

Drafting the Whole Block

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Tuesday, June 14, 2005

Welcome once again to Limited Information. This week will be following up on the draft pick I gave you at the end of last week's column. Hopefully most of you will have had a chance to check out last week's column but I'll list the draft pick again here so you don't have to keep flicking back and forth between the two columns.

It's a standard booster draft pick situation, from a *Champions-Betrayers-Saviors* booster draft. After the first two boosters your deck is looking like this:

1CC: Frostling

2CC: Skullsnatcher x 2, Akki Raider, Wicked Akuba, First Volley, Glacial Ray

3CC: Ronin Houndmaster, Villainous Ogre x 2, Nezumi Ronin, Throat Slitter, Ronin Warclub

4CC: Frostwielder, Kami of Fire's Roar

5CC: Soul of Magma, Okiba-Gang Shinobi, Frost Ogre

6CC: Swallowing Plague

Your other possible inclusions are:

Lava Spike, Psychic Spear, Kumano's Pupils, Mark of the Oni, Crushing Pain, Call for Blood.

The rest of the cards are unplayable, off-colour, late picks.

You open up the following pack:







Which card do you pick?

The Deck

The best place to start with a pick like this is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the card pool so far. The creature base so far is pretty solid. There are plenty of two and three drops already so no real need to improve things there. Cards like Frostwielder and Kami of Fire's Roar will also help push damage through against any slower decks. The spells are pretty good although the removal isn't outstanding. Swallowing Plague is fine but a bit clunky. The Glacial Ray is obviously great but there's only the First Volley that it can really be Spliced onto (the Plague is a bit too costly for that).

The mana curve is good too, there are enough creatures at each casting cost and none of the spells are overcosted either. The colour base is a little shaky though as there is a clear bias towards red with Frostling, Frostwielder, Soul of Magma and Frost Ogre all being probably inclusions. Along with those though you also have Wicked Akuba and Swallowing Plague which means getting access to  and  will be important and that in turn puts a strain on the mana. Short of cutting these cards from the deck though there isn't much that can be done about that.



Overall it's a solid deck so far, nice and aggressive which is how black-red normally wants to play. It'll be looking to establish a few quick creatures and then take out any annoying blockers with removal so it can continue its attack. It's lacking a finisher of some description really but it can probably win without that. If I were going to pick any weakness it would be the lack of good removal.

Focusing the choice

The first thing to do when faced with a pack like this is to figure out what cards you're actually going to be choosing between. There are a few cards in this pack that can obviously be dismissed, and a few more that aren't quite so obvious. As everyone is still new to the set I'll go through all of these possibilities first.

The first two cards to cut are Dreamcatcher and Promised Kannushi. Both of these are off-colour one-drops and are never ever going to be played in this deck. There's no point giving either of these a second thought.

The next card to go is Curtain of Light. It's not great but isn't unplayable either, as it's basically cantrip life gain – it 'prevents' the damage dealt by your opponent's largest unblocked attacker – and it can be useful against Ninjas in this block if your opponent should drop one while you have two mana up. However this isn't a white deck and it will never be playing this card as a result.

Rushing-Tide Zubera would be my next obvious cut, although not on the basis of its power as it's far from the weakest of the remaining cards. Blue rarely sees four-mana 3/3 creatures and the Zubera has a fine ability that can hold off any opposing Order of the Sacred Bells or Nezumi Ronins from attacking. The reason here is solely mana cost; with spells requiring  and  already there's no way the Zubera could be considered for a splash even if it were the best card in the pack and as such it won't be picked.



I'd cut two on-colour cards next, solely because they are just so poor and so much weaker than the alternatives in the pack. These two would be Into the Fray and Shinen of Fear's Chill. Both these cards are poor main-deck alternatives in any deck and there's no way you should consider drafting either of them over any of the other red or black cards in the deck. Every other on colour card in the pack is better than these by a long way.

Six down, nine remain.

Three of the last nine are off-colour. There's no denying that they're all great cards and would be excellent additions to any deck featuring those colours, but this isn't one of those decks. The question therefore becomes are any of these cards worth splashing?

Elder Pine of Jukai and Shinen of Flight's Wings are two of the best commons in the set but you shouldn't really consider splashing the Jukai. It's bets on turn three when subsequent spirits can trigger its ability. You don't want to have this sitting in your hand as the last spell you cast, as it's obviously less powerful then. Inner Calm, Outer Strength is a great card too, but doesn't usually have as big an impact on the game as a Jukai does. It may be better than the Jukai in some situations but it's very close to call in my opinion. It's a better splash card simply because it doesn't need to be cast early. However it's still not as good as Shinen of Flight's Wings. Five-mana late-game creatures are the best possible splash cards outside of removal spells. They give you more draw phases to draw the land you need to cast them and they have an immediate impact on the game when you do. Of all the off-colour cards the Shinen is the only one to consider. I'll come back to this later.

On-colour choices

This is quite a bountiful pack in terms of possible on-colour picks. There are some solid creatures, a nice removal spell and a good finisher too. With all these options which one is the correct pick?

