

Throwing Down the Gauntlet Search

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I traditionally write metagame preview articles for all the big Standard events each year -- Champs, Regionals, and so forth -- but for 2005, I did a much less in-depth Regionals preview... The reason is that my editor said that the Standard playtesting gauntlet that I had put together a few weeks previous -- *Throwing Down the Gauntlet* -- did a great job of highlighting the main decks already! This article should give you a lot of insight into how I approach playtesting; I think that the processes it implies will help you even if the decks themselves are now dated.

I. Introduction

If you listened to the PT Philadelphia Top 8 coverage, you may have picked up on a distinction that Randy Buehler made about constructed formats. Great deck designers tend to flourish in one of two *types* of formats, uncharted waters or the established format. Great designers for the Pro Tour itself can figure out decks for formats where there is no set metagame. They crash into the big show with decks designed *for one tournament*, to win that single big money event. They beat up on G/R decks with The Solution or take advantage of the fact that Affinity is under-prepared for, taking first place in Extended tournaments with good Standard decks.

A very different task is building decks for existing, established, formats. Why is it that Pierre Canali's Affinity was so great, virtually unbeatable, in Columbus, but his powerful *Mirrodin* Block artifact strategy did comparatively poorly in the Extended PTQs feeding Philadelphia? Pierre did well in Columbus via a combination of deck power and information imbalance. Affinity remained one of the fundamentally strongest strategies in the PTQs, but once players were prepared for the deck with their Energy Fluxes and Pulverizes, it no longer commanded the strength of surprise.

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Personally, I have always found it easier to build for PTQ or Championship Season events because of the ability to accurately metagame against decks exactly as they will appear across the table. For the average magicthegathering.com reader, the process of building for established environments is also more relevant. After all, in order to get to the big show of the Pro Tour, you have to hack and slash your way through PTQs and local championships... The best way to do that in the constructed realm is to prepare yourself for the decks that will show up, figuring out how to beat each one with your weapon of choice.

II. Methodology

In the next section, I am going to present the gauntlet for pre-*Saviors of Kamigawa* Standard as I see it. A lot of players show up to their local stores or brawl across the kitchen table, going up against whatever their friends bring. This is a huge mistake if you want to build the best possible deck for an event like Regionals. If all you want to do is dominate Friday Night **Magic**, it is probably a good idea to watch what the players who win every week play and just figure out how to beat those players with those decks, but unless you plan to play against your same friends every round of a big tournament, it might not be the best idea to prepare yourself for Alan's Red Deck or Josh's Green rather than the decks that people will copy from the Internet.

When I test, I figure out my gauntlet ahead of time and play 10 game sets against each of the decks in the gauntlet, recording my records (5-5, 6-4, and so on) along the way. Over the course of the 60 or so games at the alpha stage, I will come to one of three conclusions:

1. This deck is terrible

Actually, it doesn't usually take 60 games to come to this conclusion. If your deck hits 2-8 and 3-7 over the course of 3-4 match-ups, it usually means that the deck is not worth trying to save (for a tournament deck anyway). I actually advocate going for the decks you think you will definitely beat and lose to first, because one will justify the other much more than hitting a lot of the 6-4 and 5-5 close match-ups to begin with.

2. This card (mana base) is terrible

Over the course of many games, you will figure out which cards are worst. Usually the bad cards are the ones that you added to differentiate your version from "everybody else's" way to build a certain deck. Additionally, you will usually find that your mana base needs tweaking. I am guessing that almost every reader who goes through the process of actually testing new decks against a gauntlet will find that he has too few lands. I play more lands than most players and I still need people like Brian David-Marshall and Seth Burn nudging one or two more basics into my decks on a regular basis.

3. I better figure out how to sideboard

If your deck can muster acceptable match-ups across the decks that you think will be the most popular, then figuring out how to sideboard against the decks that you *aren't* beating becomes an important process. Look at the decks in your gauntlet. What cards will they bring in against you? For example, if you are testing a Big Red deck against Gabriel Nassif's Mono-Blue deck, you can bet that the average Mono-Blue player will bring in Bribery and Spectral Shift against you in anticipation of your big creatures and probable Boils.

