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This article is another one that should hold well over time as it includes a lot of concepts that are difficult to master, but that can be applied equally across all limited formats. All of the themes discussed in this article can be applied to *Ravnica* block and reading about, and understanding, the more in-depth aspects of **Magic** can only help improve your game in the long run.

After the "Back to Basics: Sealed Deck" article from two weeks ago I thought I'd try and touch on a few of the more advanced limited concepts that need to be learned before you can truly excel at this game. Some of the topics I'll be discussing are perfectly normal – things like mulliganing and sideboarding – but too often I see players not taking full advantage of these and losing games that they might otherwise have won as a result. The other thing to remember is that many of these ideas apply differently to limited matches as they do to constructed. Sideboarding and mulliganing for example are two areas that are quite different between the formats. Let's kick things off with the first decision you make every single game – whether or not to play or draw.

Play or Draw?

General consensus says you should play first. How often do you actually stop to think about whether that is correct? There are plenty of times when you should consider drawing first instead of playing. Here are a few examples:

1. You're playing sealed deck. Sealed is a much slower (and more inconsistent) format than draft and the tempo you gain through choosing to play first isn't usually as important as the card advantage you gain by drawing first. Quite often you'll be forced to play shaky mana-bases in sealed deck and this means more mulligans which in turn means you're better off choosing to draw. If you do have a fast, aggressive, two-colour deck then by all means choose to play and try and take advantage of the tempo you gain by doing so, just don't assume that's what you always should be doing.
2. It's a war of attrition. This normally applies to black-red mirror matches as there are very few combat tricks in those colours and instead the match-ups tend to be about card-advantage and removal. Often there'll be a lack of evasion creatures in black-red so the creatures will tend to smash into each other a lot, also resulting in a card advantage war. You can help win this war with the help of Soulshift and Splice in this format but you can also help by choosing to draw first instead of play.
3. You have a great deck but you lose game one. If I know I have a great deck but I lose game one to a lucky draw, or a mana-screw/mana-flood on my side I will often choose to draw first in games two and three. The reasoning for this is simple; if you know your deck is better than your opponent's then with average draws you should win. The best way for your opponent to beat you is to have you mulligan once or twice or be a little short on land, giving their deck an advantage it might otherwise not have. If you choose to draw first you might have to ride out some of their tempo advantage but in theory your card superiority will win it out for you. If you do get unlucky and have to mulligan you get that extra draw phase to help you draw out of any mana-screws. This one is a bit trickier than the others though. If you're facing an aggressive deck and your curve starts with some average three-drops then you should probably choose to play regardless.

All I am trying to illustrate here is that there are situations where playing first is not the right thing to do. Learn to be aware of those situations and make your choice accordingly.

Mulliganing

I mentioned that mulliganing is different between constructed and limited **Magic**. That may sound a little odd so let me explain myself. The act of actually taking a mulligan is obviously the same, but when you do it, and the reasons why you do it, are very different between the two formats.

The main reason you mulligan in any game of **Magic**, constructed or limited, is simply having the wrong number of lands. One land, six land and seven land hands should almost always be shipped back. In constructed **Magic** there are some very low curve red and green decks that might keep one-land hands but in general it's not good. This is obvious; I don't need to go into any detail here. You will find that you mulligan based on colour issues a lot more in limited **Magic**. Constructed decks usually have carefully crafted mana-bases and access to numerous lands that are capable of producing more than one colour of mana. In limited you're almost always restricted to using good ole' basic lands. This means you'll often see opening hands like this:



Plains, Plains, Plains, Plains, Kami of Ancient Law, Mystic Restraints, Teller of Tales.

Do you mulligan that? Yes / No



Plains, Plains, Plains, Eye of Nowhere, Kami of Ancient Law, Mystic Restraints, Teller of Tales.
Do you mulligan this? Yes / No



Plains, Plains, Plains, Reach Through Mists, Kami of Ancient Law, Mystic Restraints, Teller of Tales.
Do you mulligan that? Yes / No

The basic rule for mana-based mulligans is to work out what lands you need first of all. You've got around a 1-in-4 chance of drawing a specific land each turn (if you need a Plains for example) and about a 1-in-2 chance of drawing any land (if you need to hit that third land drop and only have two). Then work out how good your draw will be if you do actually draw them. Sometimes drawing the lands you need won't help if your spells aren't great or you'll be flooded as a result of doing so.

The other reason for mulliganing in constructed is because you know your deck's match-up and have a bad hand for that match, or just have a bad hand in general. This can apply in Limited too but not so much, as decks tend not to have good and bad match-ups quite so often. It is definitely worth considering if you can win with any given hand though. Hands like:



Plains, Plains, Island, Island, Island, Kami of False Hope, Callous Deceiver.

