

Mike Flores

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For the past several weeks, Swimming With Sharks has been, more or less, on a one deck love cruise when it comes to *Click for the latest batch of* Kamigawa Block. Gifts Ungiven, Gifts Ungiven, it beats you, this *decks* beats it, Gifts Ungiven. From the start of the season we talked about how the deck won the Pro Tour but hadn't made a splash yet, and since its ascension to the top of the format, we've never missed the opportunity to remind you of that fact. But this week, and after a smattering of second place finishes around the PTQs this season — mostly behind Gifts, natch — I'd like to point out a certain deck that has *finally* gotten the job done: Mono-Red.

Bill Stark - Aggro Red

1st Place - Illinois - Springfield - 8/13



Main Deck

60 cards

1 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
2 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea
21 Mountain
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep

25 lands

4 Frostling
4 Ghost-Lit Raider
4 Hearth Kami
4 Jiwari, the Earth Aflame

16 creatures

4 Gaze of Adamaro
2 Genju of the Spires
4 Glacial Ray
4 Lava Spike
4 Umezawa's Jitte
1 Yamabushi's Flame

19 other spells

Sideboard

3 First Volley
4 Flames of the Blood Hand
4 Ishi-Ishi, Akki Crackshot
4 Zo-Zu the Punisher

15 sideboard cards

Bill Stark made Top 8 two weeks in a row with his Mono-Red deck, and last weekend in Springfield, he parlayed that second appearance into a Blue Envelope. Mono-Red is a deck that I've been watching all season. My friend and former Swimming With Sharks author Brian David-Marshall made a Mono-Red deck earlier in the season. He said that even if it had some weaknesses against White Weenie, all the burn made it precisely the kind of deck that would give Gifts Ungiven fits... But Gifts failed to take Blue Envelopes from that ubiquitous Deck to Beat.

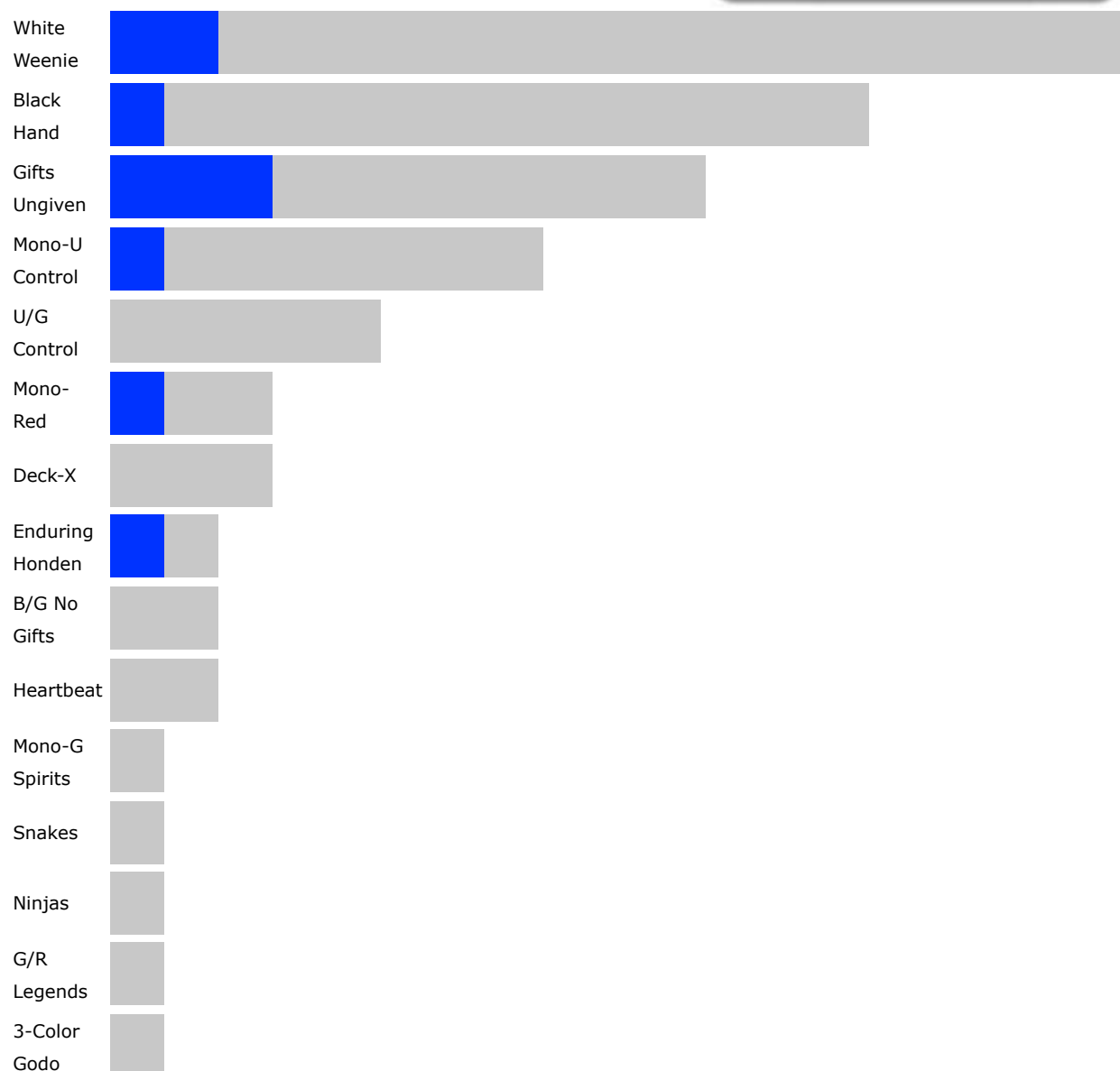
Check out Bill's most recent version. He chose last week to run both Red Channel creatures — Jiwari, the Earth Aflame and Ghost-Lit Raider — as well as Umezawa's Jitte main deck in order to beat *anti*-Gifts Ungiven decks. His direct damage waited in the sideboard this week; he brought in Ishi-Ishi,

