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Every fall, Champs rolls around as a series of tournaments around the world. As the first tournaments to showcase the new main set each year, Champs defines Standard for the year to come. This year, the new set is the souped-up gold-bordered powerhouse *Ravnica: City of Guilds*. This set will contribute both additions to existing decks and brand new archetypes that will give players the most options -- and the most decks they will have to prepare for -- in years.

Descendants of Kamigawa

Traditionally, most of the decks that show up at Champs are modified Block decks. Last year it was no surprise that Affinity -- which had dominated *Mirrodin* Block PTQs -- was the most dominant deck. Right behind the almighty best aggressive deck in the history of **Magic** came Tooth and Nail, foreshadowing the eventual dominance of *that* deck after Affinity as an archetype left Standard. The year before, Champs echoed *Onslaught* Block Goblins and White-based Control decks, U/G Madness and so on the year before that.

Rule Number One going into this year's tournaments is to be ready for the extremes in *Kamigawa* Block metagaming. Beat these two philosophies by broad strokes and you will take everything in between:

Gifts Ungiven was the best deck in *Kamigawa* Block, followed closely by White Weenie. Gifts Ungiven won the Block PT in Philadelphia, PTQ level players sort of forgot about it for three weeks despite that win, and then once the Grand Prix events started up, the deck never let go its stranglehold on the format.

Here is a sample *Kamigawa* Block Gifts Ungiven deck:

Gadiel Szleifer

GP Salt Lake City 05 Top 8 Deck

Gadiel won PT Philadelphia, but this deck is actually his Top 8 deck from Grand Prix Salt Lake City. Notice the *Saviors of Kamigawa* Block additions Ghost-Lit Stalker, Death Denied, and especially Kagemaro, First to Suffer.

Gifts Ungiven can set up infinite creature destruction with Hana Kami and splice tricks, draw into multiple big threats, and some versions can even set up infinite Ethereal Haze or Cranial Extraction. It is a strong and versatile card and the engine behind an amazing deck. Be ready for it.

Last week, Invitational Winner Terry Soh suggested an updated Gifts Ungiven that slows down beatdown better than ever:

Terry Soh

Gifts Ungiven

The most important additions to **Magic** at large are the lands: Overgrown Tomb and Watery Grave in this deck. Putrefy is already a much-lauded and versatile card, but Carven Caryatid may be the deck's

most welcome addition. The 2/5 body is positively huge when fighting two-drops (see below), and combined with its cantrip effect, this defender will really help to slow down the game.

After Gifts Ungiven, the most important deck of *Kamigawa* Block to prepare for was White Weenie. White Weenie attacked the metagame not with the Gifts deck's manipulation, subtlety, and long game, but using the most potent threats available. The most dominating of these threats was the incomparable Umezawa's Jitte.

Now, going into Champs, White Weenie can go one of two ways, depending on which direction it wants to lean for help. In *Ravnica*, there are two distinct incentives, and either of them is a reasonable way to go.

Option 1: Kick Out the Jitte

Kick Out the Jitte

The above is a version of White Weenie proposed by Star City Games columnist Mark Young. It is interesting that White Weenie came out of a format where all it wanted to do was to gain and hold onto Jitte advantage... and then go in completely the other direction and not play Umezawa's Jitte at all.

That said, Glorious Anthem is a reasonable offensive alternative. While not as singularly dominating against other creature decks as the Jitte, Glorious Anthem is somewhat faster and more synergistic with the weenie swarm approach. That said, a deck like this one could fall prey to an opposing Umezawa's Jitte, but for a new card from *Ravnica*.

Suppression Field is actually much stronger than it looks. I originally valued this card as a faster, purely white (rather than de facto white) Damping Matrix... that didn't quite finish the job. However Suppression Field hits decks with activation costs all over the place, not just in their creatures and artifacts. For example, under Suppression Field, it costs two *more* mana to sacrifice a creature to Miren, the Moaning Well. In terms of Champs preparation, Suppression Field, while not as generally powerful as Jitte itself, makes Jitte extremely clumsy. Not only does it cost *four* big mana to move a Jitte under the Field, each removal of a Charge Counter costs two as well! This card has no fan in Meloku the Clouded Mirror, either.

Option 2: Boros Deck Wins

Now that said, another exciting direction to take White Weenie is to pair it with Red, maximizing the Boros-themed cards and new burn spells.

