

Scott Wills

Tuesday, August 16, 2005

It's been more than a year since I last covered the topic of signalling in drafts and that article was by no means a comprehensive study. There are a few other aspects of signalling I want to discuss today but I'd encourage you all to check out the original article as that covers the basics of signalling: What is it? Why is it important? I'm going to assume you have a general idea about those things when discussing today's topics.

For the majority of today's article I'm going to talk about the top eight draft at Pro-Tour London. I frequently get requests for "Why don't you cover a draft from all eight player's point of view?" and while that really is too much work for a single column we do have the next best thing now.

The top eight draft of London is covered comprehensively in Wizards' latest gadget: the Draft Viewer. This amazing tool allows you to see every single pick that any of the top eight players made and you can also follow how these picks impacted the draft as a whole as well. The best way to discuss signalling and its implications is through a real-life example and with eight great players at the table this is one of the best examples you'll get.

So fire up the draft-viewer and familiarise yourself with it. You can click on the players' names on the top right to select them and each pack and each pick from that pack is selectable on the left. I'll still cover the important details here though.

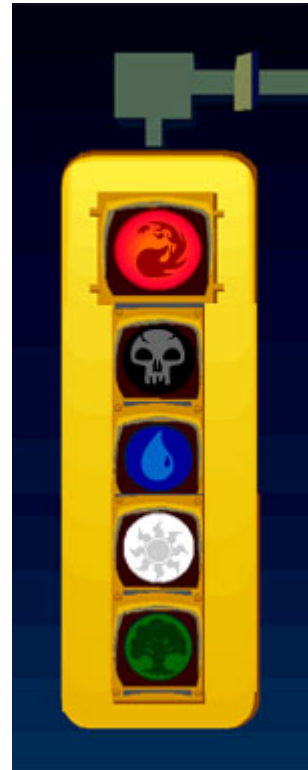
The best place to start looking here is with the interactions between Geoffrey Siron and Tsuyoshi Fujita.

Fujita was passing to Siron in pack one and Fujita's opening pack contained three real cards to choose from: Yamabushi's Flame, Mothrider Samurai, and Soratami Mirror-Mage. Fujita went with the Mirror-Guard here but the pick could go either way, with the Flame being the next best alternative. Passing the Flame second pick along with the Mirror-Mage is still a pretty good signal to go red. The only other red card that he might've taken is Glacial Ray and you don't see that and Yamabushi's Flame in the same pack too often.

Siron had opened up Honden of Infinite Rage and happily scooped up the Flame. In the meantime the best cards he passed were Cage of Hands, Scuttling Death, Samurai of the Pale Curtain and Kami of the Hunt. His first-pick here is sending a clear signal already, as he's passing no good red cards.

After picking Keiga in pack one Tomi Walamies goes ahead and takes the Kami of the Hunt that Siron passed, as Tomi's favourite combination is blue-green.

Back to Fujita. His pick two has a choice of Consuming Vortex or Ronin Houndmaster. After going with the Mirror-Guard in pack one he stays on colour and passes the Houndmaster to Siron who scoops it up. The next pick involves him staying on colour again with River Kaijin over the probably superior Kami of Fire's Roar. Once again though this is a signal he's sending – he's already told the player on his left (Siron) to go ahead and draft red with the Flame and Houndmaster being passed so he wants to keep that consistent.



The next interesting pick is in pack seven. Fujita has picked up only green and blue cards at this point and is faced with a choice of Counsel of the Soratami, Kami of Fire's Roar, and Honden of Cleansing Fire. Here he does bite and takes the red card. He could have stuck to the plan and taken either of the other two but it was unlikely they'd make his main deck, whereas a late pick Kami of Fire's Roar is a reasonable signal itself that red is not being drafted on his immediate right. Indeed, Johan Sadeghpour on Fujita's right had started almost exclusively drafting white.

The next pick – pick eight – Fujita is faced with a choice of Kami of Fire's Roar and Hearth Kami, but instead goes with Cranial Extraction, thus gifting Siron the choice of either Kami for his ninth pick. This is the pick where I believe Fujita should've seen the writing on the wall and moved into red. I'll get to why I believe that's a good idea at this point in the draft later on.