Akki Crackshot, Flames of the Blood Hand, and the mighty Zo-Zu the Punisher for Gifts Ungiven for Games Two and Three.

"I feel the deck is not that strong in general, but at the PTQ level, a solid player can manipulate the faults of bad players while benefiting from a healthy dosage of 'rogue' to come out ahead against other solid players," says Bill. "I was also the beneficiary of being a mouse playing while the cats were away at Nationals."

Chalk one up for nonconformity this week.

The week in general looked like this:



Gifts Ungiven, unsurprisingly, took the tallest stack of Blue Envelopes, but White Weenie and Black Hand were both more numerous in Top 8s this week. These aggressive decks simply refuse to die... and apparently so does their distant cousin.

Jonathan Yedidia - Blue-white Control

2nd Place - Massachusetts - Brighton - 8/13



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Cloudcrest Lake
1 Eiganjo Castle
8 Island
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
8 Plains
1 Tendo Ice Bridge

23 lands

2 Cage of Hands
3 Hisoka's Defiance
3 Phantom Wings
1 Pithing Needle
4 Umezawa's Jitte

13 other spells

Sideboard

2 Empty-Shrine Kannushi
2 Hokori, Dust Drinker
1 Indomitable Will
3 Manriki-Gusari
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Phantom Wings
2 Terashi's Grasp
3 Threads of Disloyalty

15 sideboard cards

3 Higure, the Still Wind
1 Hokori, Dust Drinker
3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda
3 Kami of Ancient Law
4 Lantern Kami
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Mistblade Shinobi
4 Ninja of the Deep Hours
4 Tallowisp

24 creatures

Jonathan Yedidia finished in the finals of the Brighton, Massachusetts PTQ with, to my recollection, the first Ninja deck of this PTQ season. Morgan Douglass made a nice little run at PT Philadelphia with his Ninja deck, and like Deck-X which we featured last week, Ninjas is an interesting take on U/W aggression in the format. Back in Philadelphia, Morgan's deck was all about a quick turn two Ophidian and a Hinder in his hand... Jonathan takes a different route with a Tallowisp engine instead. I particularly like his Phantom Wings tech... Tallowisp can fetch Phantom Wings and any of Jonathan's Ninjas can make good use of the Aura to ensure continued butt-kicking and Ninja triggers.

