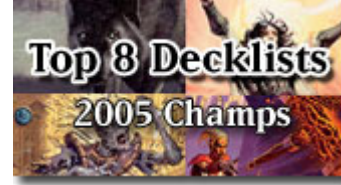


Bias in the Media: Champs 2005 and the New Decks to Beat

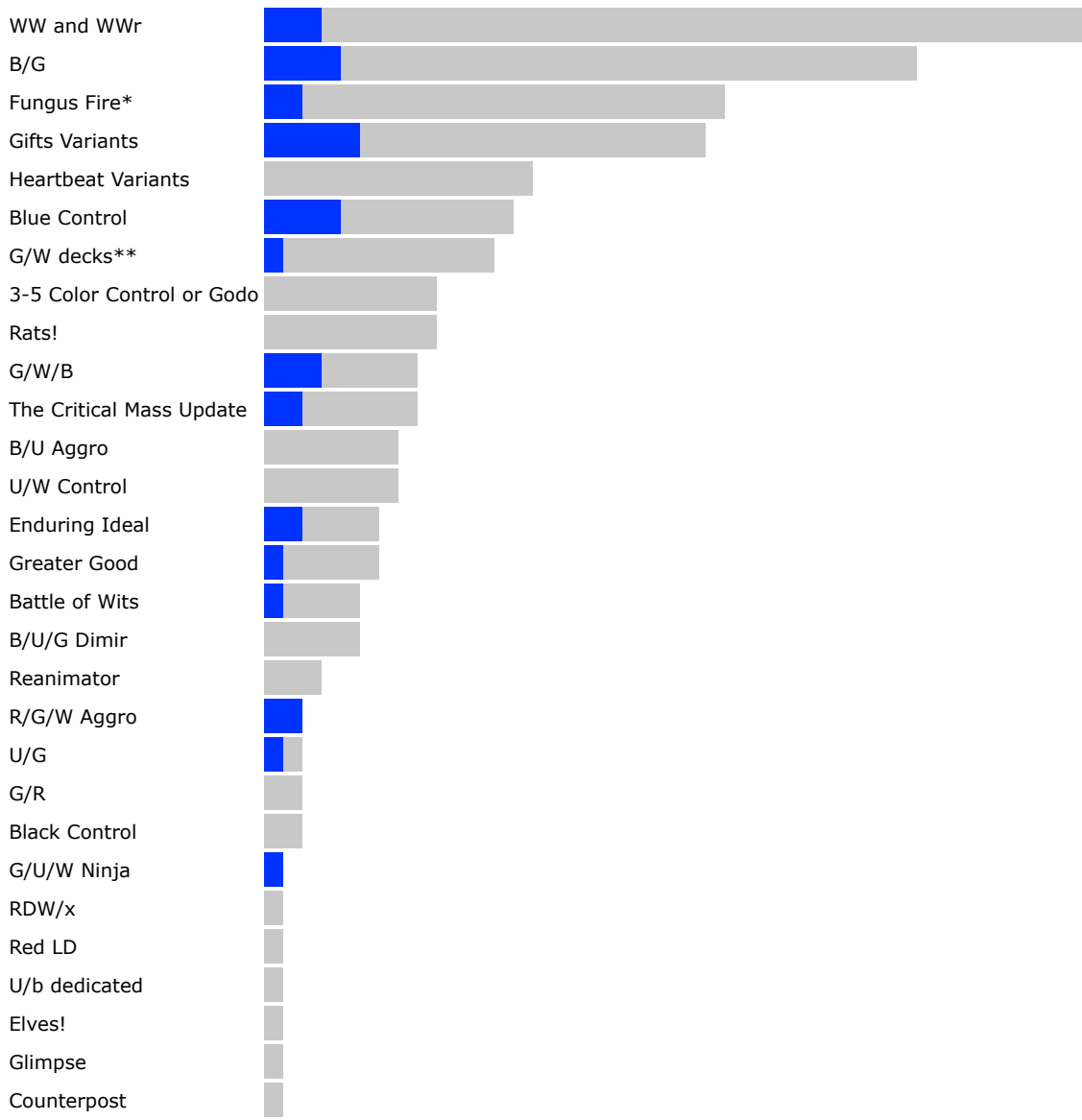
Mike Flores

Thursday, October 27, 2005

For the first time in recent memory, with no specter of Affinity, no grandfathered Goblins or Astral Slide looming over Standard from either Block or the previous Standard, 2005 Champs was a wide open format. Players came to claim their turf with a huge variety of decks... Sure, they had Gifts Ungiven, but some played aggressive Gifts with Black and Blue bears. White Weenie -- possibly the most popular deck from the summer PTQs -- returned from *Kamigawa*, sometimes combined with Red cards from the new Boros Guild, sometimes in its traditional one color mode. With just over half the North American Champs reporting at the time of this writing, we can already see more than 30 different archetypes posting Top 8 finishes in the various Provincials and States.



Here is our first look at an unofficial tally of what we have so far:



Rogue (other)



Winner





Top 8

*including "no Fungus" R/W Burn/control decks

**including Glare of Subdual decks

The decks at the top are perhaps deceptive; I combined the White Weenie and Boros decks in a single row and the R/W burn decks with and without Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree in a single category of Fungus Fire... even if some of those decks had no Fungus. There was also great variety in the composition of the B/G decks... Some were Dredge, some fairly controlling, and others were more aggressive. Like Black Hand in the Kamigawa Block PTQs, these decks played many of the same cards, headlined by Ravnica's utility removal centerpiece Putrefy.

Two Looks at Gifts Ungiven...

Philippe Gareau - Gifts Ungiven  
 1st Place - Quebec

Main Deck <i>60 cards</i>		Sideboard
6 Forest	1 Death Denied	1 Cranial Extraction
1 Island	4 Gifts Ungiven	1 Ghost-Lit Stalker
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	1 Goryo's Vengeance	1 Goryo's Vengeance
4 Overgrown Tomb	4 Kodama's Reach	2 Hideous Laughter
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	1 Nightmare Void	1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
6 Swamp	3 Putrefy	2 Kokusho, the Evening Star
2 Watery Grave	4 Sensei's Divining Top	1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
