

Exploring 9th for Sealed

For in World

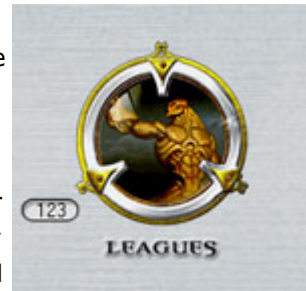
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I have written numerous draft walk-throughs in previous columns and so I thought that it's about time I went back to sealed deck play for a change. A lot of players get their limited experience in sealed deck play and sealed does present its own unique set of challenges. This column is "Limited Information" after all and sealed definitely falls within that category.

With *9th Edition* having just arrived on **Magic Online**, what better place to try this out than in the pre-release leagues online? **Magic Online** leagues are a great place to play if you don't want to commit the 2.5 to 3 hours you might need for a draft. You can just dip in and play a match or two whenever is convenient for your particular schedule and then finish up again at a later date. Overall the only real requirement (if you want to compete for prizes) is that you play five matches in a week. The pre-release leagues only last one week while normal leagues go over four weeks and allow you to add an extra booster pack each week.



9th Edition sealed is a little different from other formats as there is no 'Tournament Pack' to speak of, so instead you just play it with five booster packs. I'm going to cover the deck-building process as well as the matches played so we can see how the deck performed in practice.

So, let's get straight on with things and have a look at the card pool we have to work with.

The Card Pool



Black:

Plague Beetle
Raise Dead
Unholy Strength
Bog Imp
Foul Imp (premium)
Coercion
Looming Shade

Blue:

Fugitive Wizard
Sea's Claim
Lumengrid Warden
Horned Turtle
Time Ebb
Wind Drake
Aven Fisher

White:

Holy Day
Holy Strength
Honor Guard
Infantry Veteran
Weathered Wayfarer
Glory Seeker
Master Decoy

Mind Rot
Razortooth Rats
Scathe Zombies
Hypnotic Specter
Deathgazer
Gravedigger
Phyrexian Gargantua

Greed:

Norwood Ranger
Grizzly Bears
Elvish Warrior
Rampant Growth
Regeneration
Summer Bloom
Wood Elves
Giant Spider
Kavu Climber
Natural Spring
Rootbreaker Wurm
Scaled Wurm

Azure Drake
Dehydration
Sage Aven
Annex
Treasure Trove
Evacuation
Sea Monster

Red:

Reflexes
Shock
Goblin Brigand
Goblin Piker
Rogue Kavu
Flowstone Shambler
Goblin Chariot
Goblin Sky Raider
Stone Rain
Boiling Seas
Anarchist
Wildfire

Veteran Cavalier
Tempest of Light
Warrior's Honor
Aven Cloudchaser
Foot Soldiers
Seasoned Marshal
Aven Flock

Artifacts:

Vulshok Morningstar
Dancing Scimitar
Ur-Golem's Eye
Aladdin's Ring

The first thing I do when cracking open a card pool like this is have a quick check for any outstanding cards that you're almost definitely going to want to play with; the Shivan Dragons, Royal Assassins and Blinding Angels of the world.

There's nothing really ridiculous here although we do have a Hypnotic Specter, which is very good if it ever comes down on turn three. It does die to all the common removal spells and if it's drawn late it might be nothing more than a three mana 2/2 flyer so it's not in the same realm as the above cards but it is an excellent card all the same. Wildfire can be very good in the right deck but it's often difficult to take advantage of it in sealed deck play.

After checking for possible bombs, the next quick check I make is for removal spells. This is one of the most important elements in sealed deck play so it's worth first finding out what options you have in this area. With this deck all we really have is one Shock and one Dehydration. That's pretty appalling from five packs but it's what we have to work with.

Not a great start by any stretch of the imagination. There'll be another player somewhere opening up Shock, Volcanic Hammer, two Dark Banishing, Enfeeblement, Royal Assassin, Sengir Vampire and Shard Phoenix I guarantee it!

But, this is what we have to work with, so we have to make the best of it. The next thing I'd do would be to take a closer look at each colour and see how strong they are and what they might add to the deck if we were to play them.

