

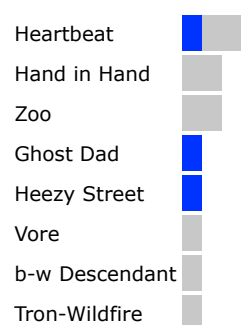
Finding the Winning Combination Search

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Thursday, April 06, 2006

Though it takes a bit of work to actually go over the decklists and figure out what changes are being made from week to week, to watch how the metagame flows, grows, reacts to itself, running the tallies for most Constructed PTQ seasons is not generally difficult. It is usually a matter of counting out which decks seem dominant by population and which ones rise to the occasion at the end of three rounds of single elimination play. Team Trios is a different animal entirely.

Let's assume that we were going to run the Grand Prix Madison Top 4 according to the "normal" tallies we've been working from the past year or two. It would look something like this:



In a Standard singles format, this would be a pretty easy read: We'd say that Heartbeat would be both the most numerous Top 4 deck and one of the first place selections. Then we'd go on to say that while Heezy Street was outnumbered 2-1 by its chief rival (in terms of opportunity cost), Zoo, Mark Herberholz's Pro Tour winner held firm and took a first place; we'd repeat that for Ghost Dad versus Hand in Hand *plus* B/W Descendant.

The problem is that for Team Trios, *this doesn't really say anything.*

For an individual Constructed PTQ season, watching the Top 8 trends gives you very specific information. For example, the Honolulu PTQs would have told you that lots and lots of players advanced to Top 8 on the strength of Tsuyoshi Fujita's Lightning Helixes... but that they didn't advance to Blue Envelopes, necessarily, with the same penetration. The PTQs for two-set *Kamigawa* Philadelphia last year would have shown lots of Red Deck Wins in the Top 8s early, and even more Goblins (mostly mono-Red Vial Goblins) late. Trends like these, over time, could affect your decisions very specifically as a *single* competitor selecting a *single* deck.

For the PT--Philadelphia Extended, you might learn that Red Deck Wins was a strong deck for escaping the Swiss... but that you would have to have some anti-Red or anti-anti-Red firepower in your sideboard if you wanted to actually take home the Blue Envelope. For the PT--Honolulu Extended, you might make a leap and say that the card that is driving those post-Fujita Boros Deck Wins decks is Lightning Helix, but that you don't need to be playing Boros Deck Wins to win with Lightning Helix; you might go the direction that many mid-to-late season qualifier winners did, and play NO Stick with Lightning Helix.



Team Trios, though, is about *opportunity cost*. It is not just about picking the right deck for a tournament, but about assembling *three* decks that can somehow exist in peace with one another. If you attend a solo PTQ with two friends, the best plan is almost always to play three duplicate copies of the best deck... You can't really do that in the Charleston feeder tournaments. You have to pick decks that don't step on your teammates' cards (at least not too much)... The limit of four copies of any one card is the binding force that keeps Heezy Street and Zoo off the same team, and makes players choose between Ghost Dad, Hand in Hand, or B/W Descendant for their B/W aggro fix. For the successful team, decks are not chosen simply for individual taste, but to accommodate how well they can be played next to one another ("We might not be the same colors... but can you get by if I take all the Jittes?").

Here's how the Grand Prix - Madison Top 4 laid out specifically:

Faddy Josh

Heartbeat

Ghost Dad

Heezy Street

FJB

Zoo

B/W Descendant

Tron-Wildfire

4815162342

Heartbeat

Hand in Hand

Vore

Cedric Phillips Stole My Bike

Heartbeat

Zoo

Hand in Hand

What the team configurations tell us above and beyond that top-of-the-page chart is that, of the teams in the Top 4 of the Grand Prix...

- ALL four teams played some kind of B/W beatdown
- Three teams played a Heartbeat deck
- Three teams played a Stomping Ground deck (two Zoo to one Heezy Street)
- Two teams played U/R Wildfire variants

Why is this important at all? Didn't we get the same information at the top of the page? Yes and no...


