

The Rewards of Nonconformity Search

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Before the Pro Tour, many of us joked that no team was going to post fewer than four copies of Loxodon Hierarch unless they somehow couldn't get their hands on a set for some reason (no friends, no barns, they blew all their money on pachinko, whatever). I had no idea that Pro Tour--Atlanta Top 4 competitors Tomohiro Kaji and Tomoharu Saito, along with their Player of the Year replacement Shota Yasooka were so hard up for cards...

Tomohiro Kaji – Seat A, Kajiharu80

Main Deck

60 cards

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 4 Breeding Pool | 2 Clutch of the Undercity |
| 4 Forest | 4 Farseek |
| 3 Golgari Rot Farm | 2 Mimeofacture |
| 5 Island | 3 Putrefy |
| 4 Overgrown Tomb | 4 Rolling Spoil |
| 3 Swamp | 3 Simic Signet |
| <hr/> | |
| 23 lands | 2 Twisted Justice |
| | 4 Voidslime |
| | <hr/> |
| | 24 other spells |
| <hr/> | |
| 4 Carven Caryatid | |
| 3 Moroi | |
| 3 Simic Sky Swallower | |
| 3 Skeletal Vampire | |
| <hr/> | |
| 13 creatures | |

Sideboard

- 4 Bound/Determined
 - 3 Last Gasp
 - 1 Leyline of Singularity
 - 2 Muse Vessel
 - 4 Ribbons of Night
 - 1 Simic Growth Chamber
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- 15 sideboard cards

Shota Yasooka – Seat B, Kajiharu80

Main Deck

60 cards

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 3 Azorius Chancery | 4 Compulsive Research |
| 4 Hallowed Fountain | 2 Convolute |
| 3 Island | 1 Debtors' Knell |
| 4 Plains | 4 Dimir Signet |
| 1 Prahv, Spires of Order | 3 Mortify |
| 4 Swamp | 1 Overrule |
| 4 Watery Grave | 4 Remand |

Sideboard

- 2 Faith's Fetters
- 2 Keening Banshee
- 1 Moonlight Bargain
- 2 Muse Vessel
- 1 Nightmare Void
- 2 Orzhov Pontiff
- 3 Spell Snare
- 2 Wit's End

23 lands

3 Swift Silence
4 Trial/Error
1 Twisted Justice

15 sideboard cards

3 Angel of Despair
4 Court Hussar
3 Grand Arbiter Augustin IV

27 other spells

10 creatures

Tomoharu Saito – Seat C, Kajiharu80



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blood Crypt
2 Boros Garrison
4 Godless Shrine
4 Mountain
4 Sacred Foundry
5 Swamp

2 Boros Signet
4 Demonfire
4 Hit/Run
4 Lightning Helix
3 Seal of Fire

17 other spells

Sideboard

4 Char
2 Orzhov Pontiff
3 Rise/Fall
1 Seal of Fire
1 Skeletal Vampire
4 Sunhome Enforcer

15 sideboard cards

23 lands

4 Dark Confidant
4 Giant Solifuge
4 Lyzolda, the Blood Witch
4 Rakdos Guildmage
4 Skyknight Legionnaire

20 creatures

In all seriousness, the eventual Pro Tour--Charleston champions had something going that most other teams missed, it seems, and they couldn't have tugged the cord of that special something if they had played the same popular cards that everyone else did. Check out Saito's deck... 4 Demonfire, 4 Lightning Helix, 4 Hit // Run, and 3 Seal of Fire starting, plus extra burn spells in the sideboard, not to mention "fake" burn spells like Giant Solifuge, Skyknight Legionnaire, Rakdos Guildmage, and Lyzolda, the Blood Witch masquerading as creatures... Given the power of the direct damage in *Ravnica* Block, the mono-fire deck was something that I'd wager most teams thought about playing, but the paradigm stating that Loxodon Hierarch was the best creature in *Ravnica* Block probably scared most off.

... Not the winners, though.