2 Yavimaya Coast	3 Sickening Shoal	3 Nezumi Graverobber
<hr/>	1 Soulless Revival	1 Recollect
23 lands	1 Wear Away	1 Reminisce
	<hr/>	1 Rending Vines
1 Grave-Shell Scarab	23 other spells	<hr/>
1 Hana Kami		15 sideboard cards
1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni		
3 Kagemaro, First to Suffer		
2 Kokusho, the Evening Star		
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror		
1 Myojin of Night's Reach		
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder		
<hr/>		
14 creatures		

Jim Roy - Gifts Ungiven  
 1st Place - Alberta



Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
2 Duskmantle, House of Shadow	1 Boomerang	2 Azami, Lady of Scrolls
8 Island	1 Darkblast	2 Dark Confidant
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	1 Disrupting Shoal	3 Execute
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	3 Gifts Ungiven	1 Overwhelming Intellect
2 Quicksand	3 Hinder	1 Shadow of Doubt
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	3 Last Gasp	2 Slay
3 Swamp	2 Mana Leak	1 Temporal Adept
4 Underground River	1 Muddle the Mixture	3 Threads of Disloyalty
4 Watery Grave	3 Remand	<hr/>
<hr/>	4 Rewind	15 sideboard cards
26 lands	3 Sensei's Divining Top	
	1 Shadow of Doubt	
	<hr/>	
1 Akuta, Born of Ash	26 other spells	
1 Dark Confidant		
3 Jushi Apprentice		
1 Keiga, the Tide Star		
1 Kokusho, the Evening Star		
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror		
<hr/>		
8 creatures		

Gifts Ungiven "variants" led all decks in actual Champs won, but as you can see, the decks were not uniform. Gareau's winner from Quebec is a pretty straightforward implementation of the *Kamigawa* Block best deck... The new cards are the ubiquitous Putrefy and a couple of dual lands... But contrast with Jim "Rotting Giant" Roy's Alberta winner. Roy's deck looks almost like a Blue Control deck... but out of nowhere has these crazy cards like Akuta, Born of Ash or dedicated main deck removal spells. Roy has been an advocate of "threat diversity" over the more commonly held redundancy theory, and his Alberta first place deck is a good example of Jim's unique outlook.

Of course, if you shift Jim Roy's rogue deck from the Gifts camp to the Blue control, the "top" of the format looks quite different (see the bias, below)...