Fujita then also passes a playable Brothers Yamazaki towards the end of the pack, leaving Siron almost mono-red except for the Honden he picked up as his eight pick.

Siron was nearly mono-red after pack 1... With a lot of playable cards and only one colour committed to, the first pack leaves Geoffrey in a very powerful position. He has cut red off very well and this signalled to the players downwind of him that the colour is not open to them. They have cooperated nicely with Tomi Walamies in blue-green on Geoffrey's immediate left, and David Larson next in line drafting mostly white with a couple of green cards that got through Tomi.

In pack two Fujita stays in blue with a first-pick Ninja of the Deep Hours, and then stays on colour with a Soratami Mindsweeper over Horobi's Whisper in pack two. This is a difficult decision here I think. He does have a Moss Kami and Sakura-Tribe Elder from pack one he doesn't want to lose, but with few other green cards coming his way in pack one he might have suspected green was being drafted on his right. Indeed both Johan Sadeghpour and Masashi Oiso had been taking green cards in the first pack. In the *Champions-Betrayers-Saviors* format green doesn't really get strong until the *Saviors* pack so it isn't a good idea to be drafting green when you have players on your right drafting it ahead of you in the third pack. On top of that when you don't actually plan on winning with the Mindsweeper's ability he doesn't have the best stats for his cost. He's great when you can stall and win the game with him but that isn't always possible and the Whisper might be the better card given those circumstances.

A second pick Whisper isn't a definite signal but it's not a terrible one either. With all the red cards Fujita passed in pack one he definitely knew at least one of Siron's colours and there are very few red cards Siron would've taken over Whisper had he been thinking about drafting red-black. Fujita could definitely have considered switching to blue-black in this pack. Black is very solid in *Betrayers* and comparatively weak in *Saviors* so you don't really care too much if you don't get passed black cards in pack three as there aren't too many great ones anyway. The lack of black cards passed in pack one does make it likely that nothing would come through in *Saviors* though.

Siron did stay on colour throughout pack two with first, second and third pick Frostlings followed by an Ogre Recluse, Blademane Baku, and seventh pick Cunning Bandit.

Fujita gritted his teeth and stuck with green, taking a Child of Thorns over Okiba-Gang Shinobi and Hired Muscle as his third pick, and a Sakura-Tribe Springcaller over another Okiba-Gang and Patron of the Nezumi in pick four. A Phantom Wings was next over a Skullsnatcher.

In pack three Fujita had no real choice but to stick to his colours. He got plenty of playables but other than a fifth pick Elder Pine of Jukai nothing spectacular came his way and that only arrived because the other green players had taken more powerful cards. In the mean time he was passing two Barrel Down Sokenzan, Sokenzan Spellblade and Undying Flames and setting Siron up perfectly for his 9-0 sweep.

So what lessons can we learn from that?

First of all, let's look at Could Fujita have taken the title if those were red cards in his grip instead? what would've happened if

Fujita had taken the hint and moved into red somewhere around pick seven or so. He could've gone with the Kami of Fire's Roar pick three over River Kaijin but with the two blue cards already the Kaijin does seem the natural choice.

At pick seven he did go with the Kami of Fire's Roar, and then pick eight he had the choice of Kami of Fire's Roar or Hearth Kami. This pack says something pretty clear which is simply "Probably only one other person is drafting red so far". As this was Fujita's seventh pick he was looking at the pack Siron opened and with two playable red cards still in the pack was it possible to foresee that no-one else on the table other than Siron was drafting red? Perhaps not. Certainly one of the conclusions that can be inferred from this pack is that none of the two players on Fujita's right are drafting red and probably not the third guy to his right either.

