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# Playing the Slow Game

Aaron Forsythe  
The Week That Was  
Friday, March 17, 2006



I got somewhat lucky with this whole “Swap Week” thing. Other writers were forced to dive headfirst into very uncomfortable territory, but my opposite—Brian David-Marshall—writes about the goings-on in the world of Organized Play. I know that stuff! I was a regular event coverage man back in the day, just as BDM is now, jetting around the globe to bring news to you, the online reader. Now that I am the proud owner of a Small Child™, I've cut way back on my traveling, limiting myself to big events that have some higher-than-usual significance to R&D. Fate would have it that the last two Pro Tour stops—Worlds in Japan and the Standard event in Honolulu—were ones that I attended, so I'm more in touch with the sights and sounds of OP for this theme week than I was at any time in the previous year.



Sadly, I'm not half the journalist that BDM is. I had pie-in-the-sky aspirations about having some kind of round table discussion regarding control decks in the current Standard environment, but the logistics of such an undertaking were a bit much for me considering I'm out of the office on vacation this week. But not all is lost! I actually did get in touch with a couple players and was able to get some answers from them about current control decks.

But first, some background. Before PT Honolulu, there were undercurrents in the pro community that aggressive decks were for chumps, that Red/Green couldn't possibly win, and that you'd have to come prepared to fight control mirrors all day long on Day 2. When I first saw the “Magic House” deck—a B/W/g number packed to the gills with *Wrath of God*, *Faith's Fetters*, and *Mortify*—it only reinforced those beliefs. I thought R&D had grievously misjudged how good the current crop of aggressive cards was compared to their controlling counterparts.

Luckily, the tournament results didn't bare those suspicions out. In fact, if you looked at just the Top 8 decks, you'd think it was a bad tournament to be packing *Wrath*, *Hinder*, *Faith's Fetters*, *Gifts Ungiven*, *Wildfire*, or *Sensei's Divining Top*, considering those cards showed up on Sunday in the following numbers: 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, and 4-in-a-combo-deck. The day belonged to *Kird Ape*, *Umezawa's Jitte*, *Dark Confidant*, and *Watchwolf*. The only thing that vaguely resembled a control deck on Sunday was Osyp Lebedowicz's *Izzetron* with its few counters, card drawing, and *Pyroclasm*.

Of course, there's more to a tournament than the Top 8. Looking at the *next* eight decks, we see a slew of control-oriented archetypes:

- 9 Arias Garcia, Jacob [ESP] Orzhov Descent
- 10 Nygaard, Nikolas [NOR] UR Magnivore-Wildfire
- 11 Moreno, William [USA] Zoo
- 12 Wafo-tapa, Guillaume [FRA] UR Counter-Mizzet
- 13 Mihara, Makihito [JPN] Greater Gifts
- 14 Yokoi, Masaki [JPN] Greater Gifts
- 15 Cornelissen, Kamiel [NLD] URw Angel-Weirding
- 16 Shiozu, Ryouma [JPN] [decklist outstanding]

These decks were all essentially a single match away from the Top 8. A few factors were at play that may have held them back—one, there were quite a few control-smashing Owling Mine decks at the event; two, it is hard to build the “perfect control deck” in a relatively unknown metagame—you need to anticipate how often you expect to be facing the format's key threats (*Hypnotic Specter*, *Jitte*, *Kird Ape*, *Bob*, *Giant Solifuge*, *Dragons*, and so on), as well as how often you expect to see other control decks. If you guess wrong, your deck will be slightly worse against the field. As things settle down, control players can start choosing their exact ratios of cards with more information.

Knowing all that, I think it's safe to say that control decks did quite well in Hawaii, and that you should expect to see them in decent numbers at Friday Night **Magic**, in the Online queues, and in the upcoming Team Standard PTQ season. Let's take a quick look at some of the major contenders.

