

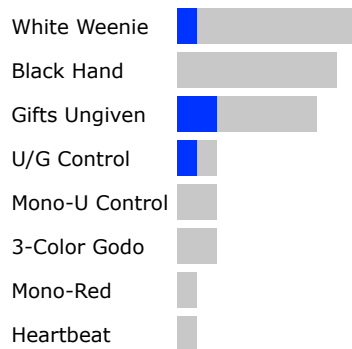
Mike Flores

Thursday, September 01, 2005

Well, it's in with the new and out still more or less in with the old this week at Swimming With Sharks. On the one hand, the *Kamigawa* Block constructed PTQ season is about to be behind us forever, and on the other hand, we finally have some big post-*Ninth Edition* "new" Standard results to look at.

Old

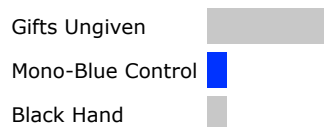
First, let's check out what will probably be our final tally for the land of Eiganjo Castle:



■ PTQ winner ■ PTQ Top 8

Echoing recent results, this week's crop of PTQ Top 8s once again shows a lot of aggressive decks in the elimination rounds... but twice as many Blue Envelopes going to Gifts Ungiven than any other deck.

Contrast this with the Top 8 of Grand Prix Salt Lake City:



Any Top 8 with no White Weenie is okay by me, but let's take a closer look...

Salt Lake's Top 8 was a star-studded affair with Antonino DeRosa, fresh off his win at US Nationals, following up with another first place finish. Once again he came to the tables with basic Islands (though this time he left his Urza's Towers at home).

Antonio DeRosa 

Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard
20 Island	1 Hisoka's Defiance
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	2 Journeyer's Kite
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	1 Keiga, the Tide Star
3 Consuming Vortex	1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
3 Disrupting Shoal	
4 Hinder	

1 Miren, the Moaning Well	3 Hisoka's Defiance	1 Overwhelming Intellect
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	2 Minamo's Meddling	4 River Kaijin
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Pithing Needle	2 Squelch
<hr/>	3 Threads of Disloyalty	1 Threads of Disloyalty
25 lands	<hr/>	2 Umezawa's Jitte
	22 other spells	<hr/>
		15 sideboard cards
3 Azami, Lady of Scrolls		
4 Jushi Apprentice		
3 Keiga, the Tide Star		
3 Meloku the Clouded Mirror		
<hr/>		
13 creatures		

The Mono-Blue archetype in *Kamigawa* Block is generally considered an anti-Gifts Ungiven deck. If you consider the three byes Antonino took to Salt Lake – not to mention the late finish results of the Grand Prix's Top 8 – aiming for Gifts as the Deck to Beat might not be a bad idea. Blue honestly doesn't hold up very well against most creature strategies: the majority of its citizens are inefficient 1/2 and 0/2 creatures for decent mana investments... But that's not where Mono-Blue is at its strength.

Jushi Apprentice on the second turn is a powerful threat against Gifts and many other slow decks. Starting on turn three, you've essentially got your own Howling Mine. When the opponent's deck is designed to take big turns with expensive recursion sequences, even one permission spell can doom his prospects, so keeping a grip full of Disrupting Shoals, Hisoka's Defiances, and especially Hinders is a great strategy if you can keep your mana open... and Mono-Blue with Jushi Apprentice waiting to draw cards certainly can.

Sitting across from Antonino in the finals was amateur Karl Briem. Though we've seen a ton of Black Hand over the course of the season, Karl's deck is legitimately a little different. He is pretty heavy on the disruption, starting Pithing Needle *on top* of playing Psychic Spear and Distress main. These cards are meant to attack the development of a slower deck before its cards in hand translate into legitimate threats and answers. Meanwhile, the speed of Karl's Nezumi Cutthroats is meant to end the game while Black Hand still has the initiative.


New

On the subject of aggressive Black decks, have you *seen* the Top 8 of Canadian Nationals?

Eight decks, two BlueTooth (UrzaTron Blue), *six* of only one additional archetype. The Canadian Nationals Top 8 featured 23 Llanowar Wastes, 23 Aether Vials, and 22 Hypnotic Specters main deck.

Has the best deck changed once again? Here's the Canadian Champion's Weapon of Choice TM.