General notes:

- It's best to beat the most popular deck. If I were testing for the Philadelphia Extended PTQs, I would count a 7-3 record against Goblins much more than I would favor a 7-3 against Affinity. Among aggressive decks with Aether Vial, Goblins was the more popular by a wide margin.
- If you don't beat the most popular deck, you should beat essentially every other deck *and* have a plan to beat the best deck after boards. By the same token, if I beat another popular deck consistently in Game One, I tend to devote less priority to it in sideboarded games.

III. The Decks

Standard since the evisceration of Affinity left Tooth and Nail the default top deck. Mono-Blue made a nice impact at the Champs level, and has become the deck of choice for savvy players since the "real" best deck was removed. Big Red, the winner of the *Mirrodin* Block Pro Tour, has a fairly aggressive Ponza-esque descendent in Standard, but should after the Invitational be considered two distinct decks for testing purposes. The X-factor is in Green. I don't know if Gifts Ungiven as Gadiel Szeleifer played it in Philadelphia can be successfully translated into Standard, but I do know that the shuffling-Sensei's Divining Top strategy will be sufficiently popular to warrant some crossover; I would therefore consider (essentially) "Mono"-Green and G5C decks worth testing. Lastly, I would test some sort of Death Cloud deck; I don't know if it actually matters if you test a Mono-Black or B/G deck; I would not bother testing against a Rat deck or any similarly strange concoctions not because I don't respect the Rats but because the likelihood of having to beat Nezumi Cutthroat is significantly less than the necessity of fighting Arc-Slogger.



I would prioritize the importance of match-ups in this order: Tooth and Nail, any Red Decks, Mono-Blue Control, then Mono-Green shuffling, with Death Cloud and G5C least important. All the decks I am recommending for test come from either the Philadelphia LCQ or Invitational.

Terry Soh (3-0)			
Main Deck	Sideboard		
<i>60 cards</i>			
10 Forest	4 Kodama's Reach	2 Iwamori of the Open Fist	
4 Urza's Mine	3 Mindslaver	2 Molder Slug	
4 Urza's Power Plant	3 Oblivion Stone	3 Plow Under	
4 Urza's Tower	1 Plow Under	2 Razormane Masticore	
<hr/>		4 Troll Ascetic	
22 lands	3 Reap and Sow	2 Vine Trellis	
	4 Sensei's Divining Top	<hr/>	
	4 Sylvan Scrying	15 sideboard cards	
	3 Tooth and Nail	<hr/>	
2 Duplicant	25 other spells		
4 Eternal Witness			
1 Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker			
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder			
2 Sundering Titan			
<hr/>			
13 creatures			

Tooth and Nail put three players into the Top 8 of the LCQ and was the most popular deck in that Standard tournament. Regardless of your personal opinion on whether or not to play decks relying on nine mana threats, Terry Soh's version of Tooth and Nail *also* went 3-0 at the Invitational and was the deck of choice for this year's champion. That makes it the single most important Standard deck to test for this environment.

Soh's version has the following unique features that should have attention paid to them in testing:

Kodama's Reach in addition to Sakura Tribe Elder:

Kodama's Reach helps offset Terry's fundamentally lower mana count while making his Sensei's Divining Tops more effective. Note that he plays neither Talismans nor Vine Trellises and therefore leans more on his Sakura-Tribe Elders in the early game.

Altered Top End Threats:

Terry has no Leonin Abunas + Platinum Angel combination and no Mephidross Vampire + Triskelion combo. He therefore can't imply a win with Tooth and Nail and has to win the old fashioned way. Life total is less important against Terry's deck than against other versions of Tooth because he *also* doesn't have a Darksteel Colossus; in the past, it was important to keep life at 12+ going into Tooth and Nail because of the possibility that Kiki-Jiki + Darksteel Colossus could spell instant death with a hasty 11.

