

Seven Keys to Beating Counterma Search

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Last week I looked at relatively elementary situations where players faced decks whose main strategy was centered around countering your spells. Normally I would take such a topic and talk about it in the abstract, then offer examples. In this case, the examples came first and now I'm going to talk about these situations in the abstract, as I think they'll be more useful now that we've set the stage. Ready for some principles?

What Counters Does Your Opponent Have?



That's one of the first things you have to ask yourself when you realize your opponent is playing a permission deck. As the level of competition rises, you have a better and better shot at determining exactly which ones are in your opponent's deck. Many opponents will be using standardized decklists, and are likely to have made predictable choices for which counters they are using and how many copies they have of each. Even if your opponent is not playing a widely played deck, you can still often figure out which ones make sense for his deck. Some are better than others, and you can combine that

with which ones make the most sense in your opponent's deck. If you're playing Standard right now, Hinder, Remand and Mana Leak are likely suspects. If you're playing Extended, good old Counterspell is the obvious candidate. In Legacy, you'd look to Force of Will and then Counterspell. In Vintage you can all but assume Force of Will if your opponent can afford to both acquire the card and pitch a blue card to it, and if there is another counter backing it up chances are it is Mana Drain.

These choices will change over time as new cards are printed and others rotate out, but the principle is to assume that the strongest cards that fit into your opponents' strategy are the ones that are most likely to show up in his deck. The only way to know for sure what he has is to keep track of the spells you've already seen from him, and then use your judgment on whether it is safe to assume that somewhere out there are the other three copies of the same spells. The same principle applies to all other cards. You should always be trying to figure out as much as you can about your opponent's deck, even in Limited. In an ideal world you'd know every card, but trying to approximate that world is not always out of reach even if you've never seen his deck before.

What Does His Mana Mean?

Once you know what counters your opponent is using, or you have come up with a good guess, that needs to be translated into knowledge of what your opponent's mana can do. Suppose you put your opponent on a heavy counter set in Standard: Remand, Mana Leak, Hinder and Rewind. You now know that if he has two lands untapped he is representing (or at least is able to cast) Mana Leak or Remand, but half of his counters are unavailable. Three mana means he can counter once with any counter but Rewind, and if he has 2U available then he could potentially counter as many as six spells thanks to Rewind.



Are His Counters Avoidable?



One of the easiest ways for counters to do even more than counter your spells, as I noted last week, is that they can prevent you from casting spells at all in an attempt to play around those counters. Doing this without good reason is a recipe for disaster. When you wait to cast your spells or cast them out of order to avoid getting them countered you need to get something out of the deal that contributes to your chance to win the game. The first thing to remember is that getting your spells countered is an inherently neutral event, not a negative one. If I cast a Watchwolf and you use Mana Leak to stop it, we've exchanged one two drop for another. If I cast Meloku and you stop it with Mana Leak,

that's bad in the long term but in the short term it is likely to be fine. If you stop it with Hinder, it is hard to say that I've lost much because Hinder 'counts' as a full spell at every point on the mana curve. You're not happy about these things, but on their own, without the context of the game going on around it, it's just a one-for-one trade.

The primary reason you can strand a hard counter like Hinder (as opposed to an unreliable or 'soft' counter like Mana Leak) is if your opponent won't be able to keep the necessary mana untapped. Your opponent is probably going to need to cast spells on his turn at some point during the game if he wants to win. How much that interferes with his ability to counter your spells depends on his deck, but remember that this doesn't last forever. Give any deck long enough and they will have virtually unlimited mana available, so you need to have a good idea of when you'll be putting the mana crunch on your opponent.

There's another side to that mana crunch, which is that leaving his counters in his hand could prevent him from tapping out. In this scenario, you don't get your spells through his defenses but instead you prevent him from casting spells by using the threat of casting spells rather than trying to cast them. The hope is that the threat will be stronger than its execution, and there's always the chance that he'll tap out anyway and give you your chance. In extreme cases he might even have to choose between casting spells with his mana or discarding at the end of his turn.

Test Spells

The best way to deal with decks full of counters is often to use test spells. The essence of a test spell is to both probe for information and give your opponent two bad choices. You suspect your opponent has a counter, so instead of casting Yosei you try to cast Loxodon Hierarch. Rather than cast the spell you consider best, you start with the next best spell to test what your opponent has. If he lets the Hierarch through then you've got a solid threat and a lot of new information. If he counters the Hierarch then that's one less counter left to stop Yosei. Often the best cards for this are those that generate a small advantage for you, like giving you card selection or small amounts of card drawing. Whether they counter or not, your opponent can't be happy.

Instants cast during your opponent's turn are also excellent test spells. Suppose I try to cast Scatter the Seeds during your end step. You now have a choice. You can counter my spell with your Hinder, in which case you will be unable to counter my next threat on my own turn when I untap, or you can let Scatter the Seeds resolve. In that case, I get to attack for three and have gained tempo.

If I'm confident that you are almost certainly sitting on a counter, I can then continue to give you bad choices by holding back my biggest threats. It is now my turn and you are sitting on three untapped Islands. If I use all of my lands to try to cast Yosei, you have a good option: Counter it. If I try to cast Savannah Lions, you have essentially the same problem you did with Scatter the Seeds. Countering it leaves you vulnerable and forces you to trade a counter for a mostly harmless creature, not countering it means you fall behind. My goal is to choose the threat that will make this decision as miserable as possible, probably something in the middle like Watchwolf.