Boros Deck Wins

This is the version of Burning Weenie suggested by New Jersey Pro player John Fiorillo. John's deck retains the speed of a Block White Weenie deck, but actually shaves off a lethal turn with Char and Lightning Helix. A deck like this one is less likely to lose a game where it has come in for 18 damage... only to hit an Ethereal Haze lock or recurring Kagemaro. On the other hand, John's deck lacks the control-cracking power of Hokori, Dust Drinker.

One of the most exciting elements of this deck is Boros Swiftblade + Umezawa's Jitte. Because of how the Jitte's abilities trigger, the Swiftblade is essentially generating 4 counters per turn. Think about it like this:

Attack 1:

First strike (1), +2 Counters (2)

Regular damage (1), +2 Counters (4)

Attack 2:

First strike (9), +2 Counters (2)

Regular damage (11), +2 Counters (2)

With any kind of setup, the Swiftblade proves his name with a quick kill over two short turns. He deals 22 damage over two swings *and even leaves counters on the Jitte in case something goes wrong.*

Even though we are breaking White Weenie out into only two big groups, *Ravnica* has a lot to offer this storied archetype. Another one of the four Guilds is half-White, so don't be surprised to see Selesnya-flavored decks... There has got to be a worse opening than Isamaru, Hound of Konda into Watchwolf. But the sleeper card? Don't forget Bathe in Light. Blessed Breath was good enough for Constructed Magic, and Bathe in Light is much better overall. This card counters Blue's Threads of Disloyalty, acts as a Reverent Mantra for PT New York 2000-style alpha strike purposes, and perhaps most importantly, counters global sweep like Pyroclasm or Shard Phoenix.

If you want to go White Weenie, the incentives are very different, so choose wisely.

There were several other important decks to come out of *Kamigawa* Block, including Black Hand, Mono-Blue Control, and to a lesser extent, the host of two-, three-, and even four-color Green Control decks, all based around the same engine of Sakura-Tribe Elder, Sensei's Divining Top, and Kodama's Reach. Most of these decks are going to gain less going into Champs than Gifts Ungiven and White Weenie, just because the new dual lands are less of a fit.

Of those big groups, the one deck that gains the most from *Ninth Edition* is Black Hand; similar to its Standard cousin Rats, this deck gets a potent threat in Hypnotic Specter. Black Hand was only one color in Block, but its cousin, Rats, touched Green for Viridian Shaman; as such, it can piggyback the Golgari somewhat while still centering on an aggressive plan.

While Mono-Blue Control doesn't add any distinct new weapons, the one card I really like in the archetype is Dimir Aqueduct. Having a Dimir Aqueduct significantly decreases the potency of an enemy Hokori, Dust Drinker, because you can always untap into 2-3 mana if you wish. The card also helps pay for Suppression Field so that you can keep your Meloku going... It's not as slow as it seems given the fact that other players are trying to slow *you* down.

Green made off like a bandit in *Ravnica*, and picks up tons of new options to slap onto its already diverse group of *Kamigawa* Block decks. Along with *Ninth Edition's* Wood Elves, Civic Wayfinder gives a second option over Kodama's Reach. Both cards cost the same as the Reach, both generate as much card advantage if not the same degree of selection or acceleration, but unlike Kodama's Reach, these creatures can chump... or carry a Jitte. Farseek is another card that can compete for the Reach slot; it's better and worse than Rampant Growth, cheaper and worse than Kodama's Reach, but can ultimately do something neither of the others can: Farseek can search up and accelerate into *Ravnica* duals. Definitely play Kodama's Reach if you are Gifts Ungiven (you need the Arcane card to set up your various splice tricks), but any of the above three cards – Wood Elves, Civic Wayfinder, or Farseek -- can be a superior role player in another big Green deck.

The last card I want to talk about here is Vinelasher Kudzu. When I qualified for PTLA, the unique element that I leaned on was Gnarled Mass or Isao, Enlightened Bushi on turn three, mucking up the ground so that my White Weenie opponent would not have the initiative as I approached Meloku or Keiga mana. Vinelasher Kudzu is cheaper than Gnarled Mass... but can get much bigger! This new

creature, reminiscent of Quirion Dryad, can win the game alone if it has to: With a Wood Elves or Sakura-Tribe Elder, Vinelasher Kudzu is swinging for three on turn three, and it only gets bigger from there.