Jason Olynyk
Viridian Rats



Main Deck
60 cards

Sideboard

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
 4 Llanowar Wastes
 1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
 12 Swamp
 2 Tendo Ice Bridge

23 lands

3 Chittering Rats
 3 Hypnotic Specter
 2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
 2 Nekrataal
 4 Nezumi Shortfang
 4 Ravenous Rats
 3 Viridian Shaman

21 creatures

4 Aether Vial
 3 Night's Whisper
 2 Pithing Needle
 3 Rend Flesh
 4 Umezawa's Jitte

16 other spells

3 Cranial Extraction
 4 Distress
 1 Hypnotic Specter
 1 Pithing Needle
 3 Razormane Masticore
 2 Sword of Light and Shadow
 1 Viridian Shaman

15 sideboard cards

Rats, already a contender in pre-*Ninth Edition* Standard, only got better with the addition of probably the most feared Black creature of all time. Now when I first started playing tournaments, we had to contend with turn *one* Hypnotic Specter. With Dark Ritual a thing of the past, R&D has said that the classic Necropotence threat isn't all that broken... The problem is, Hypnotic Specter with Aether Vial is more-or-less a combination that represents the keys to the current kingdom.

Look at the top decks in Standard, pre-*Ninth Edition*. For all their mana accelerated power, neither BlueTooth nor Tooth and Nail can easily deal with a 2/2 flyer once it's already in play. Sure, BlueTooth can aim a bounce spell at Lord Hypno, but that just sort of means gaining 2 life if nothing else can be done (you were going to drop a card anyway... why not "choose" to discard Echoing Truth and pick up two life?). The Red Decks can deal with Hypnotic Specter, but that's about all. Hypno should feel free to beat up on big, slow, decks as long as they refuse to prepare with Magma Jets.

Hypnotic Specter, which is already rumored to be going for 20 tickets on *Magic Online*, isn't even the most broken card in the modern Rats deck. Some months back, when Arcbound Ravager, Disciple of the Vault, and even Ancient Den bit it in Standard, the card that strung consistency alongside the power of Affinity – Aether Vial – was spared. Aether Vial doesn't quite boost out second turn Frogmite and third turn Myr Enforcer in the Rats deck, but it does give the deck a lot of play against the previously dominant BlueTooth decks. Here is Canadian National Team member Tyler Blum's post-*Ninth* version:

Tyler Blum BlueTooth



Main Deck 60 cards

7 Island
 1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
 1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
 3 Chrome Mox
 4 Condescend
 4 Echoing Truth

Sideboard

1 Acquire
 4 Annex
 4 Annul
 1 Duplicant

4 Urza's Mine	4 Mana Leak	1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
4 Urza's Power Plant	3 Mindslaver	4 Sun Droplet
4 Urza's Tower	3 Sensei's Divining Top	15 sideboard cards
21 lands	3 Serum Visions	
	4 Thirst for Knowledge	
	28 other spells	
2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror		
2 Memnarch		
3 Solemn Simulacrum		
4 Triskelion		
11 creatures		

Notice that Blum's main weapon for stopping Hypnotic Specter... is to counter it. He can also slow the scary 2/2 down with Echoing Truth, as we've mentioned, but that doesn't really "stop" it when Aether Vial has three counters. Even if it isn't exactly the fastest offensive play Rats can make, sitting behind a developing Aether Vial can be pretty strong when the recently-best deck is all about the Condescends and Mana Leaks. Basically a Vial can crawl up to two or three counters and force through whatever its master wants; creatures can appear at the end of turn for a queer sort of haste and counters become irrelevant. Ruh roh Raggy.

This is also where the near-maximum number of Llanowar Wastes comes in. All these Rats players commanded three if not four Viridian Shamans to seal the deal. Say you completely dominate the best deck. The smug BlueTooth players, with their UrzaTrons and consistent draws, their Top tricks and counterspells, might have dominated before Ninth Edition, but you're taking the starch out of their counters, and you know they can't easily deal with your discard creatures. How do you make sure that you win? You might be able to strip their hands and run around their Condescends at the end of turn, but what happens when they just tap out for Memnarch?

You destroy it, of course.

Don't forget that Rats wants to hit three counters on the Aether Vial *anyway* for Hypnotic Specter and Chittering Rats. Viridian Shaman can come along for the ride. Tendo Ice Bridge and Llanowar Wastes make the Shaman a reasonable cast for games where Vial isn't ready yet. So sorry, Triskelion! You really should have waited until ten mana on that Mindslaver...

Old

Antonino De Rosa
 Karl Briem
 Kenji Tsumura
 Mark Ioli
 Frank Karsten
 Gadiel Szleifer
 Gabe Walls
 Rogier Maaten

"... this was what some are calling the best Grand Prix Top 8 ever."

That sure is a great Top 8. Antonino won coming off a Nationals win. With only two amateurs in the Top 8, every other player has Grand Prix if not Pro Tour Top 8 experience, and there are some fine

theorists in the group. In fact, Gadiel just *won* the relevant Pro Tour (with another Top 8 and Grand Prix win under his belt just this season)... and Kenji is one of the hottest and best players on Tour right now.