Black

Black actually has some of the best cards in the card pool and initially I think that we'll probably want to play it as one of our main colours. This decision won't be made for sure until all the colours have been thoroughly examined and we also need to make sure there are enough cards to make the deck.



The one thing I would note is that the black cards are very dependant on having a lot of black mana. Both Foul Imp and Hypnotic Specter require double-black early, and then you have Looming Shade later on as well. Unusually black also provides the deck with the best source of card advantage. Hypnotic Specter can generate some if we get lucky but both Phyrexian Gargantua and Gravedigger can also provide support in this area too.

Finally, we also have a Deathgazer, which can act as a kind of removal spell if it sticks around and if it's able to block the creature we want to kill.

I'd preliminarily classify the black cards as follows:

The best: Foul Imp, Razortooth Rats, Hypnotic Specter, Deathgazer, Gravedigger, Phyrexian Gargantua.

The rest: Raise Dead, Bog Imp, Coercion, Looming Shade, Scathe Zombies.

The unplayable: Plague Beetle, Unholy Strength, Mind Rot.

Blue



There are four flyers here in total, and three of them are very good. We also have access to one of the removal spells here in Dehydration. The evasion in this colour is excellent, and there are some other creatures that can help stall the ground too in Horned Turtle and Lumengrid Warden. Those guys won't attack but they will hopefully shut out our opponent's early creatures.

Time Ebb can't really be considered removal but it's a fine card and sometimes it'll deal with an opposing Blanchwood Armor or something similar. Unfortunately there are no Sifts or Tidings in this pool but we do have a Treasure Trove. The Trove is very slow but if you can activate it a few times it'll usually provide enough card advantage to pull the game around for you. I wouldn't be totally dismissive of Annex either. This is often a Stone Rain + Rampant Growth in one and can accelerate the deck from four mana to six mana if we think we need to do that.

There is the combo of Sea's Claim and Sea Monster but that isn't something you should ever try and pull off really. If you only draw the Sea's Claim and not the Sea Monster then you have a totally dead card and even if you draw the Sea Monster your opponent might be able to deal with it or just trade to for a Craw Wurm and then your Sea's Claim becomes useless once again. In this format card advantage is so very important that you don't want to be sacrificing cards in this way.

Here are the rankings for the blue cards:

The best: Horned Turtle, Time Ebb, Wind Drake, Aven Fisher, Azure Drake, Dehydration.

The rest: Lumengrid Warden, Sage Aven, Annex, Treasure Trove, Sea Monster.

The unplayable: Fugitive Wizard, Sea's Claim, Evacuation.

White

White is pretty solid overall. It has a Master Decoy which, like Deathgazer, can act as removal if it survives. This colour also has a Weathered Wayfarer to provide some card advantage too; it is a

shame we don't have a Quicksand we could fetch with it. There are some good flyers here although we also have numerous smaller creatures that would likely quickly get over-powered.

Overall I'd classify the white cards like this:

The best: Weathered Wayfarer, Master Decoy, Aven Cloudchaser, Foot Soldiers, Seasoned Marshal, Aven Flock.

The rest: Infantry Veteran, Glory Seeker, Veteran Cavalier, Warrior's Honor.

The unplayable: Holy Day, Holy Strength, Honor Guard, Tempest of Light.

Green

Green here does exactly what it usually does. It provides some mana-acceleration and a lot of reasonably costed creatures but nothing much beyond that. It does have a Giant Spider, which is a great card in green, but personally I'd like to see more Craw Wurms and Orders of the Sacred Bell and less Rootbreaker Wurms and Scaled Wurms really. It's also lacking a Giant Growth or any other really great card like some of the other colours have.

In short, there are a lot of solid cards here but nothing that makes me really want to play this colour.

The green cards can be summed up as:

The best: Elvish Warrior, Rampant Growth, Giant Spider, Kavu Climber.

The rest: Grizzly Bears, Wood Elves, Rootbreaker Wurm, Scaled Wurm.

The unplayable: Norwood Ranger, Regeneration, Summer Bloom, Natural Spring.