Possible Black Aggro

This deck is based on Canadian National Champion Jason Olynyk's Rats deck. I replaced Blinkmoth Nexus with Overgrown Tomb, Rend Flesh with Putrefy, and added a land to make up for the missing Aether Vials. Another card you might want to consider is Bob Maher himself, Dark Confidant, but I would probably cut some of the more expensive cards; without Sensei's Divining Top, the Confidant might be a bit of a liability.

Possible Blue Control

This deck is based on Antonino DeRosa's winner from Grand Prix Salt Lake City. I switched in two of the Dimir Aqueducts we mentioned earlier, as well as four Quicksands to help defend on the ground. I would also sideboard two more Aqueducts for White Weenie and control match-ups where both Hokori and never missing a land drop are important concerns... Just watch out for Boomerang!

Azami, Lady of Scrolls doesn't seem good enough to me, so I replaced her with the fourth Threads of Disloyalty and finished off the other two Legendary threat slots. The other changes sought to maintain the philosophy of Ant's card choices while making them more efficient overall (Rewind over Minamo's Meddling, Boomerang over Consuming Vortex, etc.).

From the Back Alleys

Most formats come down to beatdown decks like the potential Black Aggro or WW/WW-r decks we looked at, control like Gifts Ungiven or Blue control, *and combination* decks. Ravnica gives us an interesting new combination card in Eye of the Storm.

You might be asking yourself, "Why would I want to play a symmetrical effect like Eye of the Storm? Doesn't it help both players equally?"

The answer is, in essence, *yes*, but in a combination deck, the opponent's contributions to the Eye of the Storm and his ability to exploit it are likely to be minimal. On the other hand, with a critical mass of Early Harvests and card drawing, the Eye of the Storm player might be able to untap and kill right after playing his signature enchantment.

Storming States

Olivier Ruel

If you want to test Eye of the Storm, I would suggest starting with the deck Olivier Ruel posted in The Week That Was last Friday. Olivier's deck is interesting in that it kills with Maga, Traitor to Mortals. Maga is a creature and, hence, does not go under Eye of the Storm; instead, this Legendary creature exploits Olivier's massive mana generation capabilities (Sakura-Tribe Elder and Kodama's Reach into Heartbeat of Spring and Early Harvest) to add many life-draining +1/+1 counters. The choice of Maga as a kill condition is more important than you might think. Should the opponent try to win with a sorcery or instant that *could* go under Eye of the Storm, the *opponent* could just wait for the death blow to stack and respond with an instant himself. This would trigger the Eye and everything under it, piggybacking most of the work done by combo player himself!

Beat 'em!

Gifts Ungiven

Beatdown will find it difficult to beat a deck with Carven Caryatid early and the looping recursion of Hana Kami, Soulless Revival, and any sundry Arcane spells late (especially when peppered with spot removal like Sickening Shoal or Putrefy). Ever wonder why a White Weenie deck might be willing to spend four mana on a 2/2 creature? Hokori, Dust Drinker prevents the expensive Hana Kami loops from completely erasing White Weenie's game. But with a little mana, spot removal can take out your Dust Drinker and unlock a board, so don't lean too much on a four mana 2/2... or at least have backup for it. Counterspell decks have a legitimate interactive plan against Gifts Ungiven; without its trademark instant, the Gifts deck is a bunch of clunky and expensive -- if powerful -- spells. Take out the recursion elements and you take out much of the deck's thrust. For example, you can elect to bury reanimation spells on a Gifts Ungiven; if you then deal with the Hana Kami with, say, any permission spell, the opponent will be hard pressed to "go infinite" on you. That said, Gifts is long on card quality. Each of its threats is individually substantial. One Meloku is so good that Aluren decks last year played a single one to Living Wish for in otherwise locked games; this deck packs more ammunition than a single 2/4.

White Weenie (no Red)

This is essentially a vanilla creature deck with one or two big spoilers. That means that creature kill, especially mass creature kill, will slow it down or stop it altogether depending on how many cards the opponent has in hand. Wrath of God, Hideous Laughter, and so on are all golden against White Weenie. This version has no reach, so you can probably go all the way down to one life, milking your mana and time to set up the turn that you know will win, without fear of a bolt to the brains. One thing to worry about is Hokori, Dust Drinker. White Weenie doesn't normally like a Wrath taking out its team, but it surely won't mind when the opponent taps out and it can drop the Legendary Winter Orb.