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**Makihito Mihara**  
Greater Good Gift (GGG)

Main Deck Sideboard

Main Deck	Sideboard
3 Brushland	2 Farseek
4 Forest	4 Gifts Ungiven
1 Godless Shrine	2 Goryo's Vengeance
1 Golgari Rot Farm	3 Greater Good
1 Island	4 Kodama's Reach
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	1 Mortify
1 Orzhov Basilica	1 Putrefy
1 Overgrown Tomb	1 Reclaim
2 Plains	1 Recollect
1 Selesnya Sanctuary	3 Sensei's Divining Top
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Wrath of God
2 Swamp	
1 Temple Garden	26 other spells
2 Tendo Ice Bridge	
1 Watery Grave	
23 lands	
	15 sideboard cards
1 Kagemaro, First to Suffer	
2 Kokusho, the Evening Star	
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	
4 Yosei, the Morning Star	
11 creatures	

Although Greater Gifts is hardly a quintessential control deck, it tends to play the control role in this metagame, staying alive with Wraths and **Sakura-Tribe Elders** until it can start dropping game-winning bombs. The deck was discussed to death following Frank Karsten's run with it at Worlds—all that's really changed since is that **Mortify** has made maindeck enchantment removal a reality.

Main Deck 61 cards		Sideboard
4 Adarkar Wastes	2 Boros Signet	4 Descendant of Kiyomaro
2 Boros Garrison	4 Compulsive Research	1 Ivory Mask
6 Island	3 Faith's Fetters	4 Jushi Apprentice
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	2 Gifts Ungiven	2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
5 Plains	4 Hinder	1 Pithing Needle
2 Sacred Foundry	2 Izzet Signet	1 Shard Phoenix
4 Steam Vents	4 Lightning Helix	1 Tatsumasa, the Dragon's Fang
24 lands	4 Mana Leak	1 Twincast
	1 Rewind	15 sideboard cards
4 Firemane Angel	4 Wrath of God	
1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	2 Zur's Weirding	
5 creatures	32 other spells	

I doubt anyone saw Kamiel's deck coming. This deck really intrigues me from an R&D perspective because it relies so heavily on **Firemane Angel**, a card we had pegged as the stone nuts. (Purchasers of the *Ravnica Fat Pack* may recall that **Firemane Angel** was our pick for the #1 coolest card in the set.) The card was met with such a resounding "meh" when *Ravnica* was first released that we feared it would never find a home in serious Constructed decks if for no reason other than people didn't *want* to play with it. Thank you, Kamiel!

Kamiel's deck is very, very slow. It wants to get one or more Angels in the graveyard via Gifts, **Compulsive Research**, or discarding at end of turn; start gaining life; get control of the board; then drop a **Zur's Weirding** for a near-hard lock. The Angel plays nice with the Weirding on several levels: it provides life to offset the cost of denying the opponent new cards, it is immune to being "denied" by the Weirding in the late game, and tapping out on your own upkeep to reanimate it isn't that scary when you know your opponent's hand and can prevent him from drawing anything dangerous.

I tried to contact Kamiel for some first-hand commentary on how exactly to play the deck, but I couldn't track him down in time for my deadline.



Jelger Wiegiersma	

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
2 Godless Shrine	4 Castigate	1 Eradicate
1 Orzhov Basilica	4 Cranial Extraction	4 Last Gasp
4 Overgrown Tomb	3 Faith's Fetters	2 Naturalize
4 Plains	3 Mortify	3 Nezumi Shortfang
1 Selesnya Sanctuary	4 Orzhov Signet	2 Night of Souls' Betrayal
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Phyrexian Arena	1 Peace of Mind
3 Swamp	3 Putrefy	2 Pithing Needle
4 Temple Garden	4 Wrath of God	
3 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree		15 sideboard cards
23 lands	29 other spells	
2 Angel of Despair		
2 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni		
4 Loxodon Hierarch		
8 creatures		

This deck didn't make the Top 16, but it was so hyped at the beginning of the event that it is worth mentioning here.

I firmly believe that there is a great Orzhov-based control deck out there somewhere, and I almost-as-firmly believe that this isn't it. As the metagame settles down, I think some clever souls will find the right mix of Black and White stuff. Stay tuned.