Playing a deck like this one, especially in the context of a team with no Loxodon Hierarchs, required bravery beyond description. Because they were successful, we are lauding Kajiharu80 for their

innovatively dodging what most people came in thinking was the top card, but they could easily have been on the wrong side of criticism had they failed to perform ("What do you *mean* you didn't play the best card...") ("A burn deck in the *Hierarchy* format? Come on!").

Personally, I thought that at least Day One was going to be a ton of beatdown decks running into one another, but that was not, by in large, indicative of the metagame over either Friday or Saturday. Because beatdown was (mostly) missing, making up not even one third of the decks in the room, the plodding Hierarchs - normally so good against aggressive decks - were not as valuable as they might have been had the dice rolled a little bit differently at 2AM on Thursday night. Oddly, the imbalance away from beatdown in the format equilibrium actually made the discrete beatdown/burn decks that *did* show up a more effective strategy as teams advanced. Instead of going with popular opinion, Kajiharu80 played against the decks they thought would crush the decks built to beat the defaults, rather than the defaults themselves. There isn't much liability to a deck like Saito's when you no longer believe that the Panacea Pachyderm is the be all and end all to the format.



Johan Sadeghpour- Why Would You Do Zis?



Main Deck 60 cards

4 Blood Crypt
10 Mountain
3 Rakdos Carnarium
7 Swamp

24 lands

4 Giant Solifuge
4 Rakdos Guildmage

8 creatures

4 Bottled Cloister
4 Char
4 Demonfire
4 Hit/Run
4 Rakdos Signet
4 Rise/Fall
4 Seal of Fire

28 other spells

Sideboard


4 Hellhole Rats
2 Last Gasp
2 Nightmare Void
3 Rain of Gore
4 Seize the Soul

15 sideboard cards

Another look at an aggressive beatdown/burn deck comes from Johan Sadeghpour. Johan played on what would be probably the world's scariest Team *Limited* three man squad, but his compatriots in Why Would You Do Zis?, Rich Hoaen and Anton Jonsson, acquitted themselves to an 11th place money finish despite being hampered by twenty additional cards each.

Johan's deck is perhaps even more burn-oriented than Saito's, with many of the same cards and fewer creatures (almost like a pre-sideboarded Saito deck), and Bottled Cloister to continually fill his hand... with more mana efficient damage packets.

The one card I really wanted to highlight in Johan's deck is Rise // Fall. Anyone could see how effective certain split cards would be in this format... Hit // Run was blatantly destined to achieve mass adoption in *Ravnica* Block Constructed – it is, after all, one of the few consistent ways to kill a Simic Sky Swallower – but Rise // Fall? Johan's deck, sadly, can't produce the Blue mana necessary to run the Rise side, but believe me, this split is a potent way to deal a few more points of damage in a Giant Solifuge deck. Rise // Fall shines on six or more mana, when you can force the opponent to pick up his blocker (let's say a freshly cast Firemane Angel he just tapped out for) and recoup your lost Solifuge. From that spot, you can attack immediately, and likely avoid retribution (having likely just moved a ton of the opponent's mana and a potent creature away from any useful position)... My teammate Steve Sadin was on the receiving end of this non-burn blast "combination" any number of times during his match against legendary Japanese technician Jin Okamoto.

Jin Okamoto -- Vanilla Ice		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
<i>60 cards</i>		
4 Blood Crypt	4 Char	4 Gelectrode
4 Island	3 Clutch of the Undercity	4 Goblin Flectomancer
2 Izzet Boilerworks	4 Compulsive Research	1 Nightmare Void
1 Mountain	4 Consult the Necrosages	2 Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind
1 Nivix, Aerie of the Firemind	4 Demonfire	2 Ribbons of Night
1 Pillar of the Paruns	4 Electrolyze	2 Seal of Fire
3 Rakdos Carnarium	4 Hit/Run	
4 Steam Vents	4 Rise/Fall	
3 Swamp	2 Seal of Fire	
<hr/>		15 sideboard cards
23 lands	33 other spells	
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4 Giant Solifuge		
<hr/>		
4 creatures		