Red

Last, and in this case also least, we come to red. Red has the best removal spell of the card pool here in Shock, but beyond that things go downhill very fast. Wildfire is the next best spell and is definitely a very powerful card but only if you have the other spells to back it up. Because it destroys four lands as well as killing more or less everything on board it could end up hurting you more than your opponent if they've drawn 2-3 more lands than you. They may well be able to rebuild before you can. Despite that it's still one of the best cards in the pool, and if I did play it I'd almost certainly include the Ur-Golem's Eye as a potential post-Wildfire mana source.

However, outside of those two cards there really isn't very much here. The Anarchist could get back a Time Ebb, Coercion or Rampant Growth really. (While it's possible for it to get back the Wildfire I don't ever really see that actually happening.) The rest of the creatures are a selection of weak Grizzly Bears and grey ogres and there's nothing here that could stand up to a Foot Soldier even.

The red cards shape up like this:

The best: Shock, Anarchist, Wildfire.

The rest: Goblin Brigand, Goblin Piker, Rogue Kavu, Flowstone Shambler, Goblin Chariot.

The unplayable: Reflexes, Goblin Sky Raider, Stone Rain, Boiling Seas.

Overall then, the pool of playable cards looks something like this:



Artifacts



There are a few playable artifacts here that will make the deck-building process a lot easier.

The Dancing Scimitar and Vulshok Morningstar are both automatic inclusions. The Scimitar is a fine man for his casting cost and the Morningstar is extremely powerful in this format where artifact destruction is fairly rare. The Morningstar is quite capable of winning entire games as it allows even our humblest of creatures to trade off with much better opposing men and really adds a punch to our evasion creatures. It's got a relatively cheap Equip cost too, which makes it easy to move around between offence and defence.

The Aladdin's Ring has a very powerful ability but at an enormous mana cost. Eight mana will require nearly half the lands in the deck, and if we chose to include this we should also include the Ur-Golem's Eye as a way to get the Ring out earlier. The Aladdin's Ring would also function better in a

green deck I feel, as there's both Rampant Growth and Wood Elves there, which might help get the Ring in play. In addition to that we could then also use the Ur-Golem's Eye to help pump out the Scaled Wurm and Rootbreaker Wurm. That's something worth thinking about.

Depending how the rest of the deck shapes up the Ring and the Eye are two cards that we might want to think about including.

Building the deck

Looking at the various colours I think it is black and blue that come out on top. White follows very closely but it doesn't have the card advantage of black and its evasion doesn't quite match up to blue. The first thing I'd do in this situation is take a look at the deck we could build using those two colours.

Putting the best black cards with the best blue ones and adding in the Scimitar and Morningstar gives the following initial deck:

1CC:

2CC: Foul Imp, Vulshok Morningstar

3CC: Razortooth Rats, Hypnotic Specter, Horned Turtle, Wind Drake, Time Ebb

4CC: Deathgazer, Gravedigger, Aven Fisher, Azure Drake, Dehydration, Dancing Scimitar

5CC:

6+CC: Phyrexian Gargantua

That's a total of 14 cards, so we'd have to find another eight or nine from those colours, or look at a potential splash. The mana curve is quite high so I'd want to focus on some cheaper cards I think, but there isn't much available. Sticking with just two colours will obviously involve adding some weaker cards but we could do this by playing the following:

1CC: Raise Dead

2CC: Foul Imp, Bog Imp, Lumengrid Warden, Vulshok Morningstar

3CC: Razortooth Rats, Looming Shade, Hypnotic Specter, Horned Turtle, Wind Drake, Time Ebb, Coercion

4CC: Deathgazer, Gravedigger, Sage Aven, Aven Fisher, Azure Drake, Dancing Scimitar, Dehydration, Treasure Trove

5CC:

6+CC: Phyrexian Gargantua, Sea Monster

That's 22 cards and with 18 lands would make an adequate deck. I'm not sure if it's the best on offer though.

Looking through the other three colours we could splash Shock from red, but I wouldn't really want to splash Anarchist (too few targets) or Wildfire (Double-red casting cost). There's nothing in green I want to splash, which leaves only white and that does have Aven Cloudchaser and Aven Flock, which are both reasonable splash cards. We could remove Bog Imp and Sage Aven or Sea Monster from the above pool and add these two in instead. It would improve the power of the deck certainly, but would also hurt the mana too, especially as we'd really like at least ten Swamps with all the cards requiring double-black mana.

