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It's interesting since next week we begin our look at *Guildpact* here at magicthegathering.com that I should decide to look back at an influential *Ravnica: City of Guilds* card with the equal and opposite lens of a preview article. However Loxodon Hierarch is such a pervasive and variously adopted card that has found its way into so many different decks that this "panacea" pachyderm bears a closer look for all the manifold reasons it is played.

The Better Baloth:



I actually did the original preview for Ravenous Baloth back when *Onslaught* was the hot new set, and had many nice things to say about that (at the time) gold standard. On a superficial level, there are many parallels we can draw between the Baloth then and the Hierarch today, down to the presence of the best dual lands since Alpha appearing in the 4/4s' respective sets. Loxodon Hierarch screams for comparison with Ravenous Baloth, of course. It is a 4/4 for four mana that can give you four life... pretty simple. That said, for almost any deck that can manage Loxodon Hierarch's more colorful cost, it is just a better card than the storied Baloth. We can all say "why" on a basic level: Loxodon Hierarch gives you four life immediately... it acts kind of like a bigger and angrier Teroh's Faithful whereas Ravenous Baloth demands the death of a 4/4 before forking over that anti-Fireblast. But what about from a game level? Why is that such a big deal?

The answer, beyond the obvious zoning and timing issues, is *tempo*.

People bandy the word "tempo" around like they know what they are talking about, but I have never been satisfied with any definitions of the quality for **Magic**. The best I have ever been able to discern is that tempo is this *thing* that you can watch, such that you can usually figure out who's got it and who hasn't. When any efficient 4/4 comes down against a fast Red deck, it will usually give the aggressor pause. Why? Any such monster can serve as a stop sign, deterring the next attack, or at least forcing a competent Red Deck player to start doing math. Often he will try to figure if it is right to swing with everything, whether it is worth it to "sacrifice" one of his team in each of the next two swings in exchange for whatever damage he can get across; further, the crafty Red mage will decide whether his burn card is worth the half-card 4/4 or if it is better as a co-finisher alongside those attack steps.

Loxodon Hierarch can potentially throw a huge monkey wrench into equations like these. Remember what I said about tempo being a sort of thing that you can see, that one player can hold and that the other can seize? You will be able to see if a Hierarch – which should almost always represent multiple cards against a Red player – actually halts the attack like a stop sign or if its four life and potential to block are not significant enough given the board situation, whether this card generates or steals the tempo or does nothing. Some times, especially when fighting an Extended Goblins deck, a lone Hierarch will have no significant effect, maybe it just staves off the kill for one turn. Other times it will obviate the math we spoke about in the last paragraph; the Red Deck's master will slump in his chair,

knowing that given two blocks from the big guy, he won't have enough smoke to finish the game.


When I wrote "Beatdown from Beast Town", the first thing I wanted to talk about was how Ravenous Baloth – this sort of bigger Spike Feeder – was going to kick "Red mages in the teeth." Certainly Ravenous Baloth can generate card advantage, and is bigger than most Red creatures that you will typically see in tournament play, but almost every thing that Ravenous Baloth does, from *this* perspective, the Hierarchy does better. Certain advantages, as we said, are obvious. In some situations, you will have to sacrifice Ravenous Baloth with damage on the stack to avoid lethal damage; he might get a block – and even a trade – in, but because you need the four life before passing out of the opponent's combat step, you will have to sacrifice the big Beast before damage resolves. From a card advantage standpoint, voluntary sacrifice might mean that you have no 4/4 for the next turn's blocking, whereas Loxodon Hierarchy would in the same spot have bought an additional card like Last Gasp or Volcanic Hammer before hitting the graveyard. On a more subtle level, think about a card that put a lot of hurt on Ravenous Baloth in-Block.



A long tradition of Spike Feeders and Verdant Forces meant that before *Onslaught*, great Green creatures were just *assumed* to beat little Red men; the heavy Tribal theme that put together competitive Beasts decks for the first time helped Goblins even more. As such, you had guys like Sparksmith aiming at Baloths in PTQs, posing the question "what do you care about more, four life for you or four damage for me?" More often than not, the disgusted Green players would have to sacrifice their Ravenous Baloths, giving the happy Goblin players a kill with no downside. Loxodon Hierarchy doesn't play that way. You shoot at him, 99% of the time, you take the damage. If you don't, it's because there is going to be a one-sided bloodbath that the Goblins player won't like.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many practitioners of The Rock – a deck that has for years *successfully* strung together "good stuff" Black and Green cards with little or no strategic synergy – have bent their mana bases to accommodate that one White mana in Loxodon Hierarchy's mana cost. What is more intriguing is how the disciples of Levy (rather than Malka) have approached the same problem. After his Top 8 near miss at Pro Tour LA, Raphael Levy added Iwamori of the Open Fist to his sideboard for the difficult Boros Deck Wins match-up. Levy eventually concluded that the 5/5 Legendary Human Monk just wasn't big enough.