An unusual card that was employed both by Jin in his "burn" deck and by eventual co-champion Tomohiro Kaji was Clutch of the Undercity. In a format full of Karoos, Clutch of the Undercity might be even better than one of the four-mana land destruction spells at stunting the opponent's development. Certainly the life swing it generates at the same time and the fact that it is an instant should be taken into consideration... This card was one of the real sleepers of the format, doing many things well and really helping to fill out multiple points of functionality in a format where the deck across the table could be anything from Birds of Paradise wearing a Moldervine Cloak to Seal of Fire setting up Blind Hunter to straightforward permission-enabled Sky Swallower control. In Kaji's deck alone, Clutch of the Undercity...

- Fetches Moroi
- Fetches Mimeofacture
- Fetches Muse Vessel (sideboard)
- Fetches the *one copy* of Leyline of Singularity (sideboard)
- Fetches and supplements Rolling Spoil

- Bounces a Signet or small creature at the end of turn so that you can blast a seven-drop with Twisted Justice
- Defends one of your creatures (though this hurts) (but to be fair, it hurts less with Skeletal Vampire and Carven Caryatid)
- Keeps you from getting killed, at instant speed
- ... And of course, points the last three to the opponent's skull

Generally speaking, Rolling Spoil was considered to be the top spell in the format going into Pro Tour-Charleston. This was the case for any number of reasons... Players were mostly going three colors so you could screw up their mana with even one land destruction spell; it doubled as a sweeper for Saprolings, Bats, Spirits or actual creature cards like Birds of Paradise and Dryad Sophisticate; it fell into the right colors as a default, complementing Farseek and Angel of Despair in the B/G/W "Magic Online" default deck. If you peruse the decks played team to team, you will see nearly as many Rolling Spoils as Loxodon Hierarchs, I'd wager... so the way some successful teams approach the question of land destruction is an interesting topic because you basically always know it is coming.

Chikara Nakajima – Seat A, D-25



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Blood Crypt
 5 Forest
 1 Golgari Rot Farm
 3 Mountain
 1 Overgrown Tomb
 1 Rakdos Carnarium
 4 Stomping Ground
 3 Swamp

22 lands

2 Civic Wayfinder
 4 Helldozer
 4 Rakdos Pit Dragon
 4 Rumbling Slum

14 creatures

4 Demonfire
 4 Golgari Signet
 4 Hit/Run
 4 Rakdos Signet
 4 Wreak Havoc
 4 Wrecking Ball

24 other spells

Sideboard

4 Burning-Tree Shaman
 2 Indrik Stomphowler
 2 Nightmare Void
 4 Savage Twister
 3 Seal of Fire

15 sideboard cards



This is D-25's A deck, played to the Top 4 by Chikara Nakajima. I just want to say that as a fellow A, I am overjoyed I didn't have to face Nakajima on the weekend. I beat almost every other kind of deck, but Nakajima would have almost certainly blown me to pieces, likely ruining an overall superb individual performance. D-25 *already had* a Spoil deck, but with this one... here is a *second* land destruction deck on the same team! His is one of the most unique and singularly effective *different* decks I spied on the weekend, and here's why:

Check out the mana base. He fights to hit four, with eight Signets... but only plays two Karoos. This is unusual given how awesome Karoos are in *Ravnica* Block Constructed, but there is a great deal of


method to the decision. He really wants four mana on turn 3. That means that he doesn't actually want to play – or probably *draw* – a Karoo until after he has hit his Wrecking Ball, Rumbling Slum, or Wreak Havoc mana. At that point he can double up on a four and play a Karoo, but Nakajima doesn't want it in any of his first three lands. Not playing Karoos actually makes the D-25 Seat A more resilient against other players' land destruction spells, for obvious reasons.