So the next step is to see if a different deck can be built. As this deck is lacking cheap spells I'd next look to a white-black deck to see if that could work instead. These colours are further lacking in playable cards so I'd also want to splash here as well. I'd look to blue for the splash here as it has a lot of cards that can function as part of a splash colour.

Putting this deck together would give something like:

1CC: Infantry Veteran, Weathered Wayfarer, Raise Dead

2CC: Glory Seeker, Master Decoy, Foul Imp, Vulshok Morningstar

3CC: Razortooth Rats, Hypnotic Specter, Wind Drake, Warrior's Honor

4CC: Foot Soldiers, Aven Cloudchaser, Seasoned Marshal, Deathgazer, Gravedigger, Aven Fisher, Azure Drake, Dancing Scimitar, Dehydration

5CC: Aven Flock.

6+CC: Phyrexian Gargantua

It's ok, but again, not great. The old classic of first turn Weathered Wayfarer, second turn Foul Imp... or not. With four blue cards this deck also require four Islands, which again impacts the ability to get the double-back mana this deck wants to see.

The final deck option I think utilises the green cards along with the Aladdin's Ring and Ur-Golem's Eye as I previously mentioned. This deck would also want to use the black cards and in trying to put together a straight two-colour version of this deck I quickly ran out of cards. This deck would therefore have to rely on a third colour again, but this time we have the Rampant Growth to help. I'd splash some of the blue cards to give:

1CC: Raise Dead

2CC: Elvish Warrior, Grizzly Bears, Vulshok Morningstar, Rampant Growth.

3CC: Razortooth Rats, Hypnotic Specter, Wood Elves, Coercion.

4CC: Giant Spider, Deathgazer, Gravedigger, Azure Drake, Aven Fisher, Dancing Scimitar, Ur-Golem's Eye, Dehydration.

5CC: Kavu Climber.

6+CC: Phyrexian Gargantua, Rootbreaker Wurm, Scaled Wurm, Aladdin's Ring.

Even with so much mana acceleration in the deck I think I'd want to see 18 lands just because of the seven and eight mana spells. This deck would be vulnerable to flooding because of this.

Choosing the deck

So which deck is best?

It's very difficult to say. They all have their strengths and weaknesses and I can see arguments for and against all of them.

My personal preference is to go with consistency over power, especially in a league, where you have to play five matches with your deck. I think this card pool is inherently fairly weak compared to a lot of the others it'll play against and because of that I want to be losing as few games as possible to colour-screw and mana-flood. To stand a chance with this deck the spells have to be cast consistently and you need the right land balance to ensure that.

With that in mind, the initial two-colour blue-black deck is the one for me. While it does have some weaker cards in it I hope that the copious amounts of evasion combined with the ground stall and card advantage built into it will help overcome that.

Here's the deck I finally decided on:

Limited Information 		
Main Deck <i>40 cards</i>		
8 Island	1 Aven Fisher	1 Coercion
10 Swamp	1 Azure Drake	1 Dehydration
<hr/>	1 Bog Imp	1 Raise Dead
18 lands	1 Dancing Scimitar	1 Time Ebb
	1 Deathgazer	1 Treasure Trove
	1 Foul Imp	1 Vulshok Morningstar
	1 Gravedigger	<hr/>
	1 Horned Turtle	6 other spells
	1 Hypnotic Specter	
	1 Looming Shade	

1 Lumengrid Warden
1 Phyrexian Gargantua
1 Razortooth Rats
1 Sage Aven
1 Sea Monster
1 Wind Drake

16 creatures

Despite having that deck as the initial deck I am still very aware of the other possibilities and would certainly plan on sideboarding into them should the appropriate situation present itself.

How the deck performed

I played five best-of-three matches with the deck but could manage to win only two of those, and to be honest I felt like I got quite lucky to win those.

The first round was a 2-0 loss to a RW deck. He played first and started with Samite Healer, Viashino Sandstalker and Ogre Taskmaster. I stalled on two lands and had a Bog Imp to hold off those guys. On to game two then.