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
10 Island	3 Boomerang	1 Blood Moon
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	2 Confiscate	4 Giant Solifuge
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	4 Electrolyze	1 Pithing Needle
3 Mountain	4 Hinder	4 Pyroclasm
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	3 Mana Leak	3 Shattering Spree
4 Shivan Reef	4 Remand	2 Threads of Disloyalty
4 Steam Vents	4 Repeal	15 sideboard cards
24 lands	4 Rewind	
2 Keiga, the Tide Star	4 Tidings	
2 Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind	32 other spells	
4 creatures		

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
7 Island	4 Compulsive Research	2 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Demolish	1 Mana Leak
7 Mountain	4 Eye of Nowhere	1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Oboro, Palace in the Clouds	1 Genju of the Spires	1 Pyroclasm
4 Shivan Reef	3 Mana Leak	4 Remand
4 Steam Vents	3 Pyroclasm	3 Shock
24 lands	4 Sleight of Hand	3 Volcanic Hammer
3 Magnivore	4 Stone Rain	15 sideboard cards
3 creatures	3 Tidings	
	3 Wildfire	
	33 other spells	

Here are two wildly differing Blue/Red decks that put up very good results in spite of their centerpiece cards getting bad raps: *Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind* isn't powerful enough for serious decks, and *Wildfire* is easy to beat if you're ready for it.

I talked with Norway's Nikolas Nygaard and reigning Rookie of the Year Pierre Canali of France, who played the same deck as his countryman Guillaume Wafo-Tapa, about how their decks work. First, Nygaard.

**AF:** Who designed the deck you played?

**NN:** The deck first appeared in front of my eyes during Worlds 2005 where a bunch of Punisher guys played it (most notably Anton Jonsson). The deck was afterwards popularized through *Magic Online*, where a friend gave me his modified list. I played a lot with it and modified his list a little more to suit personal preferences and the metagame I was expecting at the PT.

**AF:** Did you playtest your deck much?

**NN:** I playtested a lot online (without *Guildpact*).

**AF:** What metagame were you anticipating at the PT?

**NN:** Lots of control decks in different suits, like *Greater Good*, Black/White, Black/White/Green, and Urzatron. I expected Zoo as the main aggro deck, plus GhaziGlare and a lot of *Wildfire* mirror matches (this turned out to not be a factor). I also expected some Owling Mine, but thought it wouldn't be very popular.

**AF:** What is your matchup like against "Owling Mine"?

**NN:** Stainz (It's my only really bad matchup, though).

**AF:** What is your matchup like against aggro Black/White with lots of discard?

**NN:** Pretty good (I played against infinite of those decks at the Pro Tour, and lost to only one).

**AF:** What are your best matchups?

**NN:** All sorts of control.

**AF:** Would you play the same deck again if you could? Would you make changes to it?

**NN:** I would play it again for sure, if I was playing exactly the same tournament again. I wouldn't have made any changes to my list, the deck was pretty awesome.

**AF:** Would you recommend it to people playing Standard on *Magic Online* or in the Team PTQs?

**NN:** Yea. I think it's the best deck in the format. All control decks are good matchups, and the deck is also pretty resilient to aggro (especially after board). I have not played against Herberholz's Red/Green deck, but if that is a bad matchup (although I doubt it), my deck has probably weakened a little, because a lot of people will probably run Gruul after it won the PT. As far as the Owling Mine matchup goes, I think that at least for now that deck will be kept in check by all the aggro Zoo and Red/Green decks. If the metagame shifts again towards a lot of control and Owling Mine rises in popularity again, my deck will probably weaken.

As for Canali...

**AF:** Who designed the deck you played?

**PC:** Guillaume Wafo-Tapa built it and we worked on it two days before the Pro Tour (just like every first PT of the season!). We made some changes together.

**AF:** Did you playtest your deck much?

**PC:** Guillaume did, but I played it for the first time only two days before the event.

**AF:** What metagame were you anticipating at the PT?

**PC:** More Gruul and Zoo than there was.

**AF:** What is your matchup like against "Owling Mine"?

**PC:** Bad! But not unwinnable!

**AF:** What is your matchup like against aggro Black/White with lots of discard?

**PC:** Very good, thanks to four *Electrolyze* maindeck and four *Pyroclasm* in the sideboard.

**AF:** What are your best matchups?

**PC:** Black/White aggro and control.

**AF:** Would you play the same deck again if you could? Would you make changes to it?

**PC:** I'd play the same deck, but 25 lands would be better. Each game I drew four lands I won!

**AF:** Would you recommend it to people playing Standard on *Magic Online* or in the Team PTQs?

**PC:** Yes for sure, but it depends of the metagame of your tourney.



**AF:** How good was Niv-Mizzet? Are you confident that he was the right choice over Meloku in this deck?

**PC:** I think so. I mean, they are pretty much the same in that if you untap, you win most of the time. But if you untap with Meloku, you can still lose to a channeled Arashi two turns later, and you won't have a lot of land on the board. In our deck, it is impossible to untap with Niv-Mizzet on the table and not win. At the very least, he is a **Wrath of God** against aggro or a **Fireball** against creatureless decks, and he lets you draw extra cards!

