

Mike Flores

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At the time of this writing, Pro Tour-Los Angeles has been over for less than 24 hours. Meanwhile, for the first time in recent memory, we are in the midst of a Constructed PTQ format that is *exactly the same* as the format of the aforementioned Pro Tour. If you're interested in picking up a Blue Envelope for Honolulu, sit back and pay attention: not only are we breaking ground on this one, the format is already moving fast enough to be confusing.

The L.A. Metagame

The Extended format for the Pro Tour itself was big beyond belief. Due in large part to the late bannings of Disciple of the Vault and Aether Vial, Extended blew up from a relatively small number of available decks (Affinity, Goblins, and a few others) to something like *fifty* distinct archetypes. This should give you a clue as to what was good and what would automatically be bad...

In a format with so many different kinds of decks, it is literally impossible to create a general control deck that can effectively control all the relevant elements of the metagame; only a control deck with a potent proactive game plan of its own (Isochron Scepter + Orim's Chant or Wonder + Psychatog) that is fast enough to win before its shortcomings betray it will be able to win. Consider the failure of an archetype like The Rock. The Rock (proper) was the third most popular deck played at Los Angeles, but produced no finishers in the Top 8. You can blame cards like Engineered Plague, Sphere of Law, or Katakai, War's Wage for the similar absences of Affinity and Goblins on Sunday, but The Rock didn't fail because it was "hated out" of the tournament. Put simply, a control deck with general disruptive elements and fair threats cannot be the right call in a format with the diversity of PTLA 2005. Even Kenji Tsumura's far more relevant Psychatog deck (with Rock-like elements) is caught with clunky Frogmite-killing Last Gasps when Smother would be better, as well as Oxidize in matchups with no artifact targets. The Rock has these problems, but they are amplified by the lack of a combo-like immediate kill card (that also, let's face it, plays perfect defense).

L.A. itself is over and done with. The main thing aspiring Pro players gain, at least over the course of a couple of weeks, is a reduction in the number of archetypes that will actually show up going into the PTQ and Grand Prix follow-up tournaments. That is, even though there will be many times more PTQs running the L.A. format than the actual Pro Tour, and literally thousands of players participating in those tournaments, the number of decks that you will have to reasonably prepare for will not be the fifty-odd of L.A., but be based largely on the decks that did well there.

The Gauntlet

I am a firm believer in preparing for a "known" format by focusing on just a few archetypes at the extremes of the metagame and working under the assumption that if I can beat *those* decks, the decks that fall between the extremes become automatic. Furthermore, L.A. gave us one of the biggest potential deck pools of all time, and it is literally impossible to prepare for all of them. However, by correctly hitting the biggest archetypes in your testing, you will probably be able to cover 80% of your matches despite touching on less than 20% of the available decks.

The Beatdown



Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Bloodstained Mire	4 Firebolt	3 Blood Moon
1 Eiganjo Castle	4 Lava Dart	3 Flametongue Kavu
4 Mountain	4 Lightning Helix	3 Fledgling Dragon
1 Plains	4 Molten Rain	4 Purge
4 Sacred Foundry	4 Pillage	2 Umezawa's Jitte
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	1 Pulse of the Forge	15 sideboard cards
2 Windswept Heath	21 other spells	
4 Wooded Foothills		
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21 lands		
4 Goblin Legionnaire		
4 Grim Lavamancer		
3 Isamaru, Hound of Konda		
3 Katakai, War's Wage		
4 Savannah Lions		
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18 creatures		

Tsuyoshi Fujita spent much of the tournament at or tied for first place. It is no secret that the Resident Genius is my favorite **Magic** player, and his choice in deck for this Pro Tour is a good example of why. Tsuyoshi reputedly spent only three days designing and tuning the deck that took him to the Top 8. This Boros Deck Wins looks a lot like some of the other Red Decks splashing for Lightning Helix that got played in the tournament, but has several unique features that set it apart.