This time my offence was complicated by a Master Decoy and my opponent again had his Ogre Taskmaster this game, which is almost impossible to block successfully when facing a Decoy too. I had to 'waste' the Dehydration on the Task Master instead of the Decoy just to stem the damage and that was my sole removal spell gone so I was left to contend with the Decoy for the rest of the game.

I was getting back into the game with a couple of flyers against my opponent's board of Decoy, Hill Giant and Dehydrated Taskmaster with only one card in his hand. My opponent then had two fantastic rips as he drew Demystify which was cast at the end of my turn to kill the Dehydration and release the Taskmaster, and then he untapped and drew Viashino Sandstalker which allowed him to smash in for 11! I had only a Horned Turtle and Dancing Scimitar on defence and the Scimitar was tapped by the Decoy, leaving me no good options and a swift 2-0 loss.

The second round I did have a third turn Hypnotic Specter on the play but I would've literally bet \$1000 that my opponent had a removal spell despite only showing an Island and a Swamp and sure enough they made a Mountain and Shocked it in their turn. A few turns later my opponent's graveyard contained: Shock, Diabolic Tutor, Guerrilla Tactics x 2, Ogre Taskmaster, while in play they had Puppeteer and Phyrexian Arena and had Confiscated my Treasure Trove...! Nice deck! That's around six cards that are all better than anything in my deck and I only saw 1/3 of his deck!

This match I sideboarded into the green deck as I felt like my opponent would have trouble with the bigger creatures with all of his two-damage removal spells. I sacrificed the blue splash and instead brought in Aven Cloudchaser and Tempest of Light to deal with his ridiculous enchantments.



The next two games went much better. I Cloudchaser'd the Arena in both games, made some bigger men than he had and rode them home, it was as simple as that. This was easily the best of the five decks I played against so it was very strange to beat this one but lose to so many of the others.

In the third round I was up against a green-white deck. I kept a slightly suspicious opener of Wind Drake, Sage Aven and five lands and drew only a Raise Dead in the first few turns. I Sage Aven'd on turn four only to see three more lands and a Treasure Trove. My opponent ended his next turn with only one card in hand as he played out a bunch of smaller creatures and this time around I would've bet my house it was either Aven Cloudchaser or Naturalize and sure enough the Treasure Trove got Naturalized in my end step. With three more lands on top of my deck to go with the seven I already had there was no chance of winning this game.

Game two I had a nice draw of Lumengrid Warden, Razortooth Rats and Wind Drake and the two evasion monsters soon finished the game off with the help of a Time Ebb to slow my opponent down further still.

Game three was the decider then. My opponent made a first turn Llanowar Elves second turn Pegasus Charger, third turn Order of the Sacred Bell. On my third turn I discarded my Phyrexian Gargantua as my deck neglected to give me a third land to go with the two in my opening grip. I may not ever have recovered against that draw anyway but it would've been nice to try as I did have both Time Ebb, Dancing Scimitar and Azure Drake in hand at that point.



Fourth round I faced an active Temporal Adept on turn four but luckily my opponent targeted my Wind Drake and not my land and so I was able to get my fourth land into play and use my Dehydration to take care of the Adept. A Rod of Ruin took out my Razortooth Rats while my opponent slowed up the ground with a Drudge Skeletons and started hitting with a Phantom Warrior. I drew a couple of flyers and the damage race began. I was on eight and my opponent was dead in 2-3 turns depending on what he drew that turn. That would be a good time for him to draw Tidings I guess! With only two mana left untapped I was optimistic the tempo loss might be enough to still give me the game but one of the four cards he drew was Unholy Strength and he had the one untapped Swamp necessary to drop it on the Phantom Warrior and suddenly I was dead next turn. My deck failed to yield a Time Ebb and that was that.

This round I sideboarded out the Razortooth Rats and the Foul Imp in favour of the white splash as I felt like my superior flyers should win the match for me.

Game two my opponent led out with a Plague Beetle and promptly Unholy Strength'ed it on turn two. I guess I was lucky to have the Time Ebb although my hand contained solely Blue cards so I could just have easily traded it for the Wind Drake without playing a Swamp if I didn't have the Time Ebb. Sage Aven and Treasure Trove followed shortly after while my opponent didn't seem to have much of anything. The lowly Plague Beetle sat at home accompanied only by a Looming Shade and a lone Swamp. An Azure Drake and my own Looming Shade soon finished it.