Before I go into my choices let's get some other opinions:

Olivier Ruel: There are a lot of options in this pack but Adamaro seems very good to me. I haven't had the opportunity to play much with *Saviors* yet though. Feral Lightning has to be close as that seems like a solid card also, but in this situation I'd do what I usually do when I don't know what the pick is for sure: I pick the rare!

Tim Aten: This pick is easier than many of those in prior columns since we can discount all but two colors immediately. We have a focused R/B deck, and there's no sense in hate drafting. That leaves us with "just" Kami of Empty Graves, Akki Underling, Kagemaro's Clutch, Shinen of Fear's Chill, Into the Fray, Feral Lightning, Hand of Cruelty, and Adamaro First to Desire.



Of the on-color cards, the Shinen and Into the Fray are quick to dismiss, as they seldom do enough to warrant a slot in one's deck, let alone a first pick.

I wouldn't take Akki Underling here either. The deck is aggressive and will want to play first, meaning the Underling is unlikely to be a 4/2 even on turn 3. The deck has a lot of redundant mediocre 2/1s for two mana already; we certainly don't need another right now.

I personally like Kami of Empty Graves in red/black, but this particular deck doesn't seem to want it. It's optimal when there's enough removal to reliably clear a path for it AND plenty to Soulshift back. While it's possible we'll pick up sufficient removal to meet

the former criterion, it seems unlikely we'll get the spirits required to meet the latter. Kami of Empty Graves is out.

This leaves a situational fatty, a great 2-drop, a situational finisher, and a removal spell. Rather than continue my "process of elimination," I'm just going to go ahead and say that I'd take the Kagemaro's Clutch. An aggressive red/black deck like this wants to play creatures on turns 2 and 3, then start killing anything in those creatures' way and swinging for 4. It's really hard to draft "too much" quality removal in red/black, and make no mistake about it—the Clutch is quality. Even when you're on the play and have already deployed two threats, you'll still be able to Clutch for -3/-3 on turn 4. Later in the game, you should be able to kill Nagao with it without too much difficulty. It may not be an Arcane, but it does get around pesky regenerators and damage prevention effects.



Hand of Cruelty is great early and late, but it's still just a regular dude that attacks and blocks. Only under the most extreme circumstances would I take such a card over a removal spell. (For instance, if I'm blue/red and a little lacking on threats, I may force myself to take a Shinen of Flight's Wings over Spiraling Embers).

If I knew I would have Adamaro in play on turn 3 every game, I'd snatch him up. With this deck, even if I have him in hand on turn 3, I may not have the 2 Mountains necessary to play him. Later in the game, he could be a 0/0 on an opponent's whim and hence completely worthless. Red Maro isn't unplayable; he's just not as good as Clutch in most cases.

Feral Lightning can be a powerful finisher, but it's much easier to circumvent than a Devouring Greed or even Devouring Rage. Without cards like Kagemaro's Clutch, the board could get too gummed up to even put the opponent in danger of losing to Lightning. I'd rather stick to the more consistent plan of creatures backed by removal than potentially having to sacrifice board position to squeeze through enough damage to put the opponent in range.

When in doubt, take the removal!

Jeroen Remie: To start with there really is no reason to draft outside your colors here as you have a fine deck in two colors already. I'd narrow the choice down to being between two-drop creature, where Hand of Cruelty is the better one, or a removal spell. Since this deck already has three or four decent two-drops and is short on removal, I would definitely take the removal spell here. Kagemaro's Clutch is a fine card in any situation but this deck needs it.

Two votes for the Clutch from the players with the most experience of the set. I also think Olivier's choice is also a card that will be high up on the considerations of most players.

Of the on-colour choices left there are two that should easily be dismissed at this point. Those are Akki Underling and Kami of Empty Graves. Both are fine creatures and will make the main deck of



most draft decks but they both pale in comparison to both Hand of Cruelty and Adamaro, First to Desire which are present in the pack.

Down to five

So that leaves just four on-colour choices and the possibility of splashing Shinen of Flight's Wings.

The first card I'd dismiss from that group is actually Feral Lightning. I haven't had much play with the card yet but it obviously seems like it should be good. In evaluating the card I think it's best comparison is probably to something like Soulblast. Soulblast has the same casting cost and same sort of effect – the potential to deal a lot of damage for six mana. The problem with these sorts of cards is that they're very situational. For them to really prove their worth, you need to get into a situation where you can cast them, and they win you a game where any other spell wouldn't. From my experience with Soulblast that doesn't often happen. Often it sits in your hand unwanted or uncastable. Other times it finishes a game, but that game probably would've finished in your favour anyway. I think Feral Lightning is the same sort of spell and while they are playable and can fill a certain role I think there are better options in this pack.



The next cut for me would be the Shinen at this point. At this early point in time it's definitely still in contention for a top spot amongst the set's commons and it is a fine card to splash as well should you so desire. I can't see the Channel ability being used very often but in this deck you might just want to send Okiba-Gang Shinobi or Throat Slitter to the air for a measly one mana. The problem here is simply the mana in the deck. If there were nothing but spells with a single colour in their casting cost the Shinen could be considered further (and probably still not picked mind you) but with spells in the deck requiring access to both  and  splashing just isn't viable, and to be honest isn't even necessary as there are plenty of playable on-colour cards so far.