The most obviously unique element of Tsuyoshi's deck is his mana base. He plays only 21 lands, and several of those are *Onslaught* sacrifice lands. All those Bloodstained Mires, Windswept Heaths, and Wooded Foothills allow Fujita to find one of his four Sacred Foundries... allowing his deck to consistently play Isamaru, Hound of Konda or Savannah Lions on turn one. The other unique element of Tsuyoshi's deck is his eight Pillage and Molten Rain package starting.

A year ago, The Rock was the most popular deck on the Pro Tour, and featured such Red hating cards as Ravenous Baloth. Despite playing cards like Pernicious Deed alongside the mighty 4/4, The Rock was a virtual bye for a tuned Red Deck Wins deck. Wasteland and Rishadan Port, combined with a little burn, would keep The Rock off its mana while Jackal Pup chipped away life points until The Rock was in burn range. By the time The Rock's power rares came online, it was often too late. For this year's Extended, Tsuyoshi literally substituted the land destruction cards for his previous mana source/mana control elements. With such a low curve, 21 lands is probably enough, even when so many can't actually produce Red or White mana.

Possible Changes:

Both of the other Red Deck Wins-reminiscent decks to make the Top 8 ran Disenchant. Tsuyoshi's deck has Purge against artifact *creatures* (and Psychatog), but nothing to destroy problem cards like Sphere of Law. Additionally, if Chris McDaniel's Heartbeat combo deck catches on, then Chih-Hsiang Chang's Pyrostatic Pillars may become a necessity for Red Decks.

The Combo

Chris McDaniel – Heartbeat Combo



Main Deck

60 cards

12 Forest
10 Island

22 lands

4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

4 creatures

1 Brain Freeze
4 Cunning Wish
1 Deep Analysis
3 Early Harvest
1 Echoing Truth
3 Fact or Fiction
4 Gifts Ungiven
4 Heartbeat of Spring
4 Mind's Desire
2 Moment's Peace
4 Nostalgic Dreams
2 Rampant Growth
1 Revive

34 other spells

Sideboard

3 Brain Freeze
1 Chain of Vapor
1 Early Harvest
1 Fact or Fiction
3 Mana Short
1 Memory Lapse
2 Moment's Peace
1 Naturalize
1 Stifle
1 Words of Wisdom

15 sideboard cards

Most Extended formats come down to beatdown, control, and dirty combo archetypes, and it looks like the current format's choice for the last spot is Star Wars Kid's deck. I would recommend testing against this deck *a lot*. It is fast and resilient enough (due to Moment's Peace) to outclass most beatdown decks. The huge number of Blue card drawing spells – most of them instants – make Heartbeat strong against disruption and control as well. In terms of Extended power level, there is not another deck in the format that can match this one's raw potency. Prepare for it, or prepare to lose.

The Control

Kenji Tsumura – Dredgatog



Main Deck

60 cards

1 Barren Moor
3 Bloodstained Mire
1 Darkwater Catacombs
4 Island
1 Lonely Sandbar
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds
3 Overgrown Tomb
4 Polluted Delta

1 Circular Logic
4 Counterspell
4 Cunning Wish
1 Darkblast
3 Force Spike
3 Gifts Ungiven
2 Last Gasp
1 Life from the Loam

Sideboard

1 Circular Logic
3 Duress
1 Ghastly Demise
1 Gifts Ungiven
1 Hideous Laughter
1 Krosan Reclamation
1 Mana Short
1 Natural Affinity
1 Naturalize

1 Swamp
 1 Tranquil Thicket
 1 Underground River
 2 Watery Grave
 3 Yavimaya Coast

26 lands

4 Psychatog
 1 Wonder

5 creatures

2 Mana Leak
 1 Oxidize
 3 Pernicious Deed
 3 Putrefy
 1 Smother

29 other spells

1 Oxidize
 1 Tsabo's Decree
 2 Viridian Shaman

 15 sideboard cards

Kenji Tsumura's Dredgatog takes the classic Psychatog archetype and adds several layers of intricacy and power. The card Life from the Loam is utterly broken in this deck, combining with Gifts Ungiven, Barren Moor, Tranquil Thicket, and Lonely Sandbar to become an inexorable long game draw engine.