But *best* Grand Prix Top 8 ever?

I can't agree with my friend Teddy Cardgame on this one. This title *still* has to go to the old men...

Grand Prix Vienna 1998

Kai Budde
Christian Gregorich
Jon Finkel
Erik Lauer
Randy Buehler
Jakub Slemr
Dirk Hein
Peer Kröger

This Top 8 had the best player ever to shuffle a deck *and* the second-best player. Budde *and* Finkel! The crazy part is that because this was 1998, before Kai was officially Kai, many pundits would have said that, coming off an Extended Pro Tour win the previous season, tearing up the Grand Prix circuit himself, and in the pre-Bob Maher era the most fearsome Extended player in all the realms of Dominia, the second best player on the Pro Tour after Finkel was *Randy Buehler*, who grabbed a last-minute flight with his teammate – and arguably the best deck designer of all time – Erik Lauer. In an unprecedented move, Buehler and Lauer came across the Atlantic with a Memory Jar deck, both made the Top 8... and then got the card emergency banned almost immediately! The feat has not been matched by any players or cards since; not even by Skullclamp.

Unlike Salt Lake City, Vienna 1998 had zero players without top-level experience. Gregorich had a Grand Prix Top 16 at the time, and had played in the World Championships; Hein had played in two Worlds. The rest of the Top 8 included Lauer, again the best deck designer of his era, holding an in-season Top 8 at Rome; Slemr, a World Champion; and Kröger, who held multiple Pro Tour Top 8s in the ancient days of **Magic**... and actually came back for *another* Top 8 just one World Championships removed: sixth place at Worlds 2003!

I suggest the "some" who are calling Salt Lake City the best Top 8 ever check out the Tournament Center archives.

New

In case you didn't check The Week That Was last week (my sister visited last week and even *I* didn't see it until I talked to BDM about this part of this week's column), here is a great new deck for those of you who don't want to pick between only BlueTooth and Rats with Hypnotic Specter and Viridian Shaman:

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Adarkar Wastes	4 Chrome Mox	3 Boiling Seas 3 Boseiju, Who Shelters All

4 Battlefield Forge	3 Confiscate	3 Mana Leak
3 Island	4 Enduring Ideal	3 Sowing Salt
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	3 Form of the Dragon	3 Wrath of God
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	1 Genju of the Realm	
2 Shivan Reef	1 Ivory Mask	15 sideboard cards
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	1 Meishin, the Mind Cage	
<hr/>	4 Pentad Prism	
19 lands	4 Seething Song	
<hr/>	4 Serum Visions	
0 creatures	4 Sleight of Hand	
	4 Talisman of Progress	
	3 Thirst for Knowledge	
	1 Zur's Weirding	
	<hr/>	
	41 other spells	


Alongside being just plain good, this deck is extremely creative. Particularly cool is the conceptual leap that Gundersen and his friends made with Seething Song. The deck can play turn two Pentad Prism, turn three Seething Song into Enduring Ideal. With Chrome Mox, the same can be accomplished on turn *two*!

Once Enduring Ideal comes online, the opponent is in big trouble. The deck can ace Mono-Red with Ivory Mask + Form of the Dragon. Form of the Dragon, a card that usually keeps a man down at five life forever, provides an odd brand of life gain when combined with Zur's Weirding. Against key permanents, including UrzaTron parts, Confiscate every turn is yet another powerful tool.

But don't let me tell you. Thomas Gundersen wrote a tournament report about making Top 8, and you can check it out here, thanks to StarCityGames.com. Check it out. I sure learned a lot.

Old

Alongside a great new deck for the new Standard, here's a deck that won one of the last PTQs this past weekend, for those of you who are interested in lists other than White Weenie and Gifts Ungiven:

Mike Flores - Blue-Green Control		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
<i>60 cards</i>		
9 Forest	4 Hinder	2 Consuming Vortex
7 Island	4 Hisoka's Defiance	2 Gnarled Mass
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Kodama's Reach	4 Jushi Apprentice
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	4 Sensei's Divining Top	1 Minamo's Meddling
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	4 Umezawa's Jitte	4 Threads of Disloyalty
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	<hr/>	2 Wear Away
<hr/>	20 other spells	15 sideboard cards
23 lands		

- 1 Isao, Enlightened Bushi
- 4 Keiga, the Tide Star
- 4 Kodama of the North Tree
- 4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
- 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

17 creatures

Oh wait, that's me! Chalk one more up for the old guys.

I'd tell you more about it, but we at magicthegathering.com prefer that you tune in to BDM's The Week That Was tomorrow, instead.

New

Have a great week, everyone. I sure am. Next week should be even better, because *Ravnica* previews are coming up! I have cards for the next three weeks, and they're all great.

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