That said, Terry has a second Sundering Titan. This lets him Tinker into double Sundering Titan facing a deck with removal or an adverse Kiki-Jiki. He can also hard cast the Titan into a Tooth and Nail or play out threats with more regularity after being hit with a Cranial Extraction.



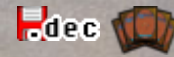
Only Three Copies of Tooth and Nail:

An interesting choice, this gives Terry's deck less immediate topdeck power after setting up the UrzaTron.

Vine Trellis in the Sideboard:

Primarily a tool against decks with Slith Firewalker, these Walls will be important elements against decks designed to get the jump on Terry's less consistent early game.

Osyp Lebedowicz (3-0)



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
20 Mountain

24 lands

4 Arc-Slogger
4 Solemn Simulacrum

8 creatures

3 Beacon of Destruction
4 Magma Jet
4 Molten Rain
4 Pulse of the Forge
4 Sensei's Divining Top
4 Shrapnel Blast
1 Sowing Salt
4 Wayfarer's Bauble

28 other spells

Sideboard

2 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
2 Culling Scales
2 Duplicant
4 Fireball
2 Flamebreak
1 Sowing Salt
2 Stone Rain

15 sideboard cards

Chris "StrWrsKid" McDaniel - Qualified



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
18 Mountain

22 lands

4 Arc-Slogger
4 Hearth Kami
1 Kumano, Master Yamabushi
4 Slith Firewalker

13 creatures

4 Chrome Mox
3 Genju of the Spires
4 Magma Jet
4 Molten Rain
1 Pulse of the Forge
4 Seething Song
3 Stone Rain
2 Volcanic Hammer

25 other spells

Sideboard

3 Boil
3 Duplicant
3 Flamebreak
1 Goblin Charbelcher
3 Oblivion Stone
2 Sowing Salt

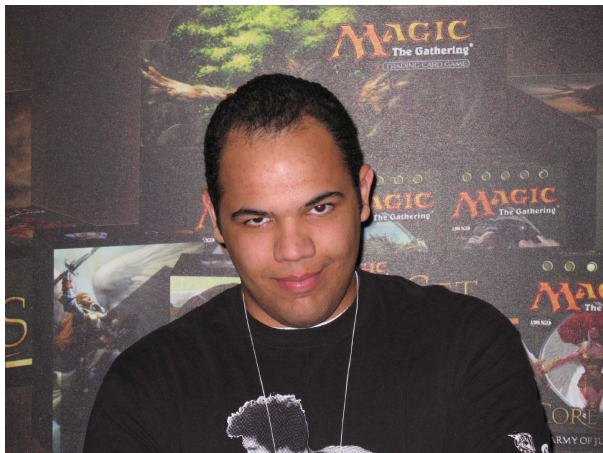
15 sideboard cards

It is important to play against *two* different Red Decks for the current Standard. Previous to the LCQ, it would probably have been okay to test only against a fast deck like Star Wars Kid's "French Red," but the Big Red that Osyp used to post a 3-0 in the Invitational from last place actually preys on the rest of the decks in the current environment; ignoring it at this point would be silly.



The best incentive to *actually playing* one of the Red Decks is that they thrash Tooth and Nail. Star Wars Kid's deck is close to 90% in Game One against an UrzaTron deck, and though Osyp's deck has a less dramatic percentage, I wouldn't want to be on the Tooth and Nail side in a tournament match. Star Wars Kid's deck uses Slith Firewalker for an early advantage and Vulshok Sorcerer to ping Eternal Witnesses and Sakura-Tribe Elders out of the way while the Firewalker sticks, while Osyp's deck plays a game built around four- and five-point burn spells that allow it to consistently win games even when Tooth and Nail resolves.