...are an automatic mulligan for me. Some players won't mulligan that but I personally don't see how that hand ever hopes to win a game. You might stall an opponent briefly with the Deceiver but it's not very likely. With 33 cards left in your deck you still have twelve or thirteen lands. That means on turn 10 you can expect to have drawn another four lands. That gives you a nine land, eight spell draw. If your opponent is able to trade one-for-one with you there you're probably not winning. If you draw even one or two lands above average you're probably dead in the water to almost any draw your opponent has as you'll still be making lands drops on turn ten while looking at the five or six spells you've drawn.

Sure you might get lucky and draw nothing but good spells but the chances of that are pretty remote and a mulligan is a better plan.

Sideboarding

Your sideboard is an important tool and not simply a collection of 'other' cards to leave in your bag between games. Every single card not in your deck forms part of your sideboard in limited matches. You should use that to your advantage when drafting and when deck-building.

During a draft I have taken cards that I thought would make good sideboard options as early as fifth or sixth pick. As soon as your colours are established you should start thinking about any on-colour cards, and even some off-colour cards, as potential sideboard options. When you're drafting it's almost always better to take an on-colour card that could potentially be useful than to take a card that isn't in your colours away from your neighbours. In addition to that, when you are drafting the last few cards from the pack, check to see whether there are any sideboard cards that other people might use against you and take them away. If you're drafting a red-black deck and have a Blood Rites and an Umezawa's Jitte and then you see a Terashi's Grasp amongst a bunch of mediocre cards that aren't going to make your deck then by all means snap it up. No point in giving that blue-white player extra answers for cards in your deck.

Most sideboard cards are pretty obvious. There's not much explanation needed for why you should draft cards like the aforementioned Terashi's Grasp. You should spend some time considering all of your cards though and whether or not they'll be good options for sideboarding against a given opponent. Let's look at some cards I have boarded in or have been boarded in against me recently:

Callous Deceiver – A very mediocre creature normally but I boarded it in over a Ninja of the Deep Hours because I was playing against an aggressive black-red deck with

multiple Goblin Cohorts, Cruel Deceivers and Hearth Kamis. It didn't feel like the Ninja was going to be attacking very often and I didn't want to trade my four-drop for an opponent's two drop. The Deceiver is a much better blocker and lowered my mana curve slightly against an aggressive opponent.

Kami of Twisted Reflection – Another very unimpressive grey-ogre, this was sideboarded in over a Soratami Cloudskater against another black-red deck as he'd shown a lot of removal but also a lot of ground-based creatures with one or two toughness. My deck had two Moonlit Striders as well as a two Hundred-Talon Kamis and the extra three mana Spirit meant I was better placed to take advantage of the Soulshift mechanic and ride the card advantage to victory.

Call to Glory – An opponent brought this in against me for a blue-white mirror match even though he had no Samurais. The reason for this was my double Waxmane Baku he saw in game one. He caught me totally off-guard with this, untapping two blockers along with a Kabuto Moth and inflicting a lot of damage to my side of the board. A simple little 2-mana spell used very well to give him 3-for-one card advantage.

Heart of Light – This is a card I will sometimes play main deck if my plan is to win with flyers but in this instance it was sitting in my sideboard. I boarded two of these in against a green-black opponent as they helped deal with his bigger ground creatures but they also outright won me the game when he dropped a Matsu-Tribe Sniper against my board of Kabuto Moth and Soratami Mirror-Mage.

Those are just a few examples from recent games I've had with blue-white decks. There are many occasions when mediocre cards can make viable sideboard options. The trick is to learn to evaluate cards based on their relevance to your opponent's deck rather than simply dismissing them due to their innate weaknesses. In a similar fashion there are times when you might want to consider sideboarding cards out. If your opponent shows you a bunch of Frostlings, First Volley's and Frostwielders then that Silverstorm Samurai might actually be a better choice than the Kami of Lunacy. When you see cards like Kami of Twisted Reflection or Call to Glory making their way around as 10th or 11th picks, snap them up. You never know when they'll be needed.

Hate-drafting

One of the most common topics that players have wildly differing opinions on is when you should hate-draft. Some players never do it; others do it all the time. At times it can be useful, but the general rule is this: don't do it when it hurts your own deck to do so.

Any given draft will typically have eight players and be played in a single-elimination format. That means you'll play three rounds, each round against another player in the draft. So you play three out of the remaining seven players in the draft; less than half of them. For a hate-draft to actually be effective the following things must happen:

1. You need to play the player who wound up receiving the card you hate-drafted. This happens 3 times in 7.
2. You need the player to have drawn the card you hate-drafted. This happens probably every other game
3. You need the card you hate-drafted to have actually made the difference between winning and losing

If all those things occur then hate-drafting was worthwhile, although even then that's before you factor in what the card you gave up would have done in this and every other match you play with this deck. If you don't play the player who you hate-drafted from, sacrificing a card from your deck didn't

do anything. If the player wouldn't have drawn the card you hate-drafted then it didn't achieve anything. If the player would have drawn the card, but it would not have completely swung the game around (i.e. he won, but he would've won without it) then it didn't achieve anything either.