It looks like both decks are built to demolish other control decks and have to work hard against beatdown, although those matchups certainly appear winnable. Basically they seem to fill the same metagame niche that Ouline Mine does, except the **Wildfire** and Niv-Mizzet decks hedge their bets; instead of 90/10 and 10/90 matchups, they have 65/35 and 40/60 ones. Whereas I expect the Owl decks to flame out, these two could stick around as real contenders.

## They Might Be Giants

Tomorrow is the date for Two-Headed Giant Limited Champs. Many players, both Pro and casual, have claimed the format to be one of the most fun they've ever played. I tip my hat to former Rules Manager John Carter on this one; his stay with the company wasn't a particularly long one, but if this format is his legacy, then he certainly has made a lasting impression on the game.

The best thing about this format compared to other team formats is that you are allowed to talk openly with your teammates throughout the game. What better way to enjoy **Magic** than with an exuberant midgame high-five or a quick intervention to prevent your mate from wasting a removal spell on a non-optimal target?

I'll be at the Pittsburgh event cheering on my brother Neil and my longtime friend Bernie. But I figured that in the interest of fairness I should pass on what few bits of wisdom I have on the format to all of you.

- **The matches are only one game.** You won't get to sideboard in situational cards for games two and three! So play most of the in the maindeck...
- **Landwalk is king.** Flying may have been king of evasion before, but it has to move over now. Chances are that between your opponents, all five basic lands will be in play by turn 7. That makes **Goblin Spelunkers** a **Wind Drake** and **Sewerdreg** an **Aven Windreader**. Even **Grayscaled Gharial** can do a passable job of pretending to be a **Suntail Hawk** in a pinch. Put a premium on the creatures that give others landwalk, like **Ivy Dancer** and **Restless Bones**.
- **Beatdown is dead.** Leave **Sell-Sword Brute** and the like on the bench. Because twice as many players will be cluttering the board with creatures, the power shifts to the defenders in combat situations. Trying to win via quick blockable damage is a fool's errand.
- **Did I say landwalk was king? I meant milling.** You have to deal twice as much damage as normal to win in this format, but you still only need to mill away a single 40-card deck for victory. When one player is decks, the team loses.
- **Play bombs even if they cost eight mana.** You'll get to eight mana almost always. **Blazing Archon**, **Chorus of the Conclave**, and **Szadek, Lord of Secrets** can all win games in this format. Replicate cards—especially **Train of Thought** and **Pyromatics**—fit into this bullet point as well, as you'll get out enough land to make them ridiculous.
- **Play some "Disenchants."** There will be targets, the game will be a slow attrition war, and there is no sideboarding. Make sense?
- **You don't need a mix of creatures, tricks, and removal in both decks.** You aren't playing separately, so glaring holes in one deck can easily be covered up by the other. Just be sure to get the mana ratios and curves in decent shape.

That's it for me. Tune in next week when the normal guy who writes this thing is back, and I can crawl back up into the Ivory Tower of R&D.

## Invitational Update

We're to the last week of balloting for the 2006 Magic Invitational. The [North American ballot](#) has a winner, and it's none other than U.S. National champion Antonino De Rosa. Along with his national championship, De Rosa finished in the money in each Pro Tour except one and captured the title at Grand Prix-Salt Lake City.

With all four regions now with their respective Invitationalists, we turn to our final voting category -- the [Fan Favorites](#). The top two vote-getters here get their tickets punched to E3, so go vote! The winners will be announced next Friday, along with the R&D pick.

## Firestarter



We're pushing 2HG Limited as a fun format, but what do people think of 2HG Constructed? Is it just as fair and fun as the sealed deck version, or is it inherently degenerate and unfun? Talk amongst yourselves...

*Aaron Forsythe was a professional **Magic** player and Internet columnist prior to leaving Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to join Wizards of the Coast. His first duty here was Content Manager of this very website, a job that required him to do actual work as opposed to playing games all the time. So when a position opened in R&D, he jumped at the chance. He is now director of **Magic** R&D, and still plays **Magic** in his free time when he's not busy playing **Magic**.*



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