French Red tests very well, but I personally dislike it because the mana is so inconsistent; the deck plays 50% mana sources, meaning it has to rely a great deal on whatever single threat it draws. It has many explosive openings based on Chrome Mox but also has problems drawing Chrome Mox late or just not drawing enough land (only 22/60 with five-drops).




I think Osyp's deck is actually the best deck in Standard, but I designed it, so take that comment with a grain of salt. The fundamental difference between this deck and every other deck in the format is that it plays a non-interactive game based on burn spells, allowing it to successfully race beatdown decks *and also* ignore the defensive measures in control decks. Because a deck like Beacon Green or even Slith Firewalker Red will deal a lot of damage early, the Big Red deck can get one or two free buybacks with the Pulse of the Forge... sufficient mana will then quickly translate into a dead opponent. The absolute best part of the main

deck is its use of Sensei's Divining Top; Red Decks in general have problems with draw consistency from early game to mid-game, but Sensei's Divining Top combined with Wayfarer's Bauble, Solemn Simulacrum, Magma Jet, and Beacon of Destruction keep the lands flowing and burn spells ready when needed. You can also activate the Top and respond by popping it with a Shrapnel Blast... but still draw a card!

Star Wars Kid only has the Goblin Charbelcher because he couldn't find a fourth Boil. Slith Firewalker Red Decks without Boil are doing poorly against prepared Mono-Blue decks, and even with a full compliment of Boils, I don't like aggressive Red in the match-up due to Spectral Shift; contrast the Big Red deck. The Big Red is actually terrible against Mono-Blue Control in Game One. However, after boards, Mono-Blue *can't actually win*. Worse than that, there is no way for it to sideboard or play that allows it to stay competitive. Big Red sides out all eight guys for Boseiju, Fireball, and land destruction. The only thing that allows Mono-Blue to fight Boseiju is either its own Boseiju or Temporal Adept, and neither of those cards is relevant against this sideboard plan. Factor in wasted space for siding *in* Bribery and Spectral Shift (cards that do nothing) and leaving in Vedalken Shackles, and the match-up is a mess for blue. Even if blue sides correctly, it has no way to fight the

Red Deck's plan in the long game, no way to keep Boseiju + Beacon of Destruction from eventually dealing 20.

Gabriel Nassif (3-0)


Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
2 Blinkmoth Nexus 15 Island 4 Stalking Stones <hr/> 21 lands 2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror 4 Thieving Magpie <hr/> 6 creatures	4 Boomerang 3 Bribery 4 Chrome Mox 4 Hinder 4 Mana Leak 2 Rewind 4 Thirst for Knowledge 4 Vedalken Shackles 4 Wayfarer's Bauble <hr/> 33 other spells	1 Bribery 3 Hibernation 3 Spectral Shift 4 Temporal Adept 4 Threads of Disloyalty <hr/> 15 sideboard cards

Even if he hadn't posted a 3-0 in the Invitational, I would have selected Nassif's deck for this gauntlet. Nassif played a similar build to second place at this year's Paris Regionals. His deck differs from earlier versions of Mono-Blue Control in its use of four Thieving Magpies as the primary card drawing and exploitation of main-deck Bribery. Bribery makes Nassif's matchup against Tooth and Nail much friendlier in Game One (but note how Soh's use of a second Sundering Titan and no Darksteel Colossus takes a lot of oomph out of this strategy).

After boards, Mono-Blue gets Temporal Adept, which is the absolute best card against Tooth and Nail, disassembling the UrzaTron before it ever comes online and keeping Boseiju from ever mattering. The Adept is effective in lots of other matchups, especially when the opponent doesn't side right, but if all it does is ensure the Tooth match-up, that is plenty.

Threads of Disloyalty is a powerful tool against Slith Firewalker, and combined with Temporal Adept and Vedalken Shackles, can make decks like White Weenie look positively silly.

Nassif's deck plays *both* Chrome Mox *and* Wayfarer's Bauble, which promotes early game development and also makes Thirst for Knowledge better (get rid of that extra Mox). All of that said, Nassif's deck has less permission than the typical deck of this type and can be test-spelled out, especially by a Green deck capable of playing more than one threat per turn.



