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I know that many of you are looking for our annual Regional Championships breakdown, but we here at **magicthegathering.com** are still waiting to hear from a Tournament Organizer or two (*or ten...*). Rather than cram this week, I decided to wait a bit and get the broadest look at the qualifying decks that we are reasonably able to get. Look for the breakdown of all (or at least most) North American Regional Championship results to start next week. If there is a ton of information or a lot of new and interesting decks to explore, we may stretch it for two weeks! Remember, these tournaments are going to set the tone for the next several months of **Magic Online**, Friday Night **Magic**, and any and all local *Dissension*-legal Standard events, so I think getting the lists right is worth the wait (you have my apologies anyway). In the interest of "new and interesting decks," though, I decided to focus this week on just one very new and very interesting specimen, the finalist from Newington, Connecticut's Southern New England Regional Championship.

Without further preamble, here is a list that I was calling "that crazy deck" during the tournament, but Kartin' Ken Krouner coined with a much more marketable moniker:

"It looks like *The Masterpiece* is about to qualify," -Ken Krouner, during the Quarterfinals

Anton Goldblatt



Main Deck

60 cards

- 1 Breeding Pool
- 3 Forest
- 1 Godless Shrine
- 1 Island
- 1 Llanowar Wastes
- 4 Overgrown Tomb
- 2 Plains
- 4 Swamp
- 4 Temple Garden
- 1 Watery Grave

22 lands

- 4 Birds of Paradise
- 1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
- 2 Keiga, the Tide Star
- 4 Loxodon Hierarch
- 2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
- 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder
- 1 Simic Sky Swallower

18 creatures

Sideboard

- 3 Bottled Cloister
- 2 Circle of Protection: Red
- 3 Cranial Extraction
- 4 Last Gasp
- 3 Okiba-Gang Shinobi

15 sideboard cards

- 4 Faith's Fetters
- 2 Farseek
- 3 Mortify
- 3 Persecute
- 4 Phyrexian Arena
- 2 Putrefy
- 2 Wrath of God

20 other spells

When you initially examine this deck, the first thing you probably see is a mana base that makes Cousin It look like Giselle Bundchen. With eleven mismatched *Ravnica* duals - and twelve "pain" lands overall - in a list featuring a mere twenty-two such mana sources, Anton's mana base is so intimidating it is almost scary! In most other years, it is the kind of deck, that amidst the hundreds of qualifying lists that we are about to see over the next week or more, I might have just passed over. However this deck has more pedigree than you might expect, and honestly, it seemed to play quite smoothly on the way to its second place finish.

Moving to the early game progression, The Masterpiece is a deck whose curve starts on turn 1, with Birds of Paradise. Because of that, at first, I just didn't understand how the deck worked at all... Few are the decks over the years - the successful ones anyway - that have played the ingenious combination of Birds of Paradise into blowing up their Birds of Paradise with Wrath of God... But there is a strange synergy here that defies convention. You will notice that Anton has three copies of Okiba-Gang Shinobi in his sideboard. At least two of those started off in the main, but when he arrived at Regionals, he re-evaluated how he was going to play.

"... as I take a walk around the room, I start to get nervous. I notice three very important things... 1) Approximately 70% of the decks are dedicated aggro, 2) every other deck is packing Mana Leak, and 3) Breeding Pool is the card most in demand."

Though he came prepared with most of his deck together, Goldblatt made a last minute change to include Wrath of God in his main. He wanted to beef up his ability to defeat aggressive decks... Where Okiba-Gang may have been clunky, Wrath of God was perfect. Moreover, Anton needed an out against Plaxcaster Frogling... The Simic Guild's new U/G decks featuring the best Gnarled Mass yet demanded the ability to sanction creatures without having to, you know, actually aim at them. Again Wrath, unplanned or no, was the right solution.

While I initially questioned the inclusion of Birds of Paradise in this deck (not something I would have even considered personally), Anton defended the choice with a very basic, and defensible, explanation: In especially the control matchups, he could go straight for Phyrexian Arena on the second turn. This makes a lot of sense: Not only is Phyrexian Arena great in slow matchups (and passable overall), in the long run it will make up for any loss of card advantage associated with Wrath of God on your own Birds of Paradise.



The Masterpiece may be the only deck in the history of competitive Constructed that - despite playing about a million pain lands - runs more basic lands of another color than basic Forest (here Swamp). But again, there is reason to this unusual choice. Not only does the "high" Swamp count promote the fast Phyrexian Arena, but alongside his Loxodon Hierarchs and various giant men, there is another sickening card in Anton's mix: Persecute. I personally saw him sacrifice Sakura-Tribe Elder to set up a third turn Persecute in the first game of his Top 8 match against Ghost Husk. Anton named Black, and his opponent had kept a two-land hand with Dark Confidant... Needless to say, this erupted in a splatter of five cards with no third land in sight. Persecute is a card that has fallen out of favor at least somewhat despite being legal in many formats since almost its original printing. When it was new, Chris Pikula and Dave Price sported three copies in their Hatred deck so as to "win on the

second turn one way or another as long as [they] drew Ritual." It is nice to see a deck - especially one that is not full of Dark Rituals and all basic Swamps - taking advantage of this card.

