

Mike Flores

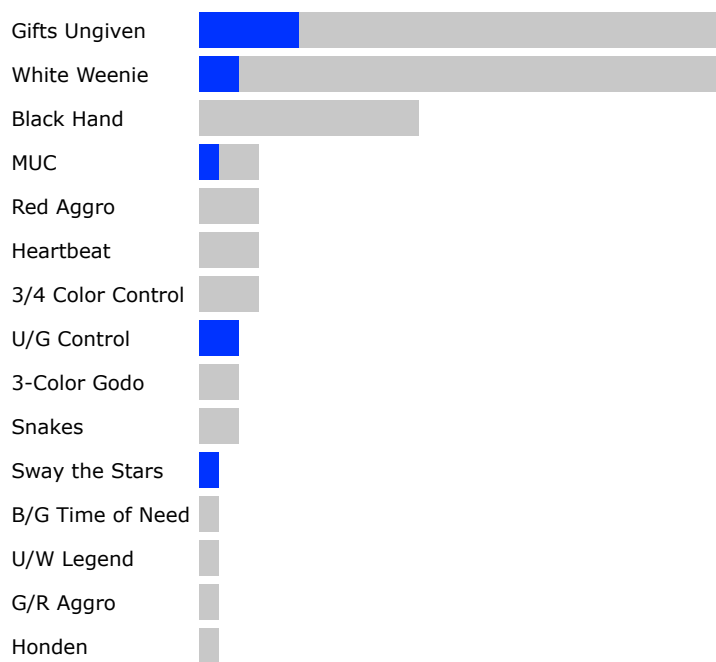
Thursday, July 28, 2005

"Do not be fooled... Look at the PTQ results. Its still WW and MBA. Gifts just does not put up the numbers, and 1 grand prix does not compare to 25+ PTQs."

"It doesn't matter how good the deck is, the PTQ players won't play it properly, and even those who DO will fall victim to their opponents playing slowly because they don't know how to play against it...and in the end, WW will still dominate the PTQ environment because it's the best beatdown deck in the environment."

"Gifts is a pretty standard pro event deck, but PTQs are just not pro events. You would not drive an Indy car to buy groceries at the store, and you should not play a pro event deck at a qualifier."

The Swimming With Sharks forums were abuzz last week after I seemingly declared the end of Umezawa's Jitte dominance and a brand new king of the format. To Gifts Ungiven's naysayers, all I can do is say "look at this week's PTQ tally."

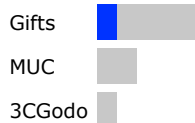


■ PTQ winner ■ PTQ Top 8

What a difference a week makes!

As we speculated might happen last week, it looks like the wholesale dominance of Umezawa's Jitte is over for this format. Sure, White Weenie remains tied for the most populous deck in all PTQ Top 8s... but when you factor in actual Blue Envelopes, the strength of Gifts Ungiven really shows. Along with holding just as many Top 8s as White Weenie, Gifts Ungiven racked up between two and three *times* as many actual invitations to the Pro Tour. Meanwhile Black Hand, the deck that looked to be White Weenie's only opposition for control of *Kamigawa* Block, had a lousy week, with no invitations whatsoever and half of White Weenie's Top 8s at best.

Gifts Ungiven's strength in the format is compounded when you look at the Top 8 of last weekend's Grand Prix Niigata:



Katsuhiko Mori In a star-studded Top 8 that included many of Japan's biggest names, Gifts Ungiven cemented itself as the official Deck to Beat. With more than half the Top 8 running some sort of Gifts Ungiven/Hana Kami lock (with or without Ethereal Haze), Gifts Ungiven simply proved too much for the aggressive Jitte decks.

Along with his eventual Grand Prix crown, Katsuhiko Mori was one of three players to run the tables on Day One. Though a mono-black aggro deck designed by Tsuyoshi Fujita held one position, the other two (including Mori of course), were variants on the same theme: Gifts Ungiven enabling Hana Kami recursion via Soulless Revival and Death Denied.

"In short, a double pseudo-tutor is too much for aggro decks to handle," said Ted Knutson, the reporter at Grand Prix Niigata. "... Particularly when you can grab Kagemaro."