Brett Blackman - Qualified


Main Deck

60 cards

21 Forest
1 Island
1 Swamp

23 lands

4 Birds of Paradise
4 Eternal Witness
1 Iwamori of the Open Fist
2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
2 Viridian Zealot
4 Wood Elves

21 creatures

4 Beacon of Creation
4 Plow Under
3 Sensei's Divining Top
3 Sword of Fire and Ice
2 Umezawa's Jitte

16 other spells

Sideboard

4 Cranial Extraction
2 Engineered Explosives
2 Gaea's Herald
1 Sword of Fire and Ice
4 Troll Ascetic
2 Viridian Zealot

15 sideboard cards



Beacon Green is the last of the main decks I would concentrate on testing against if I were building a deck for this format. It is straightforward in the sense that it has a lot of powerful cards whose interactions are not mysterious... but was surprisingly absent at the Invitational.

Blackman can swarm with either Beacon of Creation or Meloku the Clouded Mirror, but he has a very good curve before hitting the high end. He can crash with Viridian Zealot like any old two drop and has Iwamori, a relatively low risk Blastoderm, as his threat on four (probably his turn three) before the board is already spread.

Blackman's Tops are pretty good as he has Sakura-Tribe Elder and Wood Elves, as well as a persistent shuffler in Beacon of Creation.

After boards, this deck is potentially the most dangerous as it has strategy breaking sideboard cards for every main archetype. Against Blue, Blackman has Troll Ascetics and extra Zealots; Blue is weak against early beatdown, and both these cheap creatures are effective against Vedalken Shackles. Against Red, he has Ascetics carrying Swords; against Tooth and Nail, he supplements Plow Under with Cranial Extraction.

Though none of the Pros in the Invitational chose Beacon Green, I consider this a deck to watch, one of the best decks in the format to play, and certainly an important deck to test against when building your own decks.



Main Deck

60 cards

14 Forest

8 Swamp

22 lands

4 Birds of Paradise

4 Eternal Witness

4 Molder Slug

4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

4 Troll Ascetic

20 creatures

4 Death Cloud

2 Echoing Decay

4 Kodama's Reach

4 Plow Under

4 Terror

18 other spells

Sideboard

2 Boseiju, Who Shelters All

2 Cranial Extraction

4 Creeping Mold

2 Echoing Decay

2 Naturalize

3 Persecute

15 sideboard cards

When I was working on the Big Red deck, I tested against a Mono-Black deck from French Regionals with Yukora the Prisoner as my Death Cloud deck, but Hiroki's "So Close" deck from the LCQ breaks the relevant Death Cloud symmetries quite well, so I've switched to it.

The important things to keep in mind when building a Death Cloud deck are how to correctly manage resources, primarily lands, and the Green splash helps a Black deck do this with more card economy than Chrome Mox and Guardian Idol. Additionally, a Green deck gives you access to better threats.

Hiroki's deck can go Birds of Paradise into Troll Ascetic, which is close to a game win against a Mono-Blue Control deck in Game One. Plow Under can keep the UrzaTron off the board, but really needs Eternal Witness in order to keep the opponent from recovering in time to go off with Tooth and Nail anyway. Red Decks are naturally strong against Death Cloud decks, and especially the Big Red deck Osyp played has all kinds of resource-imbaling elements like Solemn Simulacrum, Molten Rain, and the one drop artifacts that really make it annoying to be the Death Cloud player; that said, being Green gives you options like Troll Ascetic and Plow Under, or even big bodies like Molder Slug, that actually matter to a Red Deck. The best reason to choose a deck like Hiroki's is that it matches good card with good card and doesn't fall prey to any one spoiler automatically... Against a deck like Blackman's, Echoing Decay can fight Beacon of Creation and green creatures can mash into one another while Death Cloud comes online while the Slugs eat equipment.