This deck is a monster against mid-range opponents in Game One, and can put on a real show against control as well, relentlessly driving down four after four and cleaning up with Hit // Run, Demonfire, or Rakdos Pit Dragon (remember, there aren't very many viable permission cards in the format). It is a mite weak against a dedicated Rakdos or Boros-Rakdos hybrid beatdown in Game One, but Nakajima's sideboard is superb for fighting Guildmages and other miniscule attackers. Seal of Fire is beautiful on the curve, and because no weenie beatdown deck can face Nakajima's key fours man-to-man, Savage Twister is almost guaranteed to get value.



Helldozer is a card I am very hot and cold on, but in this deck it obviously makes a lot of sense in Nakajima's particular implementation. It is pretty easy to color screw the opponent out of the  or  he needs to respond to your six in the three turns leading up to that point (remember, Hit // Run is a land destruction card when played at a particular time), so as long as you get one clean untap with Helldozer, it is likely going to go the distance... If the opponent didn't answer it immediately, the Nakajima deck should be able to spend the next few turns mauling the opponent's mana base sufficiently enough that he is never going to have the resources to remove it.

On the subject of clever decks, my friend Josh Ravitz (of Punting Baxter) says that the team of Rubin, Cunningham, and Douglass takes the prize for best prepared sideboards, and probably best decks overall. Check out Ben's ...

Ben Rubin – Shows up with dips. Dips		
Main Deck		Sideboard
60 cards		
1 Blood Crypt	4 Compulsive Research	2 Copy Enchantment
1 Breeding Pool	2 Dream Leash	1 Dark Heart of the Wood
7 Forest	4 Farseek	1 Debtors' Knell
2 Golgari Rot Farm	3 Invoke the Firemind	1 Dimir Signet
1 Gruul Turf	2 Putrefy	2 Dream Leash
2 Island	3 Remand	1 Life from the Loam
2 Overgrown Tomb	4 Rolling Spoil	1 Primeval Light
1 Simic Growth Chamber	3 Savage Twister	1 Putrefy
1 Steam Vents	2 Simic Signet	2 Ribbons of Night
2 Stomping Ground	2 Utopia Sprawl	2 Skullmead Cauldron
2 Watery Grave	2 Voidslime	1 Wit's End
22 lands	31 other spells	15 sideboard cards

- 4 Carven Caryatid
- 3 Simic Sky Swallower

7 creatures

In the main, Rubin's is a fairly straightforward four-color Sky Swallower control deck, complete with all the toys (Rolling Spoil, Savage Twister, light permission). After sideboarding, Ben borrows from several different strategies – all known – but somewhat unusual when played in a single deck. He has Wit's End, a favorite of the dedicated land destruction decks (they can ensure by manascrewing you that your hand will be full), and Dark Heart of the Wood... sort of a Zuran Orb for 2006. What really set Ben's deck apart, though, was the Dream Leash and Copy Enchantment package... These cards were heavily played in U/R/W main decks (alongside the synergistic Faith's Fetters), but served as defense against an opponent's Sky Swallows and Karoos in this sideboard.

As for single most creative sideboard *in the tournament*, I think that Invitational finalist Jeff Cunningham has to take the prize.

Jeff Cunningham – Shows up with dips. Dips



Main Deck

60 cards

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| 3 Azorius Chancery | 1 Congregation at Dawn |
| 3 Breeding Pool | 3 Glare of Subdual |
| 8 Forest | 1 Selesnya Signet |
| 1 Hallowed Fountain | 4 Supply/Demand |
| 1 Island | 2 Utopia Sprawl |
| 2 Plains | <hr/> |
| 4 Temple Garden | 11 other spells |
| <hr/> | |
| 22 lands | |

Sideboard

- 1 Blazing Archon
 - 4 Chord of Calling
 - 1 Congregation at Dawn
 - 4 Dovescape
 - 3 Faith's Fetters
 - 1 Indrik Stomphowler
 - 1 Netherborn Phalanx
-
- 15 sideboard cards