Unlike some previous incarnations, the newest breed of Gifts Ungiven decks busts out a full four copies of the ubiquitous Legendary Demon Spirit, leverages Death Denied along with Soulless Revival to recourse Kagemaro and really give attack decks fits.

So what happened? Why did Gifts go from the best deck at the Pro Tour, to a deck that didn't show up in a single Top 8 until a *Sunday* PTQ during Week *two*, only really gaining position a month into the format? For one thing, the dominance of Umezawa's Jitte decks early probably scared off a lot of potential Gifts Ungiven players. Like certain pundits, they thought that in order to be competitive in *Kamigawa* Block, you had to bring four Jittes to the fight.

The initial success, or at least Top 8 placements, of TOGIT-style Three-color Control and related decks probably helped Gifts back up. G/W-based decks are serious trouble for White Weenie with their combination of big creatures and mana acceleration... but Jittes or no, those decks have nearly no game against Gifts Ungiven. In every element but equipment, the Gifts Ungiven deck can match the TOGIT-style decks, Reach for Reach, Top for Top, Snake Shaman for beatdown-absorbing Snake. For most, Hokori, Dust Drinker the only real threat to a full-blown Hana Kami recursion plan in the main deck, with significant numbers boasting two -- if not only one -- copy. When you factor in Cranial Extraction and Wear Away from the Gifts Ungiven side, even the Jitte aspect of the Three-color Control decks become less relevant.

But I'll let you in on a little secret: the Gifts Ungiven decks just got better with age. Unlike the average beatdown deck, Gifts Ungiven is a delicate balance of three if not four colors, asking questions at every step of the construction process. Should I run Ethereal Haze or not? How many creatures in the main? What disruption creature should I start? What is the core reason to play this deck?

Look at Nicholas Giles's Gifts Ungiven from the Las Vegas PTQ back in Week 2.

Nicholas Giles - Gifts Ungiven

5th Place - Nevada - Las Vegas - 7/2

Nicholas obviously did a great job making Top 8 -- and even helped to get Gifts Ungiven back on the map -- but his deck was not as tuned as the more recent versions of Gifts Ungiven that we looked at last week, or certainly the ones we will see coming out of Japan. Nicholas had *Maga, Traitor to Mortals*, a card that many of the Heartbeat of Spring decks are using to win the game, but no copies of *Kagemaro, First to Suffer*; the latter is an automatic inclusion at this point. Moreover, Nicholas ran a lot of *Cranial Extractions* main, but only three *Sensei's Divining Tops*.

By contrast, check out Katsuhiko Mori's deck from the most recent Grand Prix:

Katsuhiko Mori

"Godo's Gifts" designed by Katsu-Mori

You've got to be on to something when Masashi Oiso and Kenji Tsumura -- two different players grappling for the top tier in professional **Magic** -- are running your deck. All three players made Top 8... but Mori himself went undefeated on Day One on the way to his eventual win overall.

But what makes this version special?

All Gifts Ungiven decks are powerful, but Mori's is especially streamlined. Check out his inclusion of *Ghost-Lit Stalker* in the main deck. This little Spirit can get in there early... and really make a difference late. Though Gifts Ungiven has powerful anti-creature measures, from *Sakura-Tribe Elder* as an early defender all the way up to *Final Judgment* in some builds, the archetype typically runs only *Sickening Shoal* for spot defense. Therefore *Ghost-Lit Stalker* can actually become a relevant permanent. On top of that, *Ghost-Lit Stalker* also has a Channel ability that is particularly synergistic with the graveyard recursion suite common to all Gifts Ungiven/Hana Kami decks.

Like many Japanese decks, Mori's lacks the *Ethereal Haze* lock, in this case erring on the side of the maximum number of big *Kagemaros*. But what is more interesting than Mori's exclusions is what he and his associates chose to play instead. It's not like they dropped *Ethereal Haze* to go to three colors... Their sideboard contains a basic *Mountain*!