Great Shades of *Ice Age*/*Alliances*! (With and Without the Dude Ranch)

One of the most hyped cards coming out of *Ravnica* is Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree. An even more hyped up card is Lightning Helix. Many players went to Champs with a retro R/W burn philosophy in tow. Coming into this past weekend, the so-called "Fungus Fire" deck, which combined the Saproling-generating Vitu-Ghazi with burn cards, and a dissenting version with no Fungus, both picked up some attention in independent online leagues.

<p>Chris Ripple 1st Place - Pennsylvania</p>	 
Main Deck	Sideboard

60 cards

2 Brushland
4 Forest
3 Karplusan Forest
3 Mountain
3 Plains
1 Swamp
4 Temple Garden
4 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree

24 lands

1 Firemane Angel
3 Godo, Bandit Warlord
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

8 creatures

1 Char
4 Devouring Light
3 Faith's Fetters
4 Kodama's Reach
4 Lightning Helix
2 Seed Spark
3 Sensei's Divining Top
1 Sunforger
1 Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang
1 Umezawa's Jitte
4 Wrath of God

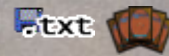
28 other spells

3 Cranial Extraction
1 Faith's Fetters
3 Ivory Mask
1 Manriki-Gusari
2 Naturalize
2 Pyroclasm
3 Sacred Ground

15 sideboard cards

Jin Su Chong

1st Place - Montana



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Battlefield Forge
6 Mountain
6 Plains
3 Quicksand
4 Sacred Foundry

23 lands

3 Firemane Angel
4 Hearth Kami
4 Paladin en-Vec

11 creatures

4 Char
4 Devouring Light
4 Flames of the Blood Hand
4 Lightning Helix
2 Searing Meditation
4 Wrath of God
4 Yamabushi's Flame

26 other spells

Sideboard

3 Ivory Mask
4 Leave No Trace
4 Pithing Needle
4 Pyroclasm

15 sideboard cards

Chris Ripple's Pennsylvania winner is a reasonably "classic," if improved, look at Fungus Fire. I actually like his version better than most because it has Godo, Bandit Warlord. Many of these decks play only Firemane Angel for threat creatures, but that never made much sense to me... Fungus Fire plays Sunforger!



The general philosophy of this deck is board control/burn. It races creature decks with the multifaceted Lightning Helix and can close long games by getting Sunforger into play. Fungus Fire exploits one of *Ravnica's* most popular draft picks in a unique and effective way. In this deck, Faith's Fetters goes a long way. It is a clunky Pacifism, and also a bad Gerrard's Wisdom; together, these two effects make for quite an annoying enchantment from the opponent's perspective. In the post-*Kamigawa* Standard, which is defined by Meloku from the control side and Umezawa's Jitte from the beatdown side, Faith's Fetters is particularly annoying. The only way to get another Jitte or what have you online is to play a second copy... but the Legend Rule then gets in the way because the first, if immobilized, has not actually left play. Quite messy.

Jin Su Chong's Montana winner has almost the same philosophy as the stock Fungus Fire, but removes Vitu-Ghazi and the Green component entirely to focus exclusively on its proactive burn/board control elements. Chong mixes up the very GargoyleHaups-looking deck (which even has a long game unstoppable White flyer) with Searing Meditation. Combined with Firemane Angel or Lightning Helix -- or Faith's Fetters if Jin had played that card, say -- Searing Meditation provides a recurring source of direct damage.

Nobody Remembers Fifth Place

Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
6 Forest	4 Darkblast	2 Exile into Darkness
4 Llanowar Wastes	3 Life from the Loam	1 Isao, Enlightened Bushi
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	2 Moldervine Cloak	3 Nightmare Void
4 Overgrown Tomb	1 Nightmare Void	3 Phyrexian Arena
2 Svogthos, the Restless Tomb	3 Sensei's Divining Top	3 Plague Boiler
7 Swamp		3 Viridian Shaman
	13 other spells	15 sideboard cards
24 lands		
2 Dimir House Guard		
2 Festering Goblin		
3 Golgari Thug		
1 Grave-Shell Scarab		
3 Greater Mossdog		
1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni		
3 Isao, Enlightened Bushi		
1 Kokusho, the Evening Star		
1 Nekkoraal		
2 Nullmage Shepherd		
4 Stinkweed Imp		

Check out Virginia's number five... That's our own Bennie Smith behind... one of the ugliest decks I've ever seen. Bennie is actually a former Virginia State Champion with B/G. It looks like he figured out how to grab the old lightning and post another B/G States Top 8.