Now most of you who followed the live coverage of the 2005 US Nationals probably know all about the dominance of the color blue and the complete failures that were Tooth and Nail and Red Deck Wins... Basically Tooth was the #1 deck and Aggressive Red was the #2 deck... and they didn't manage to scratch up a Top 8 appearance between the two of them. On the other hand, the Seven Kings and others really showcased how good basic Island still is in this format. The US National Team was made



up of three, different, Blue decks... Two members were Mono-Blue with artifacts and eventual Champion Antonino DeRosa played a single Swamp to set up the Cranial Extractions in his sideboard.

Antonino De Rosa
2005 U.S. Nationals Top 8



Main Deck

60 cards

6 Island	3 Chrome Mox
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	2 Concentrate
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	4 Condescend
1 Swamp	3 Echoing Truth
4 Urza's Mine	3 Mana Leak
4 Urza's Power Plant	3 Mindslaver
4 Urza's Tower	3 Sensei's Divining Top
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21 lands	3 Serum Visions
	3 Talisman of Dominance
	4 Thirst for Knowledge
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2 Memnarch	31 other spells
3 Solemn Simulacrum	
3 Triskelion	
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8 creatures	

Sideboard

2 Annul
4 Cranial Extraction
1 Duplicant
3 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
4 Sun Droplet
1 Talisman of Dominance

15 sideboard cards

Neil Reeves
2005 U.S. Nationals Top 8



Main Deck

60 cards

21 Island	3 Annul
4 Stalking Stones	3 Boomerang
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25 lands	2 Condescend
	4 Hinder
	4 Mana Leak
	2 Oblivion Stone
4 Jushi Apprentice	3 Rewind
4 Spire Golem	2 Thirst for Knowledge
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8 creatures	4 Vedalken Shackles
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	27 other spells

Sideboard

1 Annul
2 Echoing Truth
1 Mephidross Vampire
1 Sakashima the Impostor
4 Threads of Disloyalty
1 Triskelion
4 Twincast
1 Uyo, Silent Prophet

15 sideboard cards

Jonathan Sonne

2005 U.S. Nationals Top 8



Main Deck

60 cards

7 Island
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
4 Urza's Mine
4 Urza's Power Plant
4 Urza's Tower

21 lands

2 Memnarch
4 Solemn Simulacrum
3 Triskelion

9 creatures

4 Chrome Mox
2 Concentrate
4 Condescend
3 Echoing Truth
4 Mana Leak
3 Mindslaver
3 Sensei's Divining Top
3 Serum Visions
4 Thirst for Knowledge

30 other spells

Sideboard

2 Annul
4 Jushi Apprentice
3 Kaijin of the Vanishing Touch
2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
2 Razormane Masticore
2 Rewind

15 sideboard cards

De Rosa and Sonne play essentially the same plan. They ramp up their mana, breaking the UrzaTron in the same way a Tooth and Nail player tries to do. Because they don't have search cards like Reap and Sow, their UrzaTron Blue decks dig with spells like Concentrate or Thirst for Knowledge. Once their land combos are put together, look for these decks to bully the beatdown with Triskelion or take control of your next turn – and the game itself – via Mindslaver.




The main differences come out in the players' sideboards. Sonne morphs into a more controlling deck in the mirror, using Jushi Apprentices like a "regular" Mono-Blue Control deck, whereas De Rosa can aim Cranial Extraction at the head of a Tooth and Nail player. When facing little decks, Sonne hides behind his Defenders, whereas De Rosa plays maybe the most frustrating card in all of Standard: Sun Droplet.

Some years ago, Randy Buehler played a G/W Oath of Druids deck to first place in the Standard portion of US Nationals. We thought it, capable of winning some matches only via Jester's Cap recursion, was the slowest deck that would ever be created... but no. Between the constant re-referencing and top-of-the-deck manipulation that comes with Sensei's Divining Top *and* the almost glacial slowdown in damage generated by Sun Droplet, we can safely say that Antonino De Rosa, US National Champion, has finally shown the world a deck that can literally stop time. Getting multiple Sun Droplets is the death knell for a beatdown deck. Particularly cruel, it keeps them from winning without doing anything proactive for an interminable length, while Sensei's Divining Top uses more and more seconds every upkeep.