This crazy board plan allows "Godo's Gifts" to bring in *Godo, Bandit Warlord* and an equipment suite. Remember when I said that TOGIT Three-color Control at least retains equipment advantage against Gifts Ungiven? With *Godo* coming out of the board, capable of grabbing *Umezawa's Jitte* or even *Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang*, this is no longer 100% true. That said, the *Godo* plan is particularly effective in the mirror:

Because most Gifts Ungiven decks diversify into a *Legendary* threat sideboard plan with *Kodama of the North Tree* and assorted other offensive creatures after board, the *Godo* plan allows for potential dominance over the mirror. Like the opponent, the *Godo's Gifts* deck will bring in pricey *Legendary* creatures, but it's what comes alongside *Godo* that makes the sideboard interesting. The presence of equipment actually moves Gifts Ungiven from *combo/control* to a mid-range aggressive deck after boards. This inclusion of equipment turns every creature into a potential threat, making late-game *Ghost-Lit Stalkers* or *Sakura-Tribe Elders* a lot more relevant.

One of the decks that really came to play this week was *Mono-Blue Control*. Tomohiro Aridome worked all the way to the Niigata finals with this version:

Tomohiro Aridome

"Yaso Control" designed by Shota Yasooka

We've seen Mono-Blue control decks since Week One, but the most recent incarnations, like Godo's Gifts, emphasize the most important cards. Most Mono-Blue decks sideboarded four Threads of Disloyalty; last week, Andrew Stokinger started two. Aridome and other players running Shota Yasooka's deck had all four copies starting. Similarly, these players moved away from Minamo Scrollkeeper -- a four-of in most sideboards to date -- to run four River Kaijins(!) instead.

Why is this important?

The Mono-Blue decks with their many counters match up well with "big spell" decks like Three-color Control or Gifts Ungiven. What is more difficult is handling a deck like White Weenie. I played against Mono-Blue control with White Weenie in a recent tournament, and let me tell you, it ain't hard to beat a deck with Jushi Apprentice as its early drop when you have 2/2s on one and Bushido coming on two. However, with Threads of Disloyalty moving to the main, strategies based entirely on 2/2s simultaneously soaks up damage and generates card advantage.

After boards, River Kaijin seems to be the right defender. Minamo Scrollkeeper has nice stats for its cost -- 2/3 for 1U, as well as being a Wizard for Azami -- but it isn't that good against some of the expected early drops. Samurai, for instance, will kill the Scrollkeeper in combat, while they will merely bounce off of River Kaijin; ditto on many of Black Hand's aggressive drops.

Speaking of Black Hand, Resident Genius Tsuyoshi Fujita's newest version of Go Anan Deck shows much the same attention to innovation as the best Gifts Ungiven and Blue control decks. Though Umezawa's Jitte showed up in only one main deck in Niigata, in the hands of Tsuyoshi Ikeda, Black Hand showed itself to still be a reasonable choice, the only non-Gifts Ungiven deck to go undefeated on Day One.

Tsuyoshi Ikeda

"Go Anan Deck" designed by Tsuyoshi Fujita

Though it has the same fundamental strategy as every other aggressive Black Weenie deck we've seen to date, Go Anan Deck has serious structural differences. With not an O-Naginata in sight Fujita's latest creation *has no three drops!* Think about that: most Black Hand decks have relied on Takenuma Bleeders and Ogre Marauders to do their dirty work; this version runs a critical mass of two drops instead. In the case of Wicked Akuba, those two-drops may actually do more damage (or cause more life loss) than their more expensive cousins. This minor tweak in drops makes Go Anan Deck much more efficient against a deck like Gifts Ungiven. Not only can it start on Psychic Spear for disruption from the start, but rather than having its hand glutted with threes, the newest Black Hand can do things like play two threats on turn four for a more effective swarm strategy.

Ikeda, PT Yokohama '03

The story of this week is that detailing even established archetypes can yield powerful capabilities and breathe unexpected life into these decks. By diversifying threats in Gifts Ungiven or concentrating on filling the structural holes in Mono-Blue Control, the mightiest control decks in the kingdom of Kamigawa have risen to the challenge that was White Weenie. It would be foolish to say that the format's onetime best deck -- check out the PTQ count from "Umezawa's Dominance" just two weeks ago -- will fade entirely, but has the metagame shifted from Jitte towards control? Without a doubt.

But what about next week?