Now it is said that nobody remembers second place, and certainly fifth place is not usually something to write home about, but Bennie's deck is genuinely... odd. Running a Stinkweed Imp engine to hold off even the most efficient, sleek, and beautiful threats on a persistent basis, Bennie can Dredge through his deck to set up a Demonic Tutor-like availability of graveyard options. The selection is extreme in this case when we hit Dimir House Guard. I am sure that I am not alone in double taking that particular 2/3 for four mana... In constructed deck?

In Bennie's deck, Dimir House Guard plays a poor Diabolic Tutor for one mana less. He can set up a fourth turn Nekrataal, draw into Greater Mossdog, or set up his mighty 1 + 3 Nightmare Void in Game One.



Not just for draft anymore?

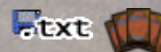
264 Shades of Jon Finkel

A few years ago, Jon Finkel went 3-0 in the Standard portion of the **Magic** Invitational with Battle of Wits. High on this accomplishment, he inexplicably decided to play Battle of Wits in every format possible... but never matched that first 3-0.

But this isn't Extended. Today we are talking about another Standard format, one where Battle of Wits is again available. Toby Wachter's onetime baby is viable and might even be quite good.

Keyafar Saleh - Battle of Wits

1st Place - Texas



Main Deck

264 cards

4 Adarkar Wastes	4 Battle of Wits
4 Caves of Koilos	4 Befoul
4 Cloudcrest Lake	4 Brainspoil
35 Island	4 Chastise
14 Plains	4 Clutch of the Undercity
20 Swamp	4 Compulsive Research
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	2 Confiscate
4 Underground River	4 Consult the Necrosages
	4 Convolute

Sideboard

4 Horobi's Whisper	
4 Jushi Apprentice	
2 Persecute	
4 Pithing Needle	
1 Twincast	
15 sideboard cards	

4 Waterveil Cavern	4 Counsel of the Soratami
2 Watery Grave	2 Cruel Edict
<hr/>	
95 lands	4 Dark Banishing
	4 Diabolic Tutor
	4 Dimir Signet
3 Kagemaro, First to Suffer	3 Disrupting Shoal
4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	4 Enduring Ideal
<hr/>	
7 creatures	3 Eradicate
	3 Exile into Darkness
	2 Final Judgment
	1 Genju of the Realm
	4 Ghostly Prison
	4 Gifts Ungiven
	4 Hideous Laughter
	4 Hinder
	1 Honden of Cleansing Fire
	1 Honden of Infinite Rage
	1 Honden of Infinite Rage
	1 Honden of Life's Web
	1 Honden of Seeing Winds
	4 Induce Paranoia
	1 Ivory Mask
	4 Last Gasp
	4 Mana Leak
	1 Meishin, the Mind Cage
	4 Muddle the Mixture
	4 Night of Souls' Betrayal
	4 Nightmare Void
	3 Oppressive Will
	4 Perplex
	4 Rend Flesh
	3 Reverence
	4 Rewind
	4 Ribbons of Night
	4 Sensei's Divining Top
	4 Sickening Shoal
	4 Spectral Searchlight
	2 Telling Time
	3 Terrarion
	4 Tidings
	4 Wrath of God
	<hr/>
	162 other spells



Saleh's deck is quite simply insane. When you have 264 cards to work with, you can fit in just about everything. He has an Enduring Ideal engine, complete with Hondens (the Ideal can of course fetch Battle of Wits); He has more counters than a Mono-Blue control deck, and can even go crazy Gifts Ungiven style.

Notice that cards like Brainspoil are playable as Dimir House Guard in Bennie Smith's deck due to Transmute. Saleh can swap the clunky Brainspoil for his signature win condition and, given all that

mana acceleration, can probably take the game home by turn five.

Is That Good?

