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# Champing at the Bit

Brian David-Marshall  
The Week That Was  
Friday, October 14, 2005



During the past **Magic** year, there has been more Constructed deck information available to players than at any other point in the game's history thanks to the [Top 8 Decklist pages](#). While the page has been a PTQ player staple for each of the Constructed seasons, it kicked off this time last year to capture as much data as possible about the face of the new Standard after Champs.

It is almost that time of year again, with [Champs](#) just two weekends away. Next week [magicthegathering.com](#) is going to be dark, but when it returns the following week it will do so bursting at the seams with Standard tech from all corners of the globe.

Last year's events were dominated by Affinity, which had been at the top of the pops for quite a while. This year's top decks are not as clear, although Gifts and White Weenie seem like the early frontrunners. It's safe to say that players tend to modify the Block Constructed decks from the previous season.

There is a not-so-small wrinkle added this year as *Ninth Edition* is also thrown into the mix. The combination of **Elves of Deep Shadow** and **Hypnotic Specter** is an example of two cards not available to the pupils of Yamabushi during the Block season. **Form of the Dragon** is definitely getting a lot of play on the message boards. It seems like many designers feel that the loss of **Pentad Prism** and **Chrome Mox** is an insignificant loss for Good Form decks with **Enduring Ideal** and have turned to green and its abundant mana acceleration to fill the void. Although black-bordered **Seething Songs** rotated out, they rotated right back in with *Ninth Edition* white borders so that deck may very well be viable.



[2004 New York State Champion Mike Clair](#) expects that the decks [Mike Flores](#) dubbed the "Descendants of Kamigawa" will dominate the field and that players should adjust accordingly.

"Though some scattered States will highlight innovation, States remains a Block format but infused with some really good cards," Clair said. "There should be some anti-Gifts cards in every sideboard, like **Hokori** and/or **Counterspells** of some sort if you're in that color."

Mike also mused that [Umezawa's Jitte](#) should possibly be relegated to sideboard status, as "**Suppression Field** seems to be the flavor of the week."



[New Jersey State Champion Mike Reitemeyer](#) agreed with his New York counterpart.

"Gifts is definitely public enemy number one this year," Reitemeyer said. "Mostly because you know a lot of top players (the ones you should be focusing on beating) will be playing it as it is a very strong deck and a lot of players are comfortable with it after block, and already have the cards for it (no need to shell out lots of cash when you know how to play an excellent deck and already have the cards)."

A scheduling conflict will probably keep Reitemeyer from defending his title this year, but he has still been looking at the new field.

"I unfortunately have an eight-hour class the day of States, however, I've still been playtesting a bit just for fun vs. White-green Weenie, White-red Weenie, Gifts (three different builds), Black Hand, Reanimator... Since I probably won't be playing I don't mind mentioning that I'd most likely be playing white-red control as it has a good matchup against all the previously mentioned decks. There are so many sleepers that are so good in the deck. I'm even running the classic **Serra Angel** in my build."

As last year's State Champions, both Mikes won free entry into all Gray Matter Conventions events for a year. (Many organizers in North America offer similar prizes for their State Championships) Clair's string of free PTQs culminated in an 11th-place finish at Pro Tour-Atlanta alongside teammates Steve Sadin and Paul Jordan. He also won a PTQ for Philadelphia but failed to cash in his envelope as he slowly sunk into the world of a certain MMORPG.

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## Back in the Game

Having escaped the clutches of online gaming, Mike Clair returned to **Magic** with the release of *Ravnica*. As many players know, the release of a new set is the best jumping-on point for making a return to the game. The weeks after a prerelease are often like a Magical version of "This is Your Life" with people you sometimes haven't seen for years making guest-drafting appearances.

The other night I had a chance to draft with a group of people I hadn't seen in the same room since the heyday of Neutral Ground in the mid- to late-90s. There were my Monkey Dog teammates Eric Kesselman and Brook North, as well as my Grand Prix-New Jersey teammate Tim McKenna. Original Deadguys David Price, Tony Tsai, and Chris Pikula were also in attendance, although Dave only played a little Sealed Deck and passed on the draftivities. Rounding out the group was a handful of characters straight out of the pages of *Jonny Magic and the Card Shark Kids*: Ben Murray and Alex Balandin, as well as the eponymous main character of David Kushner's narrative. I can't remember the last time I saw Jon Finkel draft, although this was apparently his third time drafting with *Ravnica*.



Monkey Dog, back in their heyday.

What was really striking to me about drafting with this bunch was their improvisational skills. I have probably done more drafts in the format than everyone else at the table combined (with the exception of McKenna). Taking my normal tact, I would sit down for a draft and look to go into one of the semi-established archetypes. I would happily go blue-black on a **Vedaiken Entrancer** or red-white on a third-pick **Flame-Kin Zealot**.

