

Getting Ready for Regionals

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Traditionally I do archetype and match-up breakdowns about this time in the season, but I feel like I've already written that column. Personally, I haven't deviated much from the decks that I suggested in *Throwing Down the Gauntlet*, so this year I elected instead to approach the annual Regionals ramp-up in a little bit of a different way, hopefully in a way that will help out the many first-time Regionals competitors in the **magicthegathering.com** audience. Here goes:

In the United States, Regional Championships are this weekend. If you have never played in a Regionals event, they are fairly enormous tournaments crowded by hundreds of players -- many Regionals are larger than some Grand Prix events, in fact -- where these legions of players battle for somewhere between two and eight invitations to the US National Championship. The atmosphere of Regionals is best described as... *heavy*. Playing in one is reminiscent of competing in a large PTQ, though the level of play is, as can be expected by the larger turnouts, a little lower. It is deceptive to think that because there are generally more slots available than at a PTQ, qualification at Regionals is automatically easier: the Swiss portion is longer, and you may have to accumulate the same number of actual match wins to qualify that you would at a *Kamigawa* Block one-slotter. These days, it is rare to play a legitimate name at a Regional Championship, though as recently as last year, PT Paris Champion Mike Long added a Southern California Top 8 to his storied resume... Watch out. You just might find yourself facing a superstar.

Winning at Regionals is no mean task. Success at this tournament will require a great deal of mental concentration: to make the Top 8, let alone take home an invitation at 2- or 4-slot events, will require you to maintain your concentration over long hours... and that assumes you've not only brought the right deck, but are playing it well enough to advance, round after challenging round. Outside what happens during the individual rounds of the tournament itself, there are many methodological and clerical issues where you have to keep your nose clean. Staying tight in these will help you to gain an advantage over careless opponents, and more importantly, to make sure your own game losses result from losing 20 life in an actual duel... rather than to an avoidable mistake and a judge's pen.

Rule #1: Know Your Own Deck

The single most important thing you can do coming into a tournament like Regionals is to Know Your Own Deck.

Regionals is Standard Constructed, meaning 60 card (minimum) main decks and 15 card sideboards; unless you have a very good reason, staying to that 60 should not be considered optional. The usual lists for Constructed apply, as always. Why did you choose this deck? What incentive do you have to play it over this other deck? Regionals is, as we've said, a long and arduous tournament; if you want to succeed, you should have quick and solid answers to these questions. A few years back, I was working very hard on a B/R beatdown deck. I knew that I wanted to play cards like Dauthi Slayer with evasion and two toughness, and that I wanted to add the flexibility of Red Decks to early drops like Carnophage and Sarcomancy. The problem was that the mana of this kind of deck was -- at least comparatively -- a mess. I asked Erik Lauer, at least then **Magic's** finest deck designer, what he thought; Erik looked at the list and asked me why I didn't just play Sligh.

Why did you choose this deck? What incentive do you have to play it over this other deck? Generally the decks that do well at Regionals are very consistent, or very powerful, or hopefully both. The best decks in today's Standard can Entwine Tooth and Nail on the fifth turn, untap with the best

4/5 body in the format in play -- or even attack with it -- on the fourth turn, or put two of the opponent's lands on top of his deck on the third turn of play in an explosive tangle of mana and bomb. Now you shouldn't be afraid to innovate -- and **Magic** legend Beth Moursund once said that any player good enough to make the Pro Tour should be capable of profitably deviating from the expected versions of the expected archetypes -- but when you choose your deck, you owe it to yourself to keep even, power-wise, with the best decks in the format. The only exceptions I can think of are two: Either you have a less powerful deck that for whatever reason puzzles all of the pieces of the metagame together, stapling answers to this deck to reasonably flexible responses to this other deck, hopefully catching all the possibilities and duct taping them to a realistic win condition; conversely you can play a *more* mana efficient deck, avoiding 'screw losses rather than trying to rack up victories based on raw power. A good example of the former is The Solution, the deck Zvi Mowshowitz used to defeat Resident Genius Tsuyoshi Fujita in the finals of PT Tokyo:

Zvi Mowshowitz

Winner -- Pro Tour-Tokyo 2001 - The Solution

As for the latter, one of the unique problems with the current Standard format is that such a high percentage of players, regardless of archetype, are playing Sakura-Tribe Elder and Sensei's Divining Top, Kodama's Reach or Wood Elves, that it is difficult to deviate based either solely or even primarily on superior mana consistency; furthermore, decks based on symmetrical effects (the most important of which is Death Cloud) have difficulty generating an advantage against consistent mana ramp.