But what about a different four drop? Sam Atkinson posted a Top 8 at Grand Prix Melbourne with a Levy-inspired Aggro-Rock that played Iwamori, sure, but added two main-deck copies of the Elephant in question.

Sam Atkinson - B/W/G Aggro		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
2 Forest	3 Cabal Therapy	3 Naturalize
4 Llanowar Wastes	2 Chrome Mox	3 Pernicious Deed
4 Overgrown Tomb	4 Duress	4 Pithing Needle

1 Plains	4 Putrefy	3 Smother
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	2 Sword of Fire and Ice	2 Withered Wretch
2 Swamp	3 Umezawa's Jitte	_____
1 Temple Garden	_____	15 sideboard cards
1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree	18 other spells	
4 Windswept Heath		

20 lands		
4 Birds of Paradise		
3 Dark Confidant		
4 Hypnotic Specter		
2 Iwamori of the Open Fist		
3 Llanowar Elves		
2 Loxodon Hierarch		
4 Troll Ascetic		

22 creatures		

If the problem in the Boros match-up is the closing burn, then a little life gain is probably a welcome thing. Alongside "tempo," *card advantage* is another basic term we use in **Magic** that sometimes gets a little abuse and misuse. It's easy to see that a Hymn to Tourach taking two random cards is a two-for one in the card advantage department, but what about Loxodon Hierarch? When the opponent's plan is to send a fist full of fire into your face, is it that difficult to see that today's featured 4/4 is a body that also counters *both sides* of a Firebolt, trades with two Lava Darts and two Mountains *before we even talk about removing it from the table?*

That Sorta Creatureless Thing


The CAL was one of two breakout Tier One decks from this past Extended Grand Prix and PTQ season. Called the best deck in the format by some of the best players in the game, the CAL was an outstanding machine, fighting battles on multiple fronts and winning them all. It was better at drawing cards than most Blue decks, could give the opponent that same sick feeling he might get against a combo deck, and kill creatures almost at will.

When playing *against* the CAL, decks like Astral Slide might side out all their copies of the dedicated creature-killing Wrath of God in favor of resource war winners like Plow Under. This might be right *despite* the fact that the CAL has pivotal Game One creatures like Birds of Paradise and the deadly Robert Maher, Jr. Moreover, a Rift/Slide player could expect the CAL to bring in *even more* creatures, specifically 3-4 copies of Loxodon Hierarch.

The sideboard strategy on both parts would of course put a lot of pressure on the Slide player. He would have fewer ways to defend himself against the game's most fundamental sort of threat because of the need to fight enchantments and lands, but would be facing bigger and deadlier combat creatures. Surely an advantage can be found via this imbalance.

To show what a spectacular cure-all Loxodon Hierarch is, it is important to talk about what kind of deck Slide is. Rift/Slide is anything but offensive. Its way to win is largely passive – card drawing and creature kill – *and Loxodon Hierarch is an ideal swap*. As we said in the previous section, the Hierarch is ideal against an offensive deck like Boros Deck Wins: a big blocker that demands two or more non-Goblin Legionnaire cards, an answer to the opponent's cards in hand, and ultimately a way to win.

That it is effective and disruptive against a non-proactive deck is a huge testament to the Hierarch's cure-all status.

Olivier Ruel - CAL		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Barren Moor	4 Burning Wish	1 Cabal Therapy
4 Bloodstained Mire	2 Cabal Therapy	1 Chainer's Edict
2 Forest	2 Duress	2 Cranial Extraction
4 Forgotten Cave	3 Life from the Loam	1 Duress
2 Mountain	2 Seismic Assault	1 Hull Breach
1 Overgrown Tomb	2 Sensei's Divining Top	1 Life from the Loam
1 Plains	3 Solitary Confinement	3 Loxodon Hierarch
1 Sacred Foundry		2 Overgrown Estate
1 Swamp	18 other spells	2 Putrefy
4 Tranquil Thicket		1 Pyroclasm
4 Wooded Foothills		
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28 lands		15 sideboard cards
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4 Birds of Paradise		
3 Dark Confidant		
3 Eternal Witness		
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder		
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14 creatures		

The Out-of-place Finisher

If you were paying attention during the Extended PTQ season, you know that I thought that U/G Heartbeat of Spring was one of the best decks in the format, and highly underplayed given the competitive landscape and what was available for most of the Qualifiers. Unlike the CAL, which was a mid-season development, and Frigorid, which appeared only at the end of the format, players everywhere should have known how good this powerhouse was via Chris "Star Wars Kid" McDaniel's performance in Los Angeles.

That said, one deck that rose up in the middle, towards the end, of the season was Rift/Slide. Ben Stark's PTQ deck from Florida was the inspiration for many of the New York/New Jersey Pros at Worlds and I played the archetype myself in a PTQ.