Not Eric Kesselman though, no sir. Eric and I squared off in one draft and I felt pretty confident in my controllish blue-black mill deck – especially as Eric led off with an array of **Elvish Skysweepers** and **Thoughtpicker Witches**. My draw was a little slow but I felt that I had enough time to run him out of cards. The Thoughtpicker became more than just a nuisance when Eric played out **Savra, Queen of the Golgari** on the following turn. **Shambling Shell** was the hard lock a turn later as I could not keep a creature on the board. A flying, reanimated, 7/7

**Mindleech Mass** made a mockery of my mill plan in the next game.

Finkel's drafts were equally interesting as he put a very high priority on the bounce lands and signets, which allowed him to play four colors with little to no difficulty. Counting the signets, his decks were generally half mana sources and he seemed to have no trouble playing **Hex**, **Flame-Kin Zealot**, blue card drawing, and even getting white mana for his pair of **Flash Conscriptors**.

Prior to the last draft of the evening, Eric and I went out to restock the snacks and drinks for the group and discussed the archetypes of the block. Eric is completely unimpressed with the Boros guild and has flat-out refused to draft it, feeling that the deck is underpowered. Of course this meant that Eric would be sent right into red-white – albeit a more controllish version than most – in the following draft when he opened **Brightflame**. With a third-pick **Cleansing Beam**, Eric thought he might have finally found the red-white deck that could break through mid- to late-game stalls.



We were doing three-on-three team drafts where each player plays against each player on the other team. The first team to five individual match wins gets the overall win. Our teams split the first eight matches and the final draft of the evening came down to Kesselman versus Finkel. I was kind of surprised to find that Jon had been drafting green-white to my right – especially since he passed me **Loxodon Hierarchy** and a **Selesnya Guildmage** in the second set of packs. What did he pick over them? Well, you have to go back to one of Jon's most famous decks to understand the love affair Jon has had with token generation and control elements.

FinkelPost		
U.S. Nationals '97 - Top 8		
	Main Deck	Sideboard
	60 cards	
4 Adarkar Wastes	4 Abeyance	1 Circle of Protection: Black
8 Island	4 Brainstorm	1 Disenchant
2 Kjeldoran Outpost	3 Browse	2 Disrupting Scepter
	1 Circle of Protection: Black	2 Dust to Dust

4 Plains	4 Counterspell	1 Gerrard's Wisdom
4 Thawing Glaciers	3 Disenchant	2 Karma
22 lands	2 Dissipate	2 Political Trickery
	2 Force of Will	2 Serrated Arrows
	1 Gerrard's Wisdom	2 Sleight of Mind
0 creatures	4 Impulse	15 sideboard cards
	1 Political Trickery	
	1 Soldevi Digger	
	4 Swords to Plowshares	
	4 Wrath of God	
	38 other spells	

While Jon could not manage to secure the counter-magic or a **Soldevi Digger** for this draft deck (although Eric did wreck my green dredge-based deck with Junktroller in another draft), he still did his best to recreate his favorite archetype with a first-pick board sweeper and multiple copies of the new Outpost.

Ladies and gentleman, Jon Finkel is a highly trained professional gamer. Do not – I repeat, DO NOT – try this at home. By all means, take the elephant and pass the outpost. Here is the deck Jon used to smash Eric in a pair of humiliating games to determine the outcome of the final draft on the night, while singing "The Final Countdown" the whole time. Jon was laughing and enjoying every moment of it while a horror-stricken Kesselman could scarcely believe what was happening to him.

"Don't let it end like this, God. Not like this."

FinkelPost-05 Ravnica Draft Deck		
<b>Main Deck</b> 40 cards		
1 Boros Garrison	1 Boros Recruit	1 Farseek
4 Forest	1 Conclave Equenaut	1 Fiery Conclusion
3 Mountain	1 Dromad Purebred	1 Hour of Reckoning
3 Plains	1 Elves of Deep Shadow	2 Rally the Righteous
3 Selesnya Sanctuary	1 Elvish Skysweeper	2 Scatter the Seeds
3 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree	1 Golgari Brownscale	1 Selesnya Signet
17 lands	1 Greater Mossdog	8 other spells
	1 Guardian of Vitu-Ghazi	
	1 Root-Kin Ally	
	1 Sandsower	
	1 Sparkmage Apprentice	
	2 Stone-Seeder Hierophant	
	1 Transluminant	
	1 Veteran Armorer	
	15 creatures	

If Eric goes another year without playing **Magic**, this deck will be the reason. While there are a couple of real stinkers in there – notably the **Dromad Purebred** – the deck had the ability to force an opponent into over-committing to the board to overwhelm the tap ability of the **Sandsower** and setting up the lopsided Wrath.

## Firestarter: Play or Draw?

Last week in the forums, Sol Malka posted that he disagreed with the Pro community regarding the choice to play or draw in draft formats. Almost to a man, the Pros I interviewed last week advised players to play first in draft format and draw first in Sealed. Sol wrote that he would rather have the extra card from drawing first in just about every draft format ever and that the Pros were simply playing first without any thought as to whether it was actually correct.

While I disagree with Sol's claim that the Pros have not put any thought into their play/draw decision, I am curious as to what most people choose outside of the Pro community. Share your preference in the forums and let the discussion begin.

*Brian David-Marshall has been involved in **Magic** since 1994 when he was violently shaken by someone searching for the game. He has organized tournaments, run a store, and is currently the Pro Tour Historian. His latest venture is [Top8Magic.com](http://Top8Magic.com), the publishing house that is releasing Michael J. Flores: Deckade.*



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