Game three was another win for the Vulshok Morningstar. Razortooth Rats on turn three hit for eight while a Dancing Scimitar held the fort. The Rats eventually traded for a Highway Robber and a Festering Goblin, which seemed fair. The Morningstar then simply did its thing on a flyer instead and the game was soon over.

So 2-2 and one more to play. It would've been nice to chalk up a win in the last match but that wasn't to be. Things were going quite smoothly in game one. My Razortooth Rats and Wind Drake were racing a Samite Healer and Pegasus. My opponent then made an Aven Flock that definitely swung things in his favour. I drew Coercion on my turn and decided to take a look at the three cards in his hand. They were Gravedigger, Angel of Mercy and Air Elemental! Okay, not winning that one then!

I boarded into the green deck again as it was obvious my flyers were going to be seriously outclassed here. There wasn't much hope against such a great card pool but that was the best plan I think. The Air Elemental came out on turn five for my opponent and with only the Dehydration in my deck having a hope of stopping it the game was soon over when I didn't draw it. My opponent even had the Pacifism for my Giant Spider just in case I had the Giant Growth, which of course wasn't in my deck.

So that was that. A pretty dire 2-3 finish but after playing with the card pool some more since then that seems to be as much as could be expected.

Things I did learn:

- Vulshok Morningstar is really amazing. I can't think of many things I'd pick ahead of this now, certainly not any of the commons. The cheap cost and cheap equip cost makes it easily able to swing games.
- Make use of all of your colours. The best wins that did occur came about through judicious use of the sideboard. The green cards were very relevant in the second match, as was boarding in the enchantment removal. When you're really up against better cards you need to be aware of which cards of your own will perform better against those superior cards.
- When the match is carefully balanced on a knife's edge, draw better cards than your opponent does! (Of course, this kinda precludes having better cards in your deck of course)
- When you can't win the late games, try not to let the game get to that stage. This is how I came up with the decklist below.

After playing around with the deck for another 20 or so matches (and still with a win rate around 35-45%) I finally decided on this listing as the best to play with this pool:



Limited Information



Main Deck

40 cards

3 Island	1 Aven Cloudchaser	1 Foot Soldiers
7 Plains	1 Aven Flock	1 Raise Dead
8 Swamp	1 Azure Drake	1 Time Ebb
18 lands	1 Deathgazer	1 Unholy Strength
	1 Glory Seeker	1 Veteran Cavalier
	1 Gravedigger	1 Vulshok Morningstar
	1 Hypnotic Specter	1 Warrior's Honor
	1 Infantry Veteran	
	1 Looming Shade	7 other spells

- 1 Master Decoy
- 1 Phyrexian Gargantua
- 1 Razortooth Rats
- 1 Seasoned Marshal
- 1 Weathered Wayfarer
- 1 Wind Drake

15 creatures

This is a streamlined version of one of the decks that got initial consideration but the mana-base was, and indeed still is, pretty terrible. Double-white, double-black and a blue splash too. However when you can't win the long games because everyone else has better cards, your best plan is to therefore win as quickly as possible and that is what this deck aims to do.

It has more quick creatures, still has some evasion and basically hopes to play out some early men and then back them up with the Decoy, Infantry Veteran, Seasoned Marshal, Morning Star and other pumping spells.

I played quite a few matches with this deck and it performed better than the others. It may be because I got luckier draws or played against weaker opponents, it's impossible to say, but it did feel like it had more chance than the other decks, and indeed it won around 60% of its matches. This is still far from great but it shows that even a poor card pool can be turned into something above average.

This deck is definitely not the most obvious deck to play, and indeed goes against most of the rules that apply to sealed deck as this deck frequently sacrifices card advantage and always wants to play first, despite its three colours.

I found this to be very interesting trying to come up with something playable from a weak pool. While it would've been nice to hit on the right deck straight away, hindsight is everything, and sometimes you need to play with a card pool before you can really learn how it best performs. It's a good lesson and a good reminder, because it's often what you manage to do with the non-stellar card pools that determines your success in the long run.

