most powerful cards. In addition to this though, you should also look at how deep each colour is (by that, I mean how many playable cards each colour has). It's all very well having a Kokusho, the Evening Star in your card pool, but if you don't have enough other black cards to fill out the deck you might have to leave the big dragon out. You should also pay close attention to which colours have spells that allow you to deal with your opponent's creatures. Limited **Magic** is primarily about creature combat, so any card that allows you to neutralise an opponent's creature – whether via Cage of Hands, Befoul or Torrent of Stone, for example – should draw your attention and sway your decision toward that colour.

Once you have chosen the colours you think will make the best deck, you need to select which spells from those colours will go in the deck. Sometimes you might need to include all the playable cards from each colour just to make up the 22-23 cards you need for the deck, but more commonly you'll have a number of great cards that automatically go in, and then you'll have to select the remainder of the deck from a larger number of more mediocre cards. These decisions are important, but if you're new to sealed deck and aren't too sure whether Thoughtbind is better or worse than Callous Deceiver, well, don't worry about it too much. Instead try to focus on making sure you have a good balance of cheap and expensive cards so you have things you can cast in the early turns of the game as well as later on.

Sometimes you'll open a lot of powerful cards and building a good deck isn't difficult. The real skill in the Sealed Deck format is learning to make the most from your weaker card pools. Sometimes you get a pool so bad, you can't really rescue it, but the vast majority of card pools contain a halfway decent deck in them somewhere. When you receive a mediocre card pool, the key to succeeding with it is to optimise your most powerful cards and try to build a deck that sticks to one style of play or one major theme.

In practice, this means paying closer attention to cards such as Commune with Nature when you do have a single powerful creature in your deck, as this card will help you find it more often. If you have a deck that looks like playing a lot of blue cards, consider playing Counsel of the Soratami or even Sift through Sands over some of your other weaker cards. Although neither of these cards is particularly good, the Sealed Deck format is slow enough that you can spend the time drawing some extra cards which will once again put you closer to your best spells.

You should also try to maximise any particular themes of your deck. If your deck is weak but has a respectable Soulshift theme, you might want to value a card such as Soulless Revival a lot higher as it will allow you to get multiple uses from your best Soulshift creatures, meaning you might well win just by effectively having more creatures than your opponent. Similarly you might have to play a number of weaker cards in order to give the deck a chance of winning. At Pro Tour-Atlanta, for example our second card pool was utterly terrible, but we were able to cobble together a (somewhat) playable red-black deck by making it as fast as possible including multiple Akki Avalanchers, Battle-Mad Ronin, Lava Spikes and Flames of the Blood Hand. The Spikes in particular helped the deck make the most of the only two playable red cards – a Glacial Ray and a Torrent of Stone. By making this decision, we gave the deck a chance of beating another much better deck simply by dealing enough early damage that the game would be over before their more powerful cards could significantly effect things.

Mana

As a general rule, you should try to stick to two colours whenever possible. If you need to include cards from a third colour to make up the numbers or because you have some very powerful cards in three different colours, you can do so. You should try to make sure the third colour is a minor one, though. It should only have 2-3 spells from that colour, and none of the spells should have a double-coloured mana cost. Meloku is an excellent splash card; Yosei, the Morning Star is not.

If you are able to run two colours, you should generally run 17 lands. With only two colours you don't need to include extra lands of a third basic land type, and as a result you can usually meet your colour requirements with just 17 lands. You will almost always split these 9/8 or 10/7 depending on which colour you have most of. On rare occasions you might even run an 11/6 split if, for example, you have multiple Wicked Akubas and only a handful of spells from the second colour. If you have a lot of cards at four or more mana, consider running 18 lands. The extra land will mean you ramp up to four, five and six mana slightly earlier in the game. The extra land will reduce the chance of being short on land but on the flip side will also slightly increase your chance of drawing too many. However if you have powerful, expensive spells you'll probably want the 18th land just to make sure you can cast them more consistently.

If you are running a splash colour consisting of a single spell, you should really make sure you have at least two different ways of casting that spell. You might get a dual-land (Lantern-Lit Graveyard, for example) or you might be able to rely on a mana-fixer such as Sakura-Tribe Elder. If you don't have those types of cards, two basic lands of the appropriate type should be included to support a single-card splash. If you are splashing 2-4 cards you should have at least three ways (but preferably four) of casting those spells. Again, mana-fixers can count but more often than not you'll just want to make sure you have 3-4 basic lands that will support your splash colour. Three-colour decks should contain 18 lands more often just so you have a better chance of drawing lands for all your splash colours. You'll usually want to split these in an 8/7/3 ratio (8 Swamps, 7 Islands, 3 Mountains in a black-blue, splash red deck, for example) or perhaps 7/7/4 if you have four cards for which you are splashing.

Sideboarding

The other big difference between Limited **Magic** and other formats is that in Limited formats, every card you open that doesn't make your main deck becomes part of your sideboard. You aren't

restricted to using just 15 sideboard cards -- all of the cards you opened on the day can make up your sideboard.

Sideboarding is one of the more over-looked aspects of Limited **Magic**, but paying attention to your options can swing a match that you might otherwise lose. When you sort through your card pool, pay note any cards that you wouldn't play main-deck but that you would want to play against certain decks or cards. At its simplest, this might mean basic answers to specific problems such as Terashi's Cry against artifacts and enchantments. Other cards to note are cards like Psychic Spear or Hisoka's Defiance, which aren't great cards to have main-deck but which make excellent cards against decks that have a lot of Spirits and/or Arcane spells.

Also remember that you are free to swap out entire colours if you wish. If your best black cards are Nezumi Cutthroat, Befoul and Eradicate, those suddenly don't look so great if you're playing against another black deck so consider swapping that colour out entirely if you have enough good cards in your sideboard of another colour. You might also want to consider swapping a splash colour on occasion. You might initially favour a splash for a Cage of Hands or Yamabushi's Flame, but if an opponent plays out Meloku or Kumano in the first game, swapping either of those for a Rend Flesh would be much better -- although the card is a little weaker, it's much better at dealing with your opponent's powerful cards.

The other key thing here is to plan ahead. Whenever I finish building a sealed deck in a tournament, I always spend some time and pull out any cards that I could see myself sideboarding in. If there's a possible colour change I make sure I have enough basic lands of that colour to support the change should I ever need to make it. I also spend some time deciding which cards I'd normally sideboard out in most circumstances. Making these decisions before you even sit down to play a match is much better because you won't be under any time pressure and can think more clearly. If you don't think about this until you're down a game and having to try and sideboard an entire colour out in the five minutes before the start of Game 2, you can easily make mistakes in terms of your land count and which spells you take out or leave in.

The final important thing to learn here is the ability to adapt. Although it feels like you don't have many cards to work with, it's still very easy to miss potential sideboard cards if you dismiss them at an early stage. Don't be afraid to change any of your sideboarding plans if you spot something that you think will help you out against whatever deck your opponent is playing.

If you want to see some example sealed deck builds then a recent PTQ from Doncaster in the UK has posted the Top 8 sealed deck builds from its tournament. Check out the lists to see how these players built their decks, and whether or not they all followed the strategies I've discussed.

For those of you following the PTQ Top 8s that Matt has been posting, we have a bunch more listings up on the site now. The main PTQ page has links to the Top 8 draft listings, so check those out if you want to see which draft strategies have been qualifying people for the Pro Tour over the last couple of weeks.