White Weenie (Boros)

No dice in the "no Reach" category here. The Boros deck can't beat you with Hokori in the main and has fewer frills, but on the other hand, you can be less liberal with your life points here. Lightning Helix, Char, and so on can kill you from nowhere, so plan accordingly when timing your creature kill. Additionally, this deck has Umezawa's Jitte, which is the ultimate trump in a creature-on-creature duel. It's rare that any player can start spending counters and not win when battling another creature deck; therefore you'll need Jittes of your own and maybe a little more if you want to win from the aggressive side.

Black Aggro

This deck hasn't been getting much press of late, but I consider it one of the most dangerous in the format. Then again, I live and play in the Northeast, where *Kamigawa* Block PTQs played home to as many as seven Black Hand decks in a Top 8. In Standard, this school boasts Hypnotic Specter, which is the single most dangerous threat creature available. Lord Hypno, as Erik Lauer used to call it, is probably the only random discard element in the format, meaning that even if you have the answer -- a Jitte for your man on the ground, a Wrath of God -- you might accidentally drop that answer anyway, even though the opponent didn't hit you with a Distress or the equivalent! Factor in that this little 2/2 can pack a Jitte himself, and you have a difficult threat, and a difficult *deck* to beat. That said, the Black Hand deck is vulnerable due to the small size of its creatures. Any well-tuned Red Deck should be able to bury the Black Hand creatures and keep Jitte offline, at least in the short term. For other creature decks, it's a bit of a shootout. The version of Black I suggested can generate Jitte advantage in two different ways, and with Jitte online, whose creatures are how big tends to be less important. For control decks, whether Gifts Ungiven, Blue Control, or any new deck, containing the small but deadly discard creatures is a must: Nezumi Shortfang, if left untouched, will clear the way for the next wave of attack *even if* you can eventually deal. The lesson? Don't play a deck if you can't contain 1/1 and 2/2 threats in the first three turns.

Blue Control

This deck is the strongest in the format at going very long. If its Jushi Apprentices are left untouched, the Blue Control deck can more or less match any other deck one-for-one the entire game and eventually come out ahead. Via Rewind and Dimir Aqueduct, the deck can even net mana while drawing extra cards. Therefore the goal *has* to be to present a stream of threats going into the midgame, forcing the Blue Control player to "have it" right there and then, to spend his mana. If you can get a threat to stick, force open a hole as wide as you can, either by enhancing the threat already in play or dropping more and more. Most versions of Blue Control have no mass removal (and are soft on board control anyway), so there is little disincentive to over committing. Going long, Blue's threats are the equal of the best Green decks -- packing Keiga and Meloku -- so if you let the opponent get there, you aren't going to win. Another strategy is to just try to kill the Apprentices, to make Blue play fair. This isn't a bad strategy, but you'll still have to resolve a way to win if you intend to do so.

Eye of the Storm

This seems to me one of the most fragile combination decks in some time. The mere fact that the Eye player has to devote so much mana in a single turn without any immediate profit means that you should have at least one window of opportunity to stop him before it's too late. Any counter will be good when he is actually playing Eye of the Storm, and even if the big enchantment resolves, don't forget that you can play a Naturalize or the equivalent before any real shenanigans take place; just be careful with your mana. Though I generally recommend Terashi's Grasp for White Weenie, one of the instant speed enchantment killing cards might be the right way to go, just because this card is in the format. Cards like Demystify are less flexible, maybe, but successful **Magic** with aggressive decks is usually about having the right tool for the right job at the right time, not utility in the abstract.

I hope that this primer is helpful to you as Champs approaches. No one knows, at this point, *exactly* how the format will break down, but you can bet on Gifts Ungiven and some aggressive Jitte decks being the main contenders, so metagame accordingly. I think that these decks represent a reasonable gauntlet for testing, but that said, don't forget the Pro player's saw that my old friend Worth Wollpert taught me right before I took home my own first Blue Envelope: "If you can't beat 'em, join em!"

Next week **magicthegathering.com** won't have any new content as Wizards of the Coast moves to their new building, but we'll back the week after that. Whatever deck you choose, good luck at Champs!

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