So the choice comes down to three: Kagemaro's Clutch, Hand of Cruelty and Adamaro, First to Desire. Before I get into the possibilities there let's check your own choices from last week's poll:

Which card do you pick?		
Hand of Cruelty	5854	43.5%
Adamaro, First to Desire	3416	25.4%
Kagemaro's Clutch	1740	12.9%
Feral Lightning	584	4.3%
Elder Pine of Jukai	492	3.7%
Rushing-Tide Zuberu	265	2.0%
Promised Kannushi	227	1.7%
Akki Underling	226	1.7%
Kami of Empty Graves	180	1.3%
Curtain of Light	110	0.8%
Inner Calm, Outer Strength	110	0.8%
Shinen of Flight's Wings	74	0.6%

Into the Fray	60	0.4%
Shinen of Fear's Chill	56	0.4%
Dreamcatcher	53	0.4%
Total	13447	100.0%

The readers valued Hand of Cruelty ahead of Adamaro with the Clutch coming in third. The top three is clearly correct but the order differs from the Pro's opinions.



The first choice here is between Adamaro and Hand of Cruelty. Both are obviously very good creatures. Adamaro has the potential to be more powerful, but at othertimes can be useless as well. Hand of Cruelty is always going to be solid, and is one of the best two-drops you could hope for. Jeroen states that he believes the choice to be between Hand of Cruelty and the Clutch, whereas Olivier and Tim to a lesser extent seem to feel Ademaro is the better option.

I think there are a number of things to consider when making this choice. The first is mana: which of the two cards is the deck going to be able to cast more consistently. On the one hand there's Frostling and Frostwielder vying for Mountains to be the preferred land of choice, and on the other there's Wicked Akuba and Swallowing Plague that want Swamps. I personally think the deck will function better as a heavier black deck. The Akuba really needs to come down on turn two whereas the Frostling can often kill off something even when if

it comes down on turn five or so. The Soul of Magma isn't likely to be played here and the majority of cards in the deck are black. I think this deck will likely be running ten Swamps and seven Mountains and that definitely makes Hand of Cruelty the better choice.

The other reason I like Hand of Cruelty here is because of the two Ninjas. The Hand of Cruelty is unlikely to be blocked on turns three and four meaning there'll be ample opportunity to Ninjitsu out either the Throat Slitter or the Okiba-Gang Shinobi. Adamaro could probably power these out too but would you really want to recast Adamaro after you'd just his with the Okiba? The Hand of Cruelty is cheaper and thus less tempo would be lost when combining it with the two Ninjas.

I also like the Protection from White in this deck. Most white-blue decks typically have numerous white blockers with high toughness that let them gum up the ground while their more vulnerable flyers sail over. The Hand attacks right past all of them and allows you to continue to race against decks that might otherwise stall you out.

Adamaro is potentially more powerful, there's no doubt about that. However, despite that fact, I think Hand of Cruelty makes a better choice for this particular deck.



The last question therefore must be: does Hand of Cruelty make a better choice than Kagemaro's Clutch?

I'm not going to drag this one out here; for me, it's the Clutch that makes the best pick. Tim's answer illustrates why this is so excellently, almost to the point where I don't need to write any more!

Quite simply, this deck wants to win by making guys and attacking with them. It already has a lot of good guys but what it's lacking is ways to remove those troublesome creatures your opponent can put in the way. The ideal way this deck plays out will look something like this:

Your Turn two: Play Wicked Akuba

Opponent's Turn Two: Do nothing, or cast something irrelevant like an Ashen-Skin Zubera.

Your Turn three: Make Ronin Houndmaster, attack for four.

Your opponent's turn three: Make Waxmane Baku.

Your Turn four: Glacial Ray Baku, attack for four, activate Akuba for two.

Opponent's turn four: Make Indebted Samurai.

Your turn five: Kagemaro's Clutch the Samurai, attack for four, play a land and activate Akuba for one more damage.

At that point your opponent is on five life, and you have two guys in play. You're probably winning that game. To be able to play this sort of game you need a lot of redundancy in your removal spells. You need some good quick creatures – something this deck already has plenty of – and you need plenty of ways to remove your opponent's guys. That is something this deck is definitely lacking at this point in time. Without these sorts of spells in your deck you'll just see an opponent drop a Minamo Scrollkeeper or River Kaijin and hold off half your attackers with it.

Hopefully after the Clutch you'd be able to pick up another Clutch of maybe a Spiraling Embers or Barrel Down Sokenzan too. These will give the deck that redundancy it needs and will increase the chance of getting the removal spells early in the game to help punch that extra damage through. Even though it's likely one, or perhaps more, of these cards will be picked up in the next few picks you still need as many of these as you can and with a stable creature base already the Clutch is the right pick in this instance.

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