As with any metagame information, you can use the Grand Prix breakdowns to either copy color (or specific deck choice) configurations *or* to metagame *against* those color combinations. For instance, although Ghost Dad was the version of B/W Aggro that won the Grand Prix, there is no reason that it *has* to be the version of B/W that plays next to Heezy Street and Heartbeat of Spring. So if you think that Faddy Josh had a great setup by color breakdown but you anticipate - because three of the Top 4



Nearly every team plays this guy.

decks played Heartbeat - that you need a more robust anti-Heartbeat deck out of your B/W seat, you can switch to, say, Jon Sonne's version of Hand in Hand which includes 4 Mortify, 4 Ravenous Rats, 4 Shrieking Grottesque, and 3 Castigate starting, with additional enchantment destruction and 4 Hypnotic Specters in the sideboard. This deck might not be *as good* at fighting, say, Zoo or Heezy Street as Ghost Dad with 4 Shining Shoals, but its matchup there is probably still strong... The overwhelming disruption can only help against the combo deck, where there is much less coming from Ghost Dad.

You can probably guess that the next bit is going to be about Heartbeat. You may remember that for the Honolulu PTQs, I pushed Heartbeat pretty strenuously as a deck choice. It was very strong, had a definite shot of winning the Pro Tour, but ultimately had little adoption on the amateur level. There are many reasons for this, but the most important ones are 1) in a solo environment, you have a lot more liberty about what you play because you aren't "stealing" cards from teammates, and 2) PTQ players as a class don't seem to "like" hybrid combo-control decks. Regardless of your opinion on the latter, moving forward, any team that plans on winning a PTQ will have to contend with the best deck in Team Standard at some point, so being prepared is rather important. Here are the three Heartbeat decks from the Top 4 of GP Madison:

Team 4815162342 		
Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
10 Forest	1 Boomerang	3 Bottled Cloister
10 Island	4 Early Harvest	1 Dosan the Falling Leaf
1 Mountain	4 Heartbeat of Spring	2 Rending Vines
1 Swamp	1 Invoke the Firemind	2 Savage Twister
-----	4 Kodama's Reach	4 Shadow of Doubt
22 lands	4 Muddle the Mixture	1 Viridian Shaman
	1 Recollect	2 Wood Elves
	4 Remand	-----
4 Drift of Phantasms	1 Savage Twister	15 sideboard cards
1 Maga, Traitor to Mortals	4 Sensei's Divining Top	
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Weird Harvest	
-----	-----	
9 creatures	29 other spells	

Team Cedric Phillips Stole My Bike 		
Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
10 Forest	1 Boomerang	4 Carven Caryatid
10 Island	1 Compulsive Research	2 Gigadrowse
	4 Early Harvest	2 Keiga, the Tide Star
		2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror

1 Mountain	4 Heartbeat of Spring	1 Naturalize
1 Swamp	1 Invoke the Firemind	1 Ryusei, the Falling Star
<hr/>	4 Kodama's Reach	3 Savage Twister
22 lands	4 Muddle the Mixture	<hr/>
	1 Recollect	15 sideboard cards
	4 Remand	
4 Drift of Phantasms	4 Sensei's Divining Top	
1 Maga, Traitor to Mortals	1 Weird Harvest	
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	<hr/>	
<hr/>	29 other spells	
9 creatures		

Team Faddy Josh



Main Deck

60 cards

10 Forest	1 Boomerang
10 Island	1 Compulsive Research
1 Mountain	4 Early Harvest
1 Swamp	4 Heartbeat of Spring
<hr/>	1 Invoke the Firemind
22 lands	3 Kodama's Reach
	4 Muddle the Mixture
	1 Recollect
4 Drift of Phantasms	4 Remand
1 Maga, Traitor to Mortals	1 Savage Twister
4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	4 Sensei's Divining Top
<hr/>	1 Weird Harvest
9 creatures	<hr/>
	29 other spells

Sideboard

3 Iwamori of the Open Fist
2 Keiga, the Tide Star
2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
1 Pyroclasm
2 Savage Twister
1 Umezawa's Jitte
4 Vinelasher Kudzu
<hr/>
15 sideboard cards



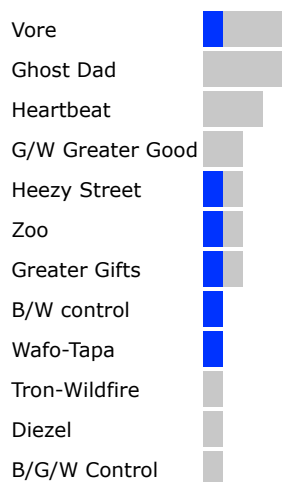
Generally speaking, any PTQ Heartbeat of Spring decks will work essentially the same way that Maximilian Bracht's Top 8 deck did. The goal of the deck is to get a certain amount of mana and then play Heartbeat of Spring into Early Harvest. With five or more mana, Heartbeat can play its namesake card, float four mana, and play Early Harvest with a one mana profit. At that point, the deck can use its extensive Transmute suite to find combination pieces and still have mana to keep moving (note how at the minimum required mana, the Heartbeat player will always have access to 10 mana unmolested, and that Transmuting Drift of Phantasms for Early Harvest and then playing that Harvest will net 4 mana minimum). Possibly the most important element of the Heartbeat engine, Drift of