The right answer will depend on a lot of variables. The biggest one is what I have in my hand. I'm going to choose the threat so that I'm happy with either choice you make, not so that you won't be happy with either choice. There's a key difference here: I know what other threats you have to deal with, but you don't. Ideally I would aim even higher here, and try to trick you into making a choice I will be especially happy with, taking advantage of the way I expect you to react with the information you have available.

The next factor to consider is which type of counter battle I'm involved in. Are we fighting a tempo battle, or am I trying to win an exhaustion war?



Tempo versus Exhaustion



These two types of fights are very different from each other. When you're up against a strategy based around counters, you need to win at least one of these battles. Often you start out trying to win on tempo and then settle in to try and win on exhaustion instead. In the tempo battle, your opponent's goal is simply to survive without falling too far behind. He wants to use his counters to allow him to play control and cast expensive spells that will win him the game. He might need to use some of those counters later in the game to protect key spells or stop true bombs but his goal is simply to reach the later stages of the game with his position and life total

intact. His primary weakness comes in the early turns. In those turns you can find gaps in his mana curve, come out faster than his counters can stop you, or force him to tap out to try and deal with your threats clearing the way for you to play more threats while his shields are down. In these battles, the primary way to avoid his counters is to put the pressure on as quickly as possible. On turn two your opponent might not have a counter. On turn three he might not have a second one.

Either way, you need to press your advantage and resolve whatever threats you can. You still might pause for a turn and refrain from casting spells, but only because doing so allows you to cause short-term trouble for your opponent. One way to do this is by using instants to set up permanents and sorceries. Another is to wait for a turn your opponent has a productive use for his mana before you start putting on the pressure, especially if you already have an advantage on the board.

Here's a good, very common example of this. You're playing an aggressive Extended deck going first and have four points of damage on the table from your plays on the first two turns. Looking at your hand, you have one more turn's mana worth of threats left in your hand; after that, you'll be out of spells until you draw more. Your opponent's deck contains Cunning Wish, Gifts Ungiven and Fact or Fiction, three and four casting cost instant card-drawing spells. If you cast your spells now, you're letting your opponent cast a counter this turn. Right now that counter will effectively be free for him, in terms of mana, because he has nothing else he can do with his two mana. Next turn, he'll have other choices if you end your turn without casting a spell. By waiting until turn three, you force him to choose between using a counter and casting Cunning Wish. If you tested him on turn four, you could force him to choose between casting Fact or Fiction, Gifts Ungiven or a counter. The key here is that you don't lose much tempo when you delay your own spells if you would have missed your next drop anyway, but be wary of being too cute. You could always draw a useful spell off the top of your deck.

That's the philosophy of trying to win on tempo. If your opponent has counters in hand and you have threats in play, those counters do him no good. If he then has to tap out to deal with those threats, you can use that opening to stay ahead on tempo. However, there comes a point where such victories become improbable and then impossible even in the match-ups where they are most common. Suppose those two decks each have eight lands out. At this point, you're unlikely to catch your opponent with all his mana tapped. If you're going to beat him, you're going to need to win via exhaustion. When your deck or hand doesn't have a good fast attack, you often have to plan for an exhaustion victory from the start.

Exhaustion

When you win via exhaustion, it means you're going to have to trade off with your opponents' cards until he doesn't have any left. Mana is not assumed to be irrelevant, but the most important aspect of your opponents' mana base is now making sure that he can't use it to go win the game while you're engaging in this drawn out campaign. The question to ask yourself is, what would happen if my opponent suddenly took the offensive, and does he know that? Often when I'm trying to draw out their counters I'm actually helpless in the short term, but that's fine when the opponent doesn't know that and can't risk the kind of play it would take to make me pay.



Fighting these types of battles means drawing out cards one by one and not giving anything away. If you're going to win, your plan is to exploit some weakness in your opponent's deck. They have sacrificed strength for speed, as all decks do, so now you're going to test only their strength. Control decks tend to have three long-term weaknesses. The first is that many take a long time to win or do something devastating enough to put the game away; if this isn't true, these strategies are much worse and should only be used when you have no other choice. The second is that they have more mana sources than they need for later in the game, which means they likely have fewer spells in their deck than you do. Trading off without letting them claim advantage can let you exploit that.

The third weakness is that often they have cards that only work conditionally because they need to play a fast card. Force Spike is the classic example of this. When you choose to play around Force Spike, you're reducing the effective number of spells in your opponent's deck (assuming they actually have the spell(s) you're playing around). The same goes for Mana Leak. If you can afford to do enough of this while not giving them a chance to ramp up their card advantage engines, they're more likely to run out of spells first and then you can go win the game. The same principle applies when playing against removal decks, or any other deck that needs to win by trading its cards for yours until the coast is clear. Plowing straight through them is plan A. Forcing them into enough bad trades that they run out of cards first is plan B.

Counters? What Counters?

The last thing to remember is that you only want to use these strategies when they have a good chance of working against the type of hand where you need to use the strategies to win. Players often make the mistake of realizing that their opponent can probably stop a direct attack and therefore they should try something tricky when something tricky is never going to work against any hand that could have stopped the direct attack. When you face a bad match-up against a blue deck, the answer is almost always to attack! The earlier you do it, the greater the chance that something has gone wrong for your opponent and the less you're risking. Even if there's a slim chance it will work, you have to take that chance. Once they start casting their card-drawing spells, you'll often have no chance at all unless they find ten lands in a row on top of their deck. In that case, your best shot is right here and right now. I can't tell you how many times I've looked like I'm sitting behind a fortress

and actually had no protection whatsoever. If you feel the game slipping away, or you fear you've already lost it, put your opponent to the test.

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