Apparently it is, because three out of the four players in Donald Swindler's crew made Top 8 at South Carolina States with their Greater Good variant (the fourth missed Top 8 by losing to another copy of the same deck):

Donald Swindler 1st Place - South Carolina		 
Main Deck 60 cards	Sideboard	
4 Brushland	4 Devouring Light	2 Circle of Protection: Red
1 Eiganjo Castle	3 Faith's Fetters	4 Cranial Extraction
5 Forest	4 Greater Good	3 Defense Grid
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	3 Kodama's Reach	2 Ivory Mask
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	2 Naturalize	2 Naturalize
4 Plains	3 Sensei's Divining Top	2 Scour
1 Swamp	4 Wrath of God	15 sideboard cards
4 Temple Garden	23 other spells	
2 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree		
23 lands		
3 Gleancrawler		
3 Kodama of the North Tree		
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder		
4 Yosei, the Morning Star		
14 creatures		

Greater Good is a uniquely Green look at the same Tribe Elder/Divining Top engine that drove much of *Kamigawa* Block, from Gifts Ungiven to TOGIT Three-color Control and others. Swindler's team can set up Yosei after Yosei with Gleancrawler keeping the juice flowing for exactly one side of the table. Of course the Greater Good deck is filled with many very good creatures, so it doesn't need to rely on the Time Walk combination.

Here Comes That Bias

Go up one state and you'll hit North Carolina. That state's champion took his Champs with The Critical Mass Update, a U/G deck designed by yours truly. This deck also won the enormous Ohio States (twice the size of most other Champs), where three Critical Mass Updates placed in the Top 8, and did well in several other events.

Orrin Beasley 1st Place - North Carolina		 
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Main Deck

60 cards

6 Forest
5 Island
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
1 Miren, the Moaning Well
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers
4 Tendo Ice Bridge
4 Yavimaya Coast

23 lands

2 Arashi, the Sky Asunder
3 Keiga, the Tide Star
4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
4 Vinelasher Kudzu
4 Wood Elves

21 creatures

4 Mana Leak
4 Remand
4 Sensei's Divining Top
4 Umezawa's Jitte

16 other spells

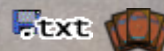
Sideboard

2 Arashi, the Sky Asunder
2 Naturalize
2 Pithing Needle
1 Reito Lantern
2 Rending Vines
3 Shadow of Doubt
3 Threads of Disloyalty

15 sideboard cards

Brian Fulop

1st Place - Ohio



Main Deck

60 cards

6 Forest
5 Island
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
1 Miren, the Moaning Well
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers
4 Tendo Ice Bridge
4 Yavimaya Coast

23 lands

1 Arashi, the Sky Asunder
4 Keiga, the Tide Star
4 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

4 Hinder
4 Mana Leak
4 Sensei's Divining Top
4 Umezawa's Jitte

16 other spells

Sideboard

4 Jushi Apprentice
2 Naturalize
3 Rending Vines
2 Rewind
4 Threads of Disloyalty

15 sideboard cards

4 Vinelasher Kudzu

4 Wood Elves

21 creatures

The general philosophy of The Critical Mass Update is to play the very best threats in the format... All of them. What other deck plays the Tribe Elder/Top engine, Jitte, *and four* copies of Meloku the Clouded Mirror? On top of those, what deck has an even better early beatdown game than White Weenie or Boros?

This deck is designed to break Vinelasher Kudzu, which is the current Standard's answer to Wild Mongrel or Arcbound Ravager in the offensive two-drop category. With Meloku providing +1/+1 counters until the game ends and Sakura-Tribe Elder and Wood Elves depositing lands in the short term, Vinelasher Kudzu is almost unstoppable in this deck.



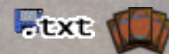
The Critical Mass Update plays like a Counter-Sliver deck. It has powerful and fast threats, which distinguish it from a deck like Mono-Blue Control, but can protect a lead with its permission spells. Where a White Weenie deck will lose its board position to KageMaro, First to Suffer or a Wrath of God out of Fungus Fire, The Critical Mass Update will strategically counter the opponent's board control spell and/or follow up with Keiga, Meloku, or Arashi to close the game without having to actually seize complete control.

I am admittedly biased, but I consider The Critical Mass Update to be one of the two best decks in the current Standard. If you test this deck against the other decks to beat, primarily the ubiquitous Boros and Gifts Ungiven and the perhaps over-hyped Fungus Fire, you will see that this deck compares very favorably. It may not be as popular a deck you'll see, but this is itself one of the best available decks to *play* yourself if you want to win your next Standard tournament.