Reeves's deck came to him by way of reigning Dutch National Champion, Jeroen Remie. Neil's version of Mono-Blue Control doesn't have Thieving Magpies... It starts off "pre-sideboarded" and attacks other slow decks with four Jushi Apprentices main deck. These little Wizards make sure Neil's hand is full of counterspells... Luckily he plays 16 main deck.

Now the deck you may *not* have noticed is Kirk Dalton's unassuming G/B "Rock." Dalton's draft record was only good enough to get him tied for Top 25, and his breakers didn't hold when it came time to collect the checks. However, all the ill luck and bad draft days in the world couldn't cancel his solo ownership of the 7-0 record in constructed. The only *really* undefeated player with 60 card decks, Kirk joins American **Magic** legends like Dave Price, Randy Buehler, and Dan Clegg as players who won Standard in years that they did not make Top 8.

Kirk Dalton		
2005 U.S. Nationals		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
1 City of Brass	3 Persecute	4 Aether Vial
11 Forest	4 Plow Under	3 Cranial Extraction
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	3 Rend Flesh	3 Hideous Laughter
5 Swamp	2 Terror	3 Nezumi Shortfang
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	2 Umezawa's Jitte	2 Viridian Shaman
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22 lands	14 other spells	15 sideboard cards
4 Birds of Paradise		
4 Eternal Witness		
2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni		
2 Iwamori of the Open Fist		
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder		
4 Troll Ascetic		
4 Viridian Shaman		

24 creatures		

Kirk's deck is anything but an expected archetype for this Standard. His creature setup is something that we would expect out of maybe Medium Green... Until you get to the two copies of Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni at the top of his curve. Kirk can get a quick beatdown with Troll Ascetic, dominate the weenie decks with an Iwamori of the Open Fist, or play a control / blocking strategy, hiding behind Sakura-Tribe Elder and his 187s.

Looking over his spell section, it's hard to figure out where Kirk gets all the room. He has the Maximum Number of starting Plow Unders... *and* room for Persecute as an additional disruptive element. On top of all that, he can keep tempo against another deck with creatures via a package of Rend Flesh *and* Terror.



So what's missing? Unlike many decks of similar style (if not color choice), Kirk doesn't lean on Sensei's Divining Top. He has Birds of Paradise and Sakura-Tribe Elder for acceleration... but no Chrome Mox or Kodama's Reach to supplement his 22 lands. I would be a little apprehensive about this kind of a mana base, having historically been the sort that overloaded on Impulses instead of business cards, coming out of the Erik Lauer school with more lands than my opponent more often than the reverse.

But like Five-color Green nearly ten years ago, Kirk's deck doesn't *need* to make land drops every turn. His curve is pretty low, with only Plow Under and Ink-Eyes at five or more mana. Playing more action and electing not to make his turns clunky with Divining Top gives Dalton a sense of natural card advantage despite his deck's lack of card drawing.

Out of the sideboard, Kirk presents four Aether Vials, which are of course a house. The defining card of all last summer, and of the previous Extended season, is getting nowhere near the love that it deserves as one of the most powerful cards in the format.

Considering how well the Blue decks finished, Aether Vial is one of the cards that you should consider as you formulate your plan of attack in this metagame. He can very realistically chain up from Birds of Paradise, through his two drops (at least two of which should be Viridian Zealots, though the listing has him on six

Shamans), perhaps going all the way up to three counters. From there, Kirk can use Ninjutsu to get Ink-Eyes into play, piggybacking Eternal Witness or Viridian Shaman 187 skills... *all without exposing a creature to a permission spell, well, ever.* I can very realistically see this deck going Aether Vial directly into Shortfang and never letting a Blue deck into the the game.

One of my favorite things about **Magic** – and there are many – is to never play the best deck. Up until Vial Affinity last year, I don't think I ever chose The Deck to Beat. For me it's always been more fun to try to figure out how to beat the best decks, comfortable in the knowledge that I can rattle off the entire contents of my opponents' sixty-card stacks. So even though Gifts Ungiven and the various Mono-Blue decks with permission are the ones getting all the press and love, here are a couple of decks that have done well recently that you can take, look at, or try for an attempt to become the next PTQ, Grand Prix, or FNM champion.

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