If you assume that to be the case then you have to stop and think about what colour you should be drafting. It is obvious Siron is in red and Fujita had given him that colour at the start of the pack. The point to make about that though is whether or not that matters? Sure Fujita gets second picks from red in *Betrayer's* but *Betrayers* is notoriously weak in red anyway so he isn't missing out on much there. What Fujita could have realised is that he can absolutely cut red off to his right in the second pack. None of the three drafters to his right that are currently not drafting red are going to start based on *Betrayers*. By the time *Saviors* comes around Fujita will be well set-up to be gifted the red cards and the juicy first-pick commons should make their way through three, four or even five players before they get to him.

So let's assume Fujita makes the decision to draft red cards and moves into red-green in *Betrayers*. Immediately he can take Frost Ogre over Ninja of the Deep Hours first pick. He then gets Springcallers second and fourth sandwiched by a Child of Thorns; all picks he had already made. He gets another Frost Ogre fifth and gets a choice of a First Volley over the Scaled Hulk he took sixth. He then gets another First Volley over the unplayed Kami of False Hope he took seventh and then still has a choice of Blademane Baku or Goblin Cohort eighth. An eleventh pick Shinka Gatekeeper is nothing to shout about but could still make the deck on mana curve considerations.

Fujita's actual *Betrayer's* picks look like this:

1. Ninja of the Deep Hours
2. Soratami Mindsweeper
3. Child of Thorns
4. Sakura-Tribe Springcaller
5. Phantom Wings
6. Scaled Hulk
7. Kami of False Hope
8. Heart of Light
9. Terashi's Grasp
10. Splinter
11. Heart of Light

When they could've looked like this:

1. Frost Ogre
2. Sakura-Tribe Springcaller
3. Child of Thorns
4. Sakura-Tribe Springcaller

5. Frost Ogre
6. Scaled Hulk
7. First Volley
8. Blademane Baku
9. Terashi's Grasp
10. Splinter
11. Shinka Gatekeeper

Already I think there's an improvement in card quality and sheer number of playables there although there's nothing overwhelmingly powerful.

But now we get to see the implications of this in *Saviors*, as this is where the real pay-off for the switch should really occur.

Here are Fujita's actual *Saviors* picks:

1. Bounteous Kirin
2. Shinen of Life's Roar
3. Moonbow Illusionist
4. Inner Calm, Outer Strength
5. Elder Pine of Jukai
6. Oppressive Will
7. Pithing Needle
8. Dreamcatcher
9. Promised Kannushi
10. Oboro Breezecaller
11. Overwhelming Intellect
12. Shinen of Fury's Fire

I think it's fairly safe to assume the picks on Fujita's right would've remained the same even give the different picks by Fujita in pack two. Given this assumption, by switching into red Fujita could instead have had the following picks:

1. Barrel Down Sokenzan
2. Barrel Down Sokenzan
3. Stampeding Serow / Akki Underling
4. Inner Calm, Outer Strength
5. Barrel Down Sokenzan
6. Sokenzan Spellblade
7. Pithing Needle
8. Undying Flames
9. Captive Flame / Promised Kannushi
10. Captive Flame
11. Sokenzan Renegade
12. Shinen of Fury's Fire

That's quite a lot of playable cards and a shot at four removal spells if he wanted them. The Undying Flames also works very well in this deck full of Springcallers, Frost Ogres and Moss Kamis. Overall I think it's apparent that the red-green deck he could've built with this switch would've been superior to the blue-green deck he ended up with.

Of course hindsight is a wonderful thing and it's very easy to draw these conclusions after the fact. However, I think the signals were there and they could've been picked up on. There are a few facts

that are worth reviewing to demonstrate why this signal was clear and why it should've been picked up on:

- The eighth pick choice of two playable red cards in an otherwise empty pack is a strong signal few or even no other players are drafting red to Fujita's right.
- Although Siron is obviously set in red this doesn't matter too much as Fujita can simply focus on his second colour in the pack where Siron is getting first shot over him. In fact, we can see that enough red cards were opened for a few decent ones to make it to Fujita anyway.
- Given that red is at its best in Savivors, Fujita is actually dominating Siron for the pack where the important red cards will be drafted. That puts him in a superior position despite the earlier choices.