Now there is one other deck that I particularly like for the current Standard, which I consider to be the best overall. That deck is Mono-Blue control:

Julian Levin - Flores Blue Control

1st Place - New York



Main Deck

60 cards

2 Dimir Aqueduct	4 Boomerang
10 Island	3 Disrupting Shoal
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	4 Hinder
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Mana Leak
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	4 Remand
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	2 Rewind
4 Quicksand	4 Threads of Disloyalty

Sideboard

3 Cranial Extraction
2 Dimir Aqueduct
4 Drift of Phantasms
4 Execute
2 Rewind
15 sideboard cards

1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
4 Watery Grave

25 other spells

25 lands

4 Jushi Apprentice
3 Keiga, the Tide Star
3 Meloku the Clouded Mirror

10 creatures



This deck represents the evolution of the Blue-splash-Black deck I posted prior to Champs, and includes many innovations to fight the field. Our baseline assumption going into Champs was that Blue Control was the best *strategy*, possessing the strongest plan, so we tuned around the potential cards and strategies that could beat *us*. For example, Dimir Aqueduct is there to trump Suppression Field and Hokori, Dust Drinker. Execute and Drift of Phantasms are in the sideboard to Overwhelm a White Weenie or Boros opponent in fights where Jushi Apprentice is sub-optimal.

In New York, our group played three copies of the Mono-Blue Control deck and two copies of the Critical Mass Update. All three Blue decks made Top 8, finishing 1,2, and 8; one of the two Critical Mass decks made Top 8 (second in the Swiss after the eventual finalist Mono-Blue, finishing fourth), beating the other Critical Mass along the way. None of these Top 8 decks lost to anyone outside the group.

Again, I suggest testing the Mono-Blue against the popular decks in the field. Like The Critical Mass Update, the Mono-Blue deck has highly favorable match-ups against Boros and Gifts, and can beat anything in between.

We haven't exhausted the options in Standard by any means. There are simply too many decks to hit for a single article. The ones I included here are the ones I found most interesting or most important to consider. We will probably revisit Standard in a few weeks, once all the Top 8 decks are in, and maybe crunch a few numbers as we take a break from the "other" constructed format.

Final Thoughts Before We Switch Gears

We'll be going full throttle into Extended for the Pro Tour and the PTQ season starting next week, which means that unless you are playing in the Last Chance Qualifier *today*, Standard won't be relevant on a large scale until Regionals. However, if you want to take home the next FNM or 8-Man Queue, I would approach Standard thusly:

- Test against White Weenie and Boros.
- Make sure you can beat Gifts Ungiven.
- Be aware of the new decks, primarily the ones packing a lot of Keigas and Melokus, which don't strictly fall between the "original" extremes of the metagame.



- Don't forget that Hypnotic Specter is the primary limiting factor of the format. Some people can summon the said on turn two.
- Draw a mix of land and spells.

Generally speaking, I wouldn't play a deck like Fungus Fire because, no matter how good it might be against pure aggro, the best decks in the format are not pure aggro. There may *be* a lot of White Weenie decks, but the best aggressive decks in the format have Mana Leaks. Also, don't forget that even though none of them actually *won* a Champs, Heartbeat variants are in the format and quite viable. Decks like Fungus Fire with few if any interactive elements to fight solitaire decks will not be a good choice if the icky combo players catch on.

For reference:

Eric Taylor - Heartbeat

4th Place - Michigan

Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
11 Forest	3 Compulsive Research	1 Blaze
7 Island	4 Early Harvest	3 Cranial Extraction
2 Swamp	4 Gifts Ungiven	1 Dosan the Falling Leaf
-----	4 Heartbeat of Spring	1 Hinder
20 lands	4 Kodama's Reach	1 Kagemaro, First to Suffer
	1 Needle Storm	1 Mountain
4 Drift of Phantasms	2 Perplex	1 Nightmare Void
1 Maga, Traitor to Mortals	4 Recollect	4 Pyroclasm
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Rending Vines	1 Rending Vines
-----	4 Sensei's Divining Top	1 Wear Away
9 creatures	-----	15 sideboard cards
	31 other spells	

Next Week: Post-Pro Tour

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