

Principles, strategies, and lots of decklists. Playing Combo at Regionals

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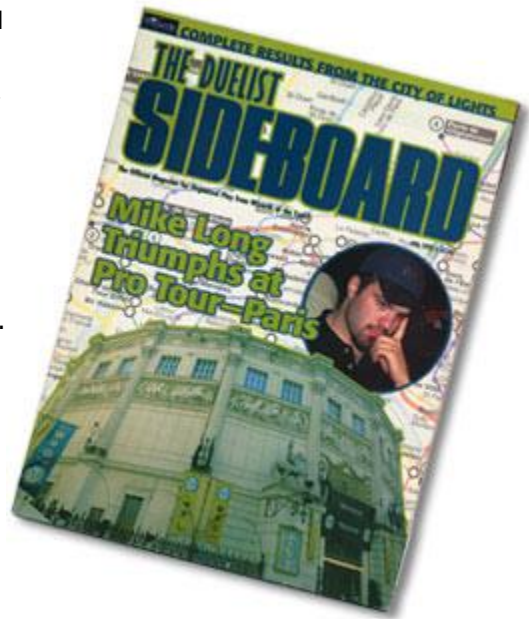
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I have always been a combo lover. My first sight of a real combo engine was PT Paris back in 1997, when Mike Long won the tournament with ProspBloom. Since then, I have been trying everything in tournament play, from Turbozvi to Mind over Matter to Tight Sight, to finally Ironworks which gave me my first big PT finish.

In this article, I will present you with several decklists of potentially exciting combo decks for you to try at [Regionals](#). Before I do that, I'll present you with a few general guidelines about why it's a good thing to base your deck around a combo, especially in the current environment. Below are the generally accepted qualities of combo decks. Before you go into Regionals with such a strategy, think about the following qualities and make sure your deck does have at least three out of four.



Ease of Play

Some might say that since combo decks often require tricky plays and a lot of calculation, then they are complicated to play. I strongly disagree with that opinion. My reasoning is that the real complexity of **Magic** comes from the interaction between both players and their cards over a number of turns. When players battle for resources and constantly switch between offense and defense, the situations that come up are often difficult to assess with full clarity.

However, when you're playing a combo deck, you are often ignoring what your opponent is trying to do and concentrating on your own combo. If you can pull it off, you win. It's never quite that simple, of course, as your opponent will try to prevent you from doing just that, but the interactions are limited to what your opponent is doing to you. Generally speaking, you are not



doing much to him or his cards until you eventually gather your combo pieces and go for the kill. In many ways, playing combo is like playing against the clock, without an opponent. It doesn't sound too hard, does it? Meanwhile, other players who focus on control or aggro decks are engaged in really tough fights for dominance of the board. Your game is simpler: they're really playing chess, while you're playing puzzle. You're just trying to put the pieces together.

I am not saying that you will not face difficult decisions or calculations. To be a good combo player, you have to love calculations and probabilities. You shouldn't worry about round limits. Combo decks are often quite straightforward, and that will save you a lot of time for the situations when thinking is required.

Another neat thing about combo decks is that they are easier to playtest. Of course, it's great if you have a good playtest group, but that isn't always the case. *Magic Online* partly solves that problem, but *Saviors of Kamigawa* won't be on MTGO for a while. Testing in real conditions is hard for a lot of us. Combo decks are a good solution to that problem, since a few hours of "goldfish practice" (playing against an imaginary opponent who does nothing, to see how long it takes you to win) are enough to get a really good feel of how the deck plays.

Speed

A better-known quality of combo decks is their speed. A lot of combo decks rely on pure speed to completely outmaneuver the opponent before he can do anything meaningful. Turn three wins are consistently pulled off in extended, sometimes even faster than that. For example, my [PT Columbus Sneak Attack](#) deck, the one that Tsuyoshi Fujita modified to make top 8 of Grand Prix Detroit, could kill on turn one about 3% of the time and on turn two very often. The most dreaded combo deck of all time (Trix, AKA NecroDonate) consistently pulled off wins on turn three.