As you can see, the chances of a hate-draft actually affecting the outcome of your draft are pretty remote. It can still happen of course, but because it is that remote you only really do it when it doesn't impact you to do so. That usually means just taking a playable late pick like an Order of the Sacred Bell when there literally is nothing else in the pack you could play. That includes sideboard cards too obviously – if you're blue-white you should still be taking that Kami of Twisted Reflection because you never know when you might need it.

The other situation when you might consider hate-drafting is when the card in question completely wrecks you or when it is just vastly more powerful than anything you could pick, and indeed there isn't a playable pick for you. I'll give two quick examples keeping within the blue-white theme.

First is a pick I made a week or so back. This pick was taking a Matsu-Tribe Sniper from a pack that contained Teardrop Kami, Toils of Night and Day, Silverstorm Samurai and Kami of Tattered Shoji. All of those cards are potentially playable but at the time my deck had enough playables and had a fairly high curve and plenty of flyers. As a result I deduced that none of those blue-white cards would make my main deck. The Sniper was particularly powerful against me, killing about 6 of my flyers and locking up some other ones too. I hate-drafted the Sniper over the blue-white cards simply because it was so good against me whilst the other cards probably wouldn't make my main deck.

The second is from a previous draft I did this morning. I was solidly blue-white after pack one. I opened up pack two and had the following blue-white picks: Devoted Retainer, Hisoka's Defiance, Kami of the Painted Road, Hisoka's Guard and Quiet Purity. Oh, there was also a Jugan, the Rising Star. In this pack there's basically nothing that will make my deck and anything I might want (such as the Defiance for the board) will almost certainly make it back around the table so here I just scoop up Jugan and cross my fingers I get something a little more playable in the next pack.

The only times you might not want to hate-draft mediocre cards when it would otherwise be easy for you is when you are trying to set someone up in a specific colour early on in a draft. If you're trying to push the player to your left into red then don't go hate-drafting random Brutal Deceivers from their late picks. You want them to have as many playable cards in their colours as possible so they'll be less inclined to switch should they open something amazing in one of your colours when the direction of the draft reverses.

Expectation

What do I mean by 'expectation'? Quite simply, it's drafting a specific way to hopefully manipulate the draft such that you get the better picks later on. In general, when we draft, we draft by taking the best cards, and settling into our colours, trying not to fight with our neighbour along the way. Sometimes people try to force a particular colour combination, other times they just take the best cards that come and see what colours they fall into. Occasionally you can draft a particular colour or selection of colours not based on how good the cards are, but instead based on the expectation that you'll be rewarded later for doing so.

This is basically a variation of forcing, except players usually force colours because they prefer them or they believe them to be the best. This 'drafting with the expectation of being rewarded' only really happens when the draft features packs from different sets. In these situations you force a weaker colour in one of the earlier packs based on the expectation that you'll then receive better cards from that colour in one of the later packs where that colour is significantly stronger.

A good example of this was in *Odyssey, Torment, Judgment* drafts. *Torment* was extremely powerful for Black. It was in fact weighted more heavily to that colour with more black cards in the set than any other. It had great commons in Faceless Butcher and Crippling Fatigue as well as lots of other playables. Its uncommons were also great, with Grotesque Hybrid, Carrion Wurm, and Chainer's Edict all being excellent cards. In an *Odyssey/Torment/Judgement* draft you could try and cut black completely in pack one, even though it wasn't the best colour there, just in the hopes that by forcing the players to your left out of black you would then receive a bounty of goodies from them when they started passing you the *Torment* packs.

There are serious risks to this strategy too however. If a colour is particularly strong in a pack, and you cut it off successfully then the player next to the guy on your left might also have been cut off. In that situation your neighbour might suddenly decide to switch into your colour anyway. They don't care that they missed out on the mediocre picks in pack one as long as they get the good stuff in pack two.

This strategy is viable in almost any draft in which the middle pack is more powerful in one particular colour than the rest but as I said, it's a risky one. The rewards can be great but if your neighbour moves into your colour you'll be struggling to salvage the draft.

Signalling

Signalling is one of the most important aspects of drafting, both in terms of reading signals and sending them. However, I've covered signalling fairly deeply in a previous article which you can find here so I don't want to repeat things quite so soon. To cover signalling in depth basically requires its own article and I will go over the topic again once Saviours has hit the streets and show how it can apply to *Champions/Betrayers/Saviours* drafts.

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