Kenji's deck also boasts many of The Rock's best elements. What incentive (other than personal preference) do people have to playing that once classic Extended archetype at this point? The main reason players gravitate to The Rock is the forgiving recovery power of Pernicious Deed... and Dredgatog utilizes the same sweeper, but in concert with a more consistent and focused proactive strategy, not to mention a broken draw engine.

Despite its status as a superb deck that led the pack at the end of the Swiss, Dredgatog has a huge structural flaw that can be exploited by other control decks that are aware of that weakness. Kenji's deck can long game with Life from the Loam, but because it only plays a single copy, it needs Gifts Ungiven to ignite its advantage engine. In the past, a control player would let the opposing Psychatog draw all the cards it wanted with Fact or Fiction and so on, choosing instead to fight over Doctor Teeth and Upheaval, but against Kenji's deck, it may be right to just deny him extra cards (he has only three "real" card drawers), and force him to play fairly off the top.



The Champion

On the subject of Psychatog, we can't really talk about the upcoming PTQ scene without mentioning the deck that *won* L.A.

Antoine Ruel – Psychatog



Main Deck
 60 cards

Sideboard

2 Cephalid Coliseum	3 Boomerang	2 Darkblast
7 Island	4 Circular Logic	4 Duress
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	4 Counterspell	3 Ghastly Demise
4 Polluted Delta	1 Deep Analysis	1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
2 Seat of the Synod	3 Fact or Fiction	2 Razormane Masticore
2 Stalking Stones	4 Force Spike	1 Skeletal Scrying
1 Swamp	1 Gifts Ungiven	1 Smother
1 Vault of Whispers	2 Mana Leak	1 Stalking Stones
3 Watery Grave	4 Mental Note	15 sideboard cards
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23 lands	2 Opt	
	2 Smother	
	2 Thirst for Knowledge	
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4 Psychatog	32 other spells	
1 Wonder		
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5 creatures		


Anyone who has been competitive for a few years or has been reading *Swimming With Sharks* for any reasonable amount of time knows how this deck works. It defends early with Force Spike and other permission cards, drops a Psychatog, and kills with one big swing. Fact or Fiction is this deck's friend. Usually the Psychatog player will take the three pile... and still get a bonus from the cards that hit the graveyard in the split.

Ruel insists that he tested Life from the Loam and simply preferred the "old school" two-color version. His first place deck has a much stronger fundamental game than the Tsumura deck - it consistently counters spells, it is only two colors (making it less likely to be color screwed), and it has more - and more consistent - card drawing capabilities to get ahead.

Besides winning the Pro Tour, this version of Psychatog has put up tons of great numbers in general. Alexandre Peset (the only other player to run the Mental Note 'Tog deck in L.A.) matched Ruel's first place with a Top 20 finish. More than that, these players called their friend (and former Masters winner) Franck Canu; he won a PTQ with the deck just before Ruel's big check finish!

The Best Deck

Antoine Ruel surely liked his deck for L.A. but said that another deck was the best in the tournament.

Billy Moreno –Madness 'Tog		
Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>61 cards</i>		
2 Bloodstained Mire	4 Careful Study	4 Cabal Therapy
1 Centaur Garden	3 Chrome Mox	3 Engineered Plague
1 Cephalid Coliseum	4 Circular Logic	4 Naturalize
2 Forest	1 Darkblast	4 Smother
2 Island	2 Deep Analysis	15 sideboard cards
1 Lonely Sandbar	2 Gifts Ungiven	

2 Overgrown Tomb
4 Polluted Delta
2 Watery Grave
4 Yavimaya Coast

21 lands

3 Aquamoeba
4 Arrogant Wurm
4 Basking Rootwalla
1 Merfolk Looter
3 Psychatog
4 Wild Mongrel
1 Wonder

20 creatures

1 Life from the Loam
3 Umezawa's Jitte

20 other spells

Billy Moreno's deck utilizes a Life from the Loam engine similar to many of the other decks in the tournament... but actually breaks Gifts Ungiven. I saw him play that format dominating spell, turn over Wonder, Life from the Loam... and get a scoop before he even finished revealing his targets.