The most important thing to remember, though, is that the goal of a combo deck is not to try to win on turn three or four all the time. That can fail, because your opponent may have a solution. You're on a clock, so you have as many turns as your opponent is willing to give you – no more, no less. That can be as low as four or five turns (which is the range by which most aggro decks can kill you with a good start) or over twenty turns against a control deck.

What it means is that you must adjust your speed depending on your opponent's strategy. Generally speaking, you should take more chances against aggro decks, but you should also mulligan into a hand that can win fast. Against a control deck, you may keep hands that don't look fast or even ones that totally lack combo pieces, because you want to take your time to set up a winning situation in the midgame.

Resilience

Combo decks are traditionally hard to disrupt, for several reasons.

First, while they often rely on permanents to end the game, destroying the permanent won't help in many games. Some other combo decks (such as Dark Tide or Bargain) do not even need a non-land permanent in play to win the game.

Land destruction is not that bad against combo, but it's usually too slow. Also, a lot of combo decks feature mana acceleration, so for each mana source your opponent destroys, you can usually play one or two the following turn.

Hand disruption is a much more efficient tool, but notice that targeted discard (such as [Duess](#)) is a lot better than random discard, or discard that lets the combo player choose. The reason for that is simple: combo decks usually feature a lot of card drawing. These extra resources help feed the opponent's discard while the combo player concentrates on the essential: getting his combo on the table (or on the stack).

Unpredictability

Probably the best aspect of combo decks is their ability to pull off wins when the opponent isn't expecting it. Combo decks put a lot of psychological pressure on a knowledgeable opponent, because he knows he can't tap out without taking a huge risk of losing the game. In some games, that gives you more time than you should have had, as your opponent slows down slightly in order to keep some mana open and represent an answer. Of course, against less experienced opponents, it's even better as they do tap out at the wrong time.

Combo decks are also easier to disguise. When playtesting, this strength is not apparent because your opponent knows your deck, knows the ins and outs of how you play it and what he must do to defeat it. In a real tournament match, your opponent might mistake your deck for another. I remember a story that took place at French nationals a long time ago. I was playing a "draw-go" blue control deck. My opponent played a first turns Plains, then a Swamp and tapped out for a [Scroll Rack](#). This looked like no archetype I had met before, so I put my opponent on some kind of rogue BW control deck. I decided to tap out for an [Ophidian](#), but then I realized my mistake on the next turn when my opponent played a Forest and [Squandered Resources](#), and then went on to win the match on turn four with all the extra mana and a 20-point drain life. He had only one Plains and one [Scroll Rack](#) in his deck, but he deliberately took advantage of that "sneaky" draw to play his cards out in an order that would confuse me.



Combo decks in large fields with a new format

While I have always loved combo decks, I particularly cherish them in large fields like Regionals. This is particularly true this year since the tournament is taking place with a new set. Saviors of Kamigawa does have a few cards for the combo lover, but that's not the main reason.

The reason is this: in a large field with a new set, the format is a *lot* less predictable. New archetypes are bound to appear. New versions of old archetypes will appear as well. You will be facing opponents of varying skill levels and competitiveness. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to have a precise idea of the metagame. Of course, we always have a rough idea. This year, it will probably be a close race between Monoblue control, Tooth and Nail, Ponza, Gifts Ungiven and White Weenie. But then again, there are a lot of other possible, more or less viable decks, and you're likely to encounter a few of them.

The advantage of playing a combo deck in such a field is obvious at this point. Since you'll be ignoring your opponent most of the time, it doesn't really matter if they are playing something weird, unexpected or "metagamed".

Also, it's likely that since the format is not currently being dominated by combo decks, few people will be prepared for this kind of deck. You'll encounter fewer threats in both main decks and sideboards.

Combo in the current environment

The state of the current standard environment means both good things and bad things for combo decks.