If the rest of this article didn't already imply the sentiment, this is a match-up that requires testing.



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blinkmoth Nexus
2 City of Brass
10 Forest
3 Island
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge
2 Mountain
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers
1 Plains

24 lands

4 Birds of Paradise
3 Etched Oracle
2 Eternal Witness
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
3 Trinket Mage

17 creatures

2 Condescend
2 Engineered Explosives
2 Fireball
2 Kodama's Reach
2 Mana Leak
3 Naturalize
1 Sensei's Divining Top
4 Sword of Fire and Ice
1 Sword of Light and Shadow

19 other spells

Sideboard

4 Boil
3 Circle of Protection: Red
1 Engineered Explosives
3 Plow Under
4 Sowing Salt

15 sideboard cards

During the LCQ, I heard rumors of a deck that used Trinket Mage for the express purpose of getting its one Sensei's Divining Top... This is that deck, and one that proudly claimed a Philadelphia PT slot.

While Brett Blackman's deck has some G5C elements, it's really a Mono-Green deck with some Meloku help... Sharfman's deck is a real G5C in the tradition of Regionals 1997. Sharfman really goes for the best elements of every color... He's got Green mana acceleration, blue for actual counters, Red for Fireball and land destruction, white for damage prevention, and a legitimate Sunburst sub-theme. The only thing missing is black for Cranial Extraction... but I guess Sharfman's deck is already spreading certain deck elements pretty thin.

Sharfman's deck can both handle basically any sort of threat between main and side... and doesn't specialize in any one thing. He doesn't have the flamethrower or beatdown power of either of the Red Decks, has less than half of Nassif's counters, and nowhere near Blackman's token generation ability... But he's also the only deck with main-deck Naturalize; even if he doesn't have Tooth and Nail's raw power, his Etched Oracles have got to look pretty good as either beaters or card drawing.




Not just for Prismatic!

I'd hate playing against this deck just because I'd have no clue what card to put my opponent on, and less of an idea what I should be doing myself. If you like decks with a lot of surprise value, testing

against Sharfman's deck will probably be rewarding... not only will you get some valuable G5C testing in, you might pick up some ideas about what you can cram into a 60 card deck if you just shave that third Eternal Witness and third Kodama's Reach.

Conversely, I *wouldn't* run this version of G5C:

Kai Budde (1-2)		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
<i>60 cards</i>		
2 City of Brass	1 All Suns' Dawn	4 Boil
11 Forest	1 Cranial Extraction	3 Cranial Extraction
2 Island	1 Crystal Shard	3 Engineered Explosives
1 Mountain	1 Engineered Explosives	1 Plow Under
1 Plains	3 Gifts Ungiven	2 Terror
2 Swamp	4 Kodama's Reach	2 Viridian Shaman
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	1 Persecute	15 sideboard cards
23 lands	3 Plow Under	
	1 Stir the Grave	
	1 Terror	
	17 other spells	
4 Birds of Paradise		
1 Bringer of the Black Dawn		
1 Duplicant		
4 Etched Oracle		
4 Eternal Witness		
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror		
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder		
1 Viridian Shaman		
20 creatures		

Some awfully good players ran this deck at the Invitational and the best record any of them posted was a 1-2. Though it theoretically has a ton of raw power, testing similar decks to this one show a bit of a deficiency against pressure and a surprising glass jaw to cards like Molten Rain. Getting the mana right is hard enough even with Sakura-Tribe Elder and Kodama's Reach, but a well placed land destruction card will keep the Sunburst theme on the shelf, permanently stranding cards like All Suns' Dawn and Bringer of the Black Dawn.

Saviors of Kamigawa is going to throw a huge monkeywrench in the metagame, but these are the decks that I would test against up until then. In many cases, especially the Soh, Blackman, and Nassif decks, they are also the backbone of the format that will eventually be this summer's Championship Season. Study and Grow Strong... But don't forget: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!