Astral Slide got many new tools since its dominance in *Onslaught* Block, including Life from the Loam, which allowed the deck to recourse its Tranquil Thickets and other cycling lands. The deck had the option to play Loxodon Hierarch as a super Teroh's Faithful, which was a fairly late development for the deck (I, for example, was stuck on Pulse of the Fields). The problem match-ups for the deck were Tooth and Nail and Heartbeat of Spring. We eventually went down the road of siding lots of Plow

Unders and even Boils. When brainstorming on how to beat Heartbeat, I laid out my deck and said "I think I can slow them down with four Boils and four Plow Unders, but I'm taking out an awful lot of Lightning Rifts to make room. They will be able to come back with mana accelerators and card drawing... How will I win in time?"



Tsai, at GP Milwaukee '02

My friend Tony "the Shark" Tsai, one of the big stars of the early Grand Prix circuit smiled and said, "What about the Hierarchs? They do everything!"

And he was probably right. I have been contextualizing Loxodon Hierarch as this panacea that generates card advantage and tempo and can fit into interesting places in deck interactions, but at the end of the day, it is *also* a highly efficient creature. Even without any additional text, a 4/4 for four mana is a fantastic deal. There was a time when Pro players were running *Nettletooth Djinn* at the Standard Pro Tour! In a match-up like Astral Slide v. Heartbeat, where life gain is completely

irrelevant, you can still draw utility from the Elephant of the hour. When you are destroying the opponent's mana position and Disenchancing his key permanents, you have a strong advantage in the short term. The problem is that Heartbeat can win so quickly against a goldfish it is almost *implied* that a Gifts Ungiven after a Tribe Elder or two will pull it out of the woods, even given a ton of disruption. What Slide needs is a *way to win fast enough*. The Hierarch isn't Jackal Pup fast, but in the context of a disarmed enemy... The Rock's de facto kill speed (given all that deck's disruption) can be good enough.

Josh Ravitz played a version of the deck at Worlds this year, just missing out on Top 8 (and taking a loss to the mirror in the process). He later wrote that he was quite pleased with the deck and would play it again in a heartbeat. Here's the listing for his deck, which has the Hierarchs in the board:

Josh Ravitz's Top 16 Extended deck from Worlds



Main Deck

60 cards

5 Forest
4 Forgotten Cave
1 Mountain
4 Plains
2 Sacred Foundry
4 Secluded Steppe
2 Temple Garden
4 Tranquil Thicket

26 lands

4 Astral Slide
2 Decree of Justice
1 Disenchant
1 Farseek
2 Life from the Loam
4 Lightning Rift
1 Naturalize
4 Renewed Faith
4 Wrath of God

23 other spells

Sideboard

4 Boil
1 Disenchant
3 Katakai, War's Wage
3 Loxodon Hierarch
2 Naturalize
2 Wing Shards

15 sideboard cards

3 Eternal Dragon
3 Eternal Witness
1 Krosan Tusker
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

11 creatures

The New Standard for the Current Standard:

Not surprisingly, Loxodon Hierarch has shaken the earth in Standard as well as Extended. Check out World Champion Katsuhiko Mori's Standard deck:

Katsuhiko Mori		
Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Brushland	2 Congregation at Dawn	2 Carven Caryatid
5 Forest	3 Glare of Subdual	2 Greater Good
1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers	3 Pithing Needle	3 Hokori, Dust Drinker
1 Plains	2 Seed Spark	1 Kodama of the North Tree
4 Selesnya Sanctuary	3 Umezawa's Jitte	1 Kodama's Reach
4 Temple Garden		2 Naturalize
4 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree	13 other spells	1 Seedborn Muse
		1 Wrath of God
23 lands		2 Yosei, the Morning Star
		15 sideboard cards
3 Arashi, the Sky Asunder		
1 Birds of Paradise		
3 Kodama of the North Tree		
3 Llanowar Elves		
4 Loxodon Hierarch		
4 Selesnya Guildmage		
4 Wood Elves		
2 Yosei, the Morning Star		
24 creatures		

Four Elephants are once again a key to a successful deck's ability to compete. Initially, I thought that despite the traditional interaction between Red and Green creatures, Boros Deck Wins might be able to overwhelm Ghazi-Glare with beatdown and burn... Until my friend Tim McKenna pointed out Glare's ability to win the game on turn two.

"What does Boros do about Congregation at Dawn for three Loxodon Hierarchs?"

4/4s are great to begin with against 1/1, 2/1, and 2/2 threats... but with 12 free life attached? Good luck with that "Char" plan.

In this deck, Loxodon Hierarch's *other* ability even comes into play. Usually we just drift past that sacrifice text (unless we are trying to keep the counters off a Jitte or some such), but in Ghazi-Glare, the Hierarch can even save a swarm of Saprolings from Wildfire or Pyroclasm, and that is a good thing.



Thanks Hierarch!

I mean... What kind of cure-all can't *also* prevent mass removal spells?

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