Methodologically, the most important bit about Knowing Your Own Deck is to get your list right. Theron Martin, once a very popular Internet writer, believed that you should know your deck well enough to be able to summon the entire deck list from memory without consulting the cards. The corollary is that you don't want any deck registration errors. Deck registration errors, either in the 60- or 15-card columns, are anything but desirable. Registration errors lead to game losses and possibly bigger problems: either the judges force you to play a sub-optimal list balanced with basic lands... or you can correct your list but acquire some game or match losses that your opponents don't actually have to earn. Again, you aren't looking for either.

While it may be obvious that you should take the time to correctly register your deck, keep in mind that players as unbeatable as Jon Finkel himself have been penalized at the Regionals level by their TOs (*cough* Brian David-Marshall *cough*) for registration issues, and when I play team with BDM, I actually register his deck for him (oddly successful teammate, good friend, horrendous track record in remembering which basic land is which).

Know the Opponents' Decks

Knowing your own deck is largely about contextualizing it in the greater context of the metagame. What do the other decks in the metagame look like? What are the major archetypes? Failing those, what are the kinds of cards that will inspire the atypical player's listing? Perhaps most importantly for this year's uniquely positioned Regionals, what are the new cards being included in the major archetypes?

Examples:

Green Beatdown

Blanchwood Armor - A unique archetype unto itself, the true Green Beatdown deck, recent to emerge, doesn't play cards like Sensei's Divining Top or Kodama's Reach... It is built to punish its slow cousins that *do*. By putting Blanchwood Armor on a creature with Forestwalk (such as Jukai Messenger) the true beatdown deck can win the game quickly, even if it seems to be falling behind against the opponent's Plow Unders.

Medium Green

Stampeding Serow - This *Saviors of Kamigawa* monster allows the mid-range Green deck to break its most powerful elements. Looping *Eternal Witness* allows for infinite *Plow Under* recursion and bouncing *Viridian Shaman* lets the Serow player mop up a house of artifacts. That the Serow is a huge creature with trample itself also helps to break up defenses based on chump blocking, and its *Eternal Witness* reload ability lets the Medium Green player recoup the Serow in the unlikely case that it is slain in combat. The corollary to knowing about *Stampeding Serow* is to know that it is not adopted universally; Medium Green decks will play both Serow/Wood Elves engines *and* Troll Ascetics without either creature... Being ready means having an idea of how to beat both configurations. The same is true for every card on this list with the exception of *Blanchwood Armor*, which in and of itself, makes the Green Beatdown archetype.

Mono-Red Aggro

Zo-Zu the Punisher - Various Red Decks, from the alleged "Ponza" to swashbuckling weenie decks, have started to include this Legendary Gray Ogre. Zo-Zu is a slightly below average beater for his cost, but his special ability -- particularly good in a format defined by *Sakura-Tribe Elder* and *Reap and Sow* -- can help bring the opponent within burn range or quicken the clock. It is effective both in decks that destroy the opponent's lands, forcing him to play more, and those interested purely in short term damage for its own sake.

Rats

Skull Collector - *Skull Collector* is *Stampeding Serow*'s peer in the Rats department. This Ogre Warrior has a nice body for its cost, and can help loop *Ravenous Rats* and *Chittering Rats* very quickly, and creates redundancy with the Rats deck's existing *Ninjasu* plan. Given the right setup and the right mana acceleration, a *Skull Collector*/*Chittering Rats* combination can completely lock an opponent out of the game as early as turn three or four.

Black/x Control

Kagemaro, First to Suffer - This Legendary Demon Spirit is like a *Black Masticore*. Doing double duty as an endgame threat *and* efficient creature defense any time before the final nail is pounded into the opponent's coffin, *Kagemaro* is potentially bigger than the *Evening Star*, a great answer to army makers *Beacon of Creation* and *Rude Awakening*, and matches up nicely with regular old giants like *Iwamori of the Open Fist*.