Bad things

- The general lack of mana acceleration seriously diminishes your speed. I'm not saying there aren't ways to get a lot of lands in play early: [Chrome Mox](#), [Sakura-Tribe Elder](#) and [Rampant Growth](#) do that job pretty well. However, what we're really missing is something like [Dark Ritual](#) or [Krark-Clan Ironworks](#) with the artifact lands: something that can gain you a net mana advantage in the very early turns of a game.
- The most popular deck in the format is not exactly a good matchup on paper: monoblue control will be widely played. Cheap countermagic is not your friend.
- Another deck you may face is really hard for combo to beat: monoblack agro combines discard and fast creatures, the worst things that can happen to you.
- The constant threat of [Cranial Extraction](#): this card alone has made players put their combo decks back in the closet.
- Likewise, [Pithing Needle](#) could be a problem for many decks based around an activated ability. Therefore, here are the things I recommend:
- Either play a multicolor combo deck with a lot of green for mana acceleration, or do not rely on speed.

- Build your deck and sideboard with the monoblue matchup in mind. That is, try to imagine how your deck will hold a twenty-turn game. How can you put pressure on your opponent or force him to act? When will the "critical turn" happen, how much mana does he need and what are the cards you need to take the advantage? Make a heavy use of [Choke](#), [Boil](#) and [Defense Grid](#).
- Build your deck so you have some form of permanent card drawing (black always has trouble removing permanents).
- Try building your deck around an engine – not a "pure" combo. For an explanation of that terminology, check out a [previous article of mine](#) about the creation of combo decks.
- Do not base your engine on an activated ability (for example, it was sad, but I had to give up on *Recurring Mindslavers*).

I know, it still sounds rough. Here are the good things to balance the bad things out.

Good things

- The lack of a widely played artifact/enchantment based deck means there is little removal of that kind in the environment. There is plenty of green so you should expect [Naturalize](#), but probably not in the main decks.
- With Ravager and Ironworks gone, the format is a lot slower than before, so the problem of speed isn't such a huge issue. The fastest decks are monowhite and monored aggro, and those lack the mix of disruption and pressure that monoblack aggro has.
- The same goes for [Cranial Extraction](#). If you look at decklists of various strategy sites, very few actually use the card in the main deck. You'd rather not have them at all, but potentially only facing them after game 1 is a big help, particularly if you're likely to be going to game 2 with a game win already under your belt.
- Combo decks based on engines are definitely more likely to experiment with a "switcheroo" sideboard – that means you can build your sideboard in such a way that your strategy completely changes after game one. Your combo deck is now a control deck or even has fifteen creatures that your opponent did not expect.

Standard Combo Decks, Circa 2005

All the above is just saying that this year's Regionals is a good opportunity for trying out new combo decks, in order to surprise the field and be prepared for everything. But what decks exactly are we talking about? Here are a few archetypes that are worth considering. I have included the qualities for each of them. The interesting thing about this year is that there is no real tier one combo deck – yet. It will be up to your imagination and courage. A lot of the pleasure I take from **Magic** (and I know other people do, too), is when winning with my own creation.

Make sure to have fun at Regionals!

Existing Archetypes

Intruder Combo

by Frank Karsten (with one small sideboard change)
(<http://magic.tcqplayer.com/db/article.asp?id=5195>)

Qualities: Speed, Unpredictability, Ease of Play

Intruder Combo



Main Deck

60 cards

2 Blinkmoth Nexus	2 Chrome Mox
4 City of Brass	2 Diabolic Tutor
4 Forbidden Orchard	3 Fabricate
5 Forest	4 Gifts Ungiven
3 Island	1 Goblin Cannon
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Intruder Alarm
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	4 Lifespark Spellbomb
1 Swamp	2 Sensei's Divining Top
	3 Serum Visions
	3 Sylvan Scrying

21 lands

28 other spells

4 Birds of Paradise
3 Eternal Witness
1 Kumano, Master Yamabushi
3 Sakura-Tribe Elder

11 creatures

Sideboard

1 Bringer of the White Dawn
4 Dosan the Falling Leaf
4 Mana Leak
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Mindslaver
4 Sacred Ground

15 sideboard cards



Sway of the Stars

(inspired by Olivier Ruel's block deck)