Moreno's deck is an offensive marvel. He runs the best creature of all time (Psychatog) alongside the best two drop in the history of **Magic: The Gathering** (Wild Mongrel). Those Madness outlets would be scary enough just pitching Arrogant Wurm and Wonder, but Billy also plays Umezawa's Jitte! With all the features of a classic Deep Dog deck, but running better threats from expanded colors and more blocks, Moreno's deck will be a superb one for the upcoming PTQs.

As much as I love Billy's deck, it can still be improved. He has 61 cards rather than 60, which is never optimal; the single Lonely Sandbar was added last minute to "protect" his Life from the Loam from potential graveyard hate. Billy has Cephalid Coliseum and Centaur Garden to help break Life from the Loam, but said he would borrow one Golgari Grave-Troll and one Brawn from the competing version of B/U/G Wild Mongrel/Psychatog if he were to play the deck again.

One of the reasons I like Moreno's deck so much is that even though it has a strong central plan – Wild Mongrel into Arrogant Wurm or Psychatog + Circular Logic – it can play so many different games so well. It can play an attrition war with Gifts Ungiven setting up Life from the Loam, it can eliminate creatures with the lone Darkblast, and it can dominate the board with Jitte on any dork. On top of all of those features, Moreno's list has superb weapons across the board in the board. It is the only deck in the Top 8 that can put a Plague on Goblins, tear up a combo player's hand with Cabal Therapy, or spot kill creatures, enchantments, or artifacts.

Overall, I would suggest starting with the above five lists in your PTQ Honolulu testing. These decks certainly don't cover every base, but they will give you a good idea of the mechanics and interactions that make the modern Extended tick. *Of course* there will be Goblins decks, and *of course* there will be Affinity decks in the PTQs. Just because those decks didn't make Top 8 at the Pro Tour doesn't mean they won't be played at the amateur level (and they were the most played decks at the PT anyway).

Seven decks (to start) may seem like a large gauntlet, but it sure beats forty-nine.

Sample Affinity:

Olivier Ruel



Main Deck

60 cards

3 Blinkmoth Nexus
4 Darksteel Citadel
4 Seat of the Synod
2 Underground River
4 Vault of Whispers

17 lands

3 Arcbound Ravager
4 Arcbound Worker
4 Erayo, Soratami Ascendant
4 Frogmite
3 Myr Enforcer
4 Ornithopter

22 creatures

3 Chromatic Sphere
1 Chrome Mox
4 Cranial Plating
3 Pithing Needle
3 Scale of Chiss-Goria
3 Talisman of Dominance
4 Thoughtcast

21 other spells

Sideboard

1 Arcane Laboratory
3 Cabal Therapy
3 Darkblast
3 Disrupt
1 Echoing Truth
4 Engineered Plague

15 sideboard cards

Sample Goblins:

Osyp Lebedowicz



Main Deck

60 cards

2 Goblin Burrows
18 Mountain

20 lands

3 Chrome Mox
4 Gempalm Incinerator
2 Goblin King
4 Goblin Matron
4 Goblin Piledriver
4 Goblin Ringleader
3 Goblin Sharpshooter
2 Goblin Sledder
4 Goblin Warchief
4 Seething Song

0 other spells

Sideboard

4 Blood Moon
2 Flaring Pain
1 Goblin King
2 Overload
3 Pithing Needle
2 Sword of Fire and Ice

14 sideboard cards

2 Siege-Gang Commander

4 Skirk Prospector

40 creatures

The gauntlet will change and further narrow, of course, as the format progresses. Next week, we'll start looking at the Top 8 deck lists from the new PTQ season.

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