In terms of signalling this was a very interesting draft as the signals were there if you could pick up on them. Of course, that's very hard to do when you have a few seconds for each pick, and especially in a Pro-Tour final as well where the pressure is immense, so this article is not intended as any sort of slight against Fujita's playing skills but rather an informative chance to show how important reading signals can be.

And that's just the start. There are other elements to this draft that are interesting to review as well, most particularly how John Sadeghpou, Antti Malin and Masashi Oiso all ended up drafting black next to each other. However I'll leave it as an exercise for the reader to explore the picks and follow what happened between those three.

When Signals Go Bad

Of course all of this commentary is fine, but signalling only works when the other players on your draft table understand them, an important point to keep in mind when moving from a Pro Tour Top 8 draft to something you're more likely to see at your local store. There are several times when you don't gain anything by signalling and when you might misinterpret signals other players are sending you so it's worth being aware of those.

The most common thing is when other players simply don't look for signals and take their picks based on other criteria. They might simply take white cards for their first couple of picks and then ignore that third pick Moss Kami you send their way in favour of a Kitsune Diviner simply because they don't like drafting green-white for example.

In this sort of situation making assumptions based on the signals you are sending to other players can leave you in a worse situation than if you just forgot about the whole idea altogether. You can end up forcing a specific colour and signalling that another is clear to your neighbour only to find those signals completely ignored simply because a player isn't willing to give up their first pick for example.

It's difficult to know when this might happen though. You can make an educated guess as to the player's skill level and act accordingly but this can sometimes be guesswork at best. If it's a side event draft then you're probably best focusing on your own deck but if it's a PTQ top eight draft then you can probably assume your opponent's are competent at least and will pick up on any signals you try to send.

Other times you might get players who come into a draft with a very specific plan. They might believe red-green is the best colour combination by far and when you pass them that second pick choice of Kami of Fire's Roar or Teller of Tales they just take the Kami and pass the Teller because that fits into their plan. Even in the top eight draft of Pro-Tour London you can see Tomi Walamies selecting Kami of the Hunt as his second pick over Cage of Hands and Scuttling Death due to his personal preference for green-blue. Both the black and white cards are superior to Kami of the Hunt but Tomi had a strong preference for his specific colour combination and that influenced his choice.

If Siron on his right had taken a green card from that pack as his first pick he may well have thought to himself "Ok, I'm passing Scuttling Death and Cage as the next two best picks so I should be able to cut off green" only to find himself sadly mistaken when the *Betrayers* cards started to come through Tomi to him.

This is another thing that is very difficult to be aware of. If a player has a set plan and is determined to stick to it no matter what there may be nothing you can do to make yourself aware of that.

The last important thing to keep in mind with signals comes down to card evaluation. For other players to understand the signals they are sending and receiving they need to value the cards in the packs in the same way that you do. The player to your right might look at his fourth pick choice of Frostwielder or Hearth Kami and think "Hmm, I don't like four mana 1/2s, I'll take the Hearth Kami". You might think Frostwielder is really good and consider one a gift as a fifth pick and thus move towards red as a result.

That is a fairly extreme example but in that situation neither player is doing anything wrong really, they just value cards differently. This leads to a lot of confusion though and can really mess with a draft. Of all the problems this one probably occurs more than the others, simply due to players being less experienced with the set. They may well take Cage of Hands over Nagao, or Soratami Mirror-Guard over Honden of Seeing Winds, thus sending you what appears to be a great signal to go into a colour that they too are actually drafting.

These sorts of mis-signals can be a little easier to read simply because you'll get fewer cards in that colour passed to you over the next few packs but sometimes you don't, or can't, pick up on that. Even if you do your first few picks will still have been hurt as a result of the misinformation you received. Then again, in these circumstances you'll often find yourself getting passed good cards you wouldn't normally expect, since the player(s) in question don't necessarily know the value of the better cards the way you hopefully do.

Signalling is a very fine art. There are lots of ways it can go wrong but when you pick up on the correct signals your draft can be significantly improved as a result. You only have to look at the deck Fujita did have and the one he could have had to see this.

© 1995-2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)