Qualities: Unpredictability, Ease of Play, Resilience

Sway of the Stars



Main Deck *60 cards*

4 City of Brass	4 Gifts Ungiven
9 Forest	4 Heartbeat of Spring
2 Island	4 Kodama's Reach
3 Plains	3 Sensei's Divining Top
1 Swamp	2 Sway of the Stars
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	4 Wrath of God

23 lands

21 other spells

4 Birds of Paradise	Sideboard
3 Eternal Witness	4 Boil
1 Kodama of the North Tree	4 Defense Grid
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	3 Final Judgment

- | | | | |
|---|--|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Myojin of Cleansing Fire | 4 | Mana Leak |
| 1 | Myojin of Seeing Winds | <hr/> | |
| 4 | Sakura-Tribe Elder | 15 sideboard cards | |
| 1 | Yosei, the Morning Star | | |

16 creatures



New Decks with Potential

Angry Kaminari

by Manuel Bevand (<http://magic.tcplayer.com/db/article.asp?id=5158>)

Qualities: Resilience, Unpredictability (unless you mill away your own Ires), Ease of Play (and sometimes speed with a lucky draw!)

Angry Kaminari



Main Deck

60 cards

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|----|---------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| 11 | Island | 3 | Consuming Vortex |
| 4 | Mirrodin's Core | 3 | Eerie Procession |
| 7 | Mountain | 4 | Glacial Ray |

22 lands

0 creatures

- 4 [Howling Mine](#)
- 4 [Ire of Kaminari](#)
- 4 [Lava Spike](#)
- 4 [Mesmeric Orb](#)
- 4 [Peer Through Depths](#)
- 4 [Reach Through Mists](#)
- 4 [Sift Through Sands](#)

38 other spells

Sideboard

- 4 [Blind with Anger](#)
- 4 [Boil](#)
- 3 [Bribery](#)
- 4 [Mana Leak](#)

15 sideboard cards



Mesmeric Orb

by Manuel Bevand (<http://magic.tcgplayer.com/db/article.asp?id=5158>)

Qualities: Resilience, Unpredictability, Ease of Play

Mesmeric Orb



Main Deck

60 cards

19 Island	4 Aether Spellbomb
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Boomerang
	4 Dampen Thought
	4 Echoing Truth
	4 Howling Mine
	4 Mesmeric Orb
	4 Peer Through Depths
	4 Reach Through Mists
	4 Serum Visions
	4 Thirst for Knowledge

20 lands

0 creatures

40 other spells

Sideboard

2 Jetting Glasskite
3 Jushi Apprentice
2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
4 Thieving Magpie
4 Wall of Air

15 sideboard cards



Enduring Ideal

by Manuel Bevand

Qualities: Unpredictability, Ease of Play, Resilience (because of the relative lack of enchantment removal in decks right now)

Enduring Ideal



Main Deck

60 cards

3 [City of Brass](#)
12 [Forest](#)
1 [Island](#)
1 [Mountain](#)
5 [Plains](#)
1 [Swamp](#)

23 lands

4 [Birds of Paradise](#)
3 [Eternal Witness](#)
4 [Sakura-Tribe Elder](#)

11 creatures

1 [Arrest](#)
1 [Circle of Protection: Red](#)
1 [Confiscate](#)
4 [Enduring Ideal](#)
2 [Genju of the Realm](#)
1 [Honden of Cleansing Fire](#)
1 [Honden of Infinite Rage](#)
1 [Honden of Life's Web](#)
1 [Honden of Night's Reach](#)
1 [Honden of Seeing Winds](#)
1 [Ivory Mask](#)
1 [Meishin, the Mind Cage](#)
3 [Rampant Growth](#)
1 [Reverence](#)
3 [Sensei's Divining Top](#)
3 [Wrath of God](#)

26 other spells

Sideboard

3 [Choke](#)
2 [Confiscate](#)
4 [Defense Grid](#)
3 [Karma](#)
3 [Pacifism](#)

15 sideboard cards

Honden of Infinite Rage

2



Legendary Enchantment — Shrine



At the beginning of your upkeep, Honden of Infinite Rage deals damage to target creature or player equal to the number of Shrines you control.

To the sorrow of all, its rage became focused on those who once stoked it.

John Ayew