Artifact Blue

In case you haven't seen it, a new archetype has come up. Hybridizing powerful blue cards with the traditionally *Tooth-oriented* *UrzaTron* lands from *Eighth Edition*, this deck has been a hot topic in some corners of cyberspace. Most recently, Eduardo Pizarro won Chile's Santiago Regionals with this version:

Eduardo Pizarro

Santiago, Chile Regionals

The deck can do many things. It has nearly as many counters as *Gabriel Nassif's* *Blue Control*. It can use *Trinket Mage* to get either *Sensei's Divining Top* or *Aether Spellbomb*. It has many different bombs, from *Oblivion Stone* to *Mindslaver*, any one of which can win the game on its own. Though this deck looks strange, and may be hard to pinpoint, it is probably worth a look.

Another part of knowing the opponents' decks is to understand not just what cards they play, but what makes them "tick." What are the offensive and defensive measures that each deck relies on to win? What are the chinks in each deck's armor?

Examples:

Tooth and Nail

The deck is fundamentally powerful and can out-last any other deck in the format, given time and sufficient mana. Terry Soh increased the redundancy of the deck by adding Kodama's Reach, making it more resilient to mana disruption, and better overall in games where it did not naturally acquire the UrzaTron... But the core weakness of the deck is still ultimately its lands. The deck's namesake involves nine mana to entwine, and is vulnerable to a variety of weapons. The problem with committing overmuch to an anti-lands strategy is that the modern incarnation of the deck can exploit non-UrzaTron mana access to just play a Medium Green game with Iwamori & co. out of the sideboard.

Mono-Red Burn

Usually we force ourselves to value cards more than life, to bleed a little to get more creatures with that Wrath of God, to sacrifice in the short term for the cardboard payout earned by our patience. This is not a winning strategy against a Red Deck with a lot of reach. You give up unnecessary life points, you'll probably lose. Burn is one of the few match-ups in Standard where Umezawa's Jitte is better than the other options, and Sword of Light and Shadow -- which doesn't give Protection from Red -- is potentially more effective than the on-color Sword of Fire and Ice. Why? Because life is more important than cards, and Jitte and B/W Sword can give you life.

Methodology

Part of knowing your opponents' decks is to know how many cards they are presenting... and that those cards are well mixed. Let me tell you how to win more at Regionals, especially if it is one of your first attempts at winning on the National level: table shuffle your opponent's deck. You are actually *required* to shuffle the opponent's deck at REL3 or above, but table shuffling the opponent's deck first in addition is very helpful. Our own editor Scott Johns used to use the 2-pile table shuffle before matches; he would split the cards into two piles, every other card, counting to 60 along the way. I like this technique because it allows you to quickly count the opponent's deck, ensuring that it is 60 cards, and sets those cards up into two piles perfect for the riffle.

The goal of shuffling each opponent every round is not necessarily to get cheap wins (but those *do* come up, and from even top tier players at times), but to create an environment across the entire tournament that discourages cheating. If every player approaches every round with the expectation that he is going to get shuffled -- even by his friends -- potential cheaters will be less likely to stack their decks in an attempt to get an unfair advantage beforehand. Ultimately, the last line of defense you can give yourself, more than information, more than picking the right deck yourself, more even than playing it to the best of your ability, is to safeguard yourself from chicanery; if you lose an important match at **Magic**, let it be to someone who played better than you, rather than someone who played more deviously.

Listen to Your Old Pal, MichaelJ:

Regarding your article "Try Not to Get Wrecked":

What great timing your article was!

After reading the article, I managed to tune my Red Deck for the Regionals in Singapore and get into the Top 8, getting the invitation I needed.

Your articles have always been a must read since I started to play competitively and affected how I build my decks and prepare for competitions.

Therefore I must really say thanks for all the "help". Hope to see many more of your wonderful articles.

*Regards,
Chong
--Chong Teng*

Great job, Chong. Take some names at Nationals!

Goodbye and Good Luck...

The last bit of advice I can give you is to draw the correct balance of land *and* spells. That's the first step to **Magic** fame and fortune.

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