Phantasms can get either Heartbeat of Spring *or* Early Harvest (*or* either of the kill conditions, Maga, Traitor to Mortals or Invoke the Firemind). Muddle the Mixture can find Weird Harvest or any number of maindeck or sideboard singletons; the simplest way to win is to Weird Harvest for multiple de facto combination pieces, generally multiple Drift of Phantasms and the one Maga. The Drifts get Early Harvest after Early Harvest until the deck can generate $x+3$ mana, where x is the opponent's life total... With even a single Heartbeat of Spring and Weird Harvest, ~ 23 mana is academic once this deck starts moving.

Hoan and Star Wars Kid's lists varied by only one card (a Compulsive Research versus a Savage Twister main); Ziegler's incremental variation was to play both cards, cutting a four-of Kodama's Reach from the main.

The sideboards varied more, but all three decks ultimately had access to the same number of Savage Twisters (three). Ziegler played essentially a full transform, very reminiscent of Maximilian Bracht's deck from PT--Honolulu; McDaniel took a more general look at his transformation, opting for Carven Caryatid for early game defense rather than Vinelasher Kudzu for early game attack. He also included Gigadrowse, a bomb against control decks. The most unusual take on the Heartbeat sideboard was Hoan's... His deck seemed to prepare for a totally different metagame. The only deck to fundamentally expect *itself*, Hoan's full boat of Shadow of Doubt seem aimed at opposing Transmute (who says I can't counter that?), and though Hoan has creatures in his side, the aren't there for any kind of a legitimate transformation. Instead, Hoan went with Bottled Cloister as an out against B/W Rat decks. Bottled Cloister does two things: It draws cards (obviously), but in its own weird way, it also defends against hand destruction. You may see the Cloister as a potential liability, but in the matchups where Rich wanted it, he didn't expect the opponent to be able to eliminate an artifact. Note that if you have Early Harvest under the Cloister when the opponent plays Cranial Extraction, you won't lose quite *all* of them and will still be able to go off, if more carefully. Should Heartbeat gain tremendously in Team Standard adoption (and it *will* after this week), Rich's approach may in fact be the correct one, as Shadow of Doubt for the mirror where the opponent has nothing will yield value; meanwhile Bottled Cloister in anticipation of more Heartbeat-aware B/W decks certainly can't hurt when you're ahead in basically every matchup.

Team Standard: The PTQs



Of the 8 teams tracked across 2 PTQ Top 8s...

- 6 played some sort of G/x beatdown, either Heezy Street, Zoo, or G/W post-Worlds Selesnya decks (both winning teams played the conventional Heezy Street or Zoo).
- 6 played some sort of U/R control; 5 of them Wildfire decks (both winning teams had a U/R control).
- 5 played B/W beatdown decks; 4 of those were Ghost Dad... None of the teams with a B/W beatdown deck actually won its PTQ.

- 3 played Heartbeat; Heartbeat was not played by either winning team.
- 2 teams played Greater Gifts (one won).
- 2 teams played an Orzhov-style control (one won).

Though it's not exactly scientific, looking at the Grand Prix and PTQ information we have thus far, I would prepare for the April 8 PTQ in New York (or whatever PTQ I were to attend) with the following assumptions:

- Almost every team will run a B/W beatdown deck. Though only 5/8 played one in the two-PTQ sample, the rise in Heartbeat will replace Mortify-leeching Greater Gifts players on most teams due to the conflict on Sakura-Tribe Elder and Sensei's Divining Top. Of those B/W beatdown decks, Ghost Dad remains very popular; although the commensurate growth in Heartbeat will create B/W shock waves in archetype choice, those will not reach full effect *this week*.
- Most PTQ teams will run a G/x beatdown deck. As with the Grand Prix finalists, the most successful teams will generally play Stomping Ground. Heezy Street and Zoo remain two of the strongest available decks, and are proving their finalist appearances from PT--Honolulu, regardless of the evolution in the rest of the metagame.
- Most teams that advance will play a U/R control deck. Of those decks, Vore's proactive stance and overall lower mana costs make it a popular choice among advancing teams.

Make your metagame decisions accordingly.

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