The element of The Masterpiece that I am most interested in, though, is the backbreaking eight-pack of Loxodon Hierarch and Faith's Fetters. Never in the history of **Magic** has there been a duo of heavily played cards that so annihilate aggressive decks. The defining success of Mark Herberholz and his Heezy Street deck at Pro Tour--Honolulu was the attention to specifically beating this class of cards with Scorched Rusalka and Flames of the Blood Hand, but I think even Mark would prefer to dodge a deck that packed both... along with Sakura-Tribe Elder and Farseek. The thing that I like about this new deck, even more than its truly unusual mix of threats and answers, is its realistic approach to threats. Rather than skimping, The Masterpiece elects simply to annihilate aggro with the full complement of Loxodon Hierarchs and Faith's Fetters, and fits all those superb multi-dimensional cards even as it plays a fairly different game from the majority of its Standard contemporaries. For those of you who haven't been paying attention, these *Ravnica* White cards do double duty and more... Not only are they superb one-for-one answers to threats, they counter the next *two* burn spells that the opponent *plans* to play.

Along with the addition of Mortify and Putrefy, there is the issue of "some giant Blue monsters." I am a giant fan of the said giants, more than willing to "pull down my pants" and tap out for Keiga or Meloku as soon as I hit the requisite count of mana, even with permission in hand. Having, um, no Remands, Mana Leaks, Hinders, or more exotic permission spells, Anton's deck experiences no such conflict... He will tap out for not just the classics, but new kid on the block Simic Sky Swallower. To be fair, Anton sided out the Sky Swallower on a good number of occasions, but it was nevertheless gratifying to see this new non-Legendary Legendary Creature-class giant in a deck capable of qualification.



Before I heap too much aplomb on Mr. Goldblatt, it is important to note that the genesis of The Masterpiece lies with Grand Pooh-Bah Rewind Master Shaheen Soorani. We have looked at a couple of Shaheen's efforts over the past couple of years here on Swimming With Sharks, in particular his tendency to play, well, Rewind in basically every available format and/or qualify in Extended with what seem like underpowered U/W control decks (which may or may not include the aforementioned Rewind). However, this time the former Virginia State Champion took control in a very different direction, posting impressive individual records during the Team PTQ season with earlier versions of The Masterpiece. As a contrast to Goldblatt's eventual qualifying deck, here is the Team Trios PTQ deck that Shaheen posted in a public forum on Star City Games (in fact acknowledging that it "is one of the most awful looking control decks on paper"):

Shaheen Soorani		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
6 Forest	4 Faith's Fetters	3 Bottled Cloister
1 Godless Shrine	2 Farseek	2 Circle of Protection: Red
		3 Cranial Extraction

1 Island	2 Mortify	4 Last Gasp
4 Overgrown Tomb	3 Persecute	2 Naturalize
2 Plains	4 Phyrexian Arena	1 Okiba-Gang Shinobi
4 Swamp	3 Putrefy	
2 Temple Garden		15 sideboard cards
1 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree	18 other spells	
1 Watery Grave		

22 lands

1 Angel of Despair
 4 Birds of Paradise
 1 Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni
 2 Keiga, the Tide Star
 4 Loxodon Hierarch
 2 Meloku the Clouded Mirror
 2 Okiba-Gang Shinobi
 4 Sakura-Tribe Elder

20 creatures

... It just goes to show you never know where you will strike gold!

Anton's translations were to flip Putrefy in favor of Mortify (he [rightly] expected Heartbeat of Spring to be a dominant archetype) and play a bit less greedy... in what is still one of the greediest, if good, competitive decks to appear in some time. Angel of Despair seemed to stretch the mana with its **WUBU** colored cost; that seven became the Sky Swallower. Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree seemed the epitome of greediness in an already embattled mana base; I think it's replacement with colored mana producing land was probably a sound decision, especially considering the end result. The move of Okiba-Gang Shinobi from the main to the side necessarily pushed out *some* pair of cards, but I don't think that the deck needs Naturalize all that much given maindeck Mortify and Putrefy.

As he was already qualified for U.S. Nationals, Soorani did not himself play The Masterpiece (but he would have). "My only regret would be that the deck can't support double **U** for Rewind."



So is The Masterpiece the be all and end all of new decks?

Shaheen has posted three **Magic Online** Premiere Event Top 8s with it alongside some very solid Team Trios PTQ records, but I don't know that it will ever pick up, say, Ghost Dad popularity in the metagame... just because it looks so odd and [Shaheen's original Wrath-less Ninja version] doesn't fall into any recognizable historical model. However this seems like a strange, powerful, and ultimately *interesting* deck that you may want to explore in *Dissension* Standard. According to its primary designer, this deck has no truly unwinnable matchups, but IzzeTron is tough (and Anton calls Heartbeat a "gamble"), but given the "diversity" (there's that word again) of the present Standard

format, those potential bad matchups probably matter less than they might have a month ago. At the end of the day, The Masterpiece is only one of some hundreds of decks that qualified this past weekend... Assuming our Tournament Organizers (and technology) accommodate, let's hope we can check out all of them starting next week. If you want a preview, think "diverse" (more diverse than last year, at least!).

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