- 4 Birds of Paradise
 - 4 Civic Wayfinder
 - 3 Court Hussar
 - 3 Grand Arbiter Augustin IV
 - 4 Loxodon Hierarch
 - 4 Selesnya Guildmage
 - 1 Simic Sky Swallower
 - 4 Watchwolf
-
- 27 creatures

Jeff transforms a more-or-less stock U/G/W Glare of Subdual deck into a Chord of Calling/Dovescape deck after boards... This strategy was of course known since Regionals, at least, but not using *quite* the cards that **Magic's** funniest writer chose. In my mind, Jeff had two standouts: Blazing Archon was the first. For maybe one out of three decks in the tournament, Blazing Archon played a hard lock... Most G/W-based decks simply can't remove it; ergo they can't win, except by decking. Jeff could win with massive token advantage, or not... But he certainly couldn't get bashed to death after setting up this nine drop with Congregation at Dawn or Chord of Calling. The G/W decks had tools like Faith's Fetters and Glare of Subdual, but with Blazing Archon, Cunningham showed them that they maybe had to revisit **Magic 101**.



The even more creative spell, though, was Netherborn Phalanx. A card that most people considered unplayable in 60-card decks served multiple purposes in Jeff's deck. With his Birds of Paradise or Utopia Sprawls online, Cunningham could use this card to fetch Dovescape. More importantly, in stalled games – such as token-on-token or once he already had the Archon down – Cunningham could just run out the Horror as a kill card. Many games came down to board positions with literally *dozens* of creatures on both sides as both players amassed Saprolings via Selesnya Guildmage... What's a tiny twenty?

Morgan Douglass – Shows up with dips. Dips



Main Deck 60 cards

2 Godless Shrine
4 Orzhov Basilica
8 Plains
9 Swamp

23 lands

4 Angel of Despair
2 Belfry Spirit
4 Blind Hunter
3 Ghost Council of Orzhova
4 Skeletal Vampire
3 Teysa, Orzhov Scion

20 creatures

3 Castigate
1 Golgari Signet
4 Last Gasp
4 Mortify
4 Orzhov Signet
1 Selesnya Signet

17 other spells


Sideboard

1 Castigate
3 Darkblast
2 Debtors' Knell
2 Golgari Signet
2 Moonlight Bargain
3 Orzhov Pontiff
2 Seize the Soul

15 sideboard cards

Josh says that Morgan's Bat deck was better than either the one he played or the one I played ("because it's not 'confused'"); I agree with roughly half that position. Because you are probably

curious about my deck as well, here it is so you can compare it with Morgan's, Bat-to-Bat and decide for yourself:

Mike Flores – Two-Headed Giant		
Main Deck		Sideboard
	<i>60 cards</i>	
3 Godless Shrine	3 Hour of Reckoning	4 Castigate
4 Orzhov Basilica	4 Last Gasp	3 Culling Sun
8 Plains	4 Mortify	2 Debtors' Knell
9 Swamp	4 Orzhov Signet	2 Muse Vessel
<hr/>		2 Orzhov Pontiff
24 lands	15 other spells	2 Woebringer Demon
		<hr/>
		15 sideboard cards
2 Belfry Spirit		
4 Blind Hunter		
4 Ghost Council of Orzhova		
2 Gleancrawler		
2 Orzhov Pontiff		
4 Skeletal Vampire		
3 Teysa, Orzhov Scion		
<hr/>		
21 creatures		

I must admit that now several days after the tournament, I am jealous of Morgan's fifth Signet in the main, and somewhat of his addition copies in the side... but having played all fourteen rounds, I don't think I would have actually changed a single slot in my deck despite coveting those key two mana artifacts. My deck was exactly as efficient as I needed it to be in basically every matchup; I didn't lose on Day One, and posted a perfectly respectable 4-3 record on Day Two, with only one of those rounds being really unwinnable. The main difference between my deck and Morgan's (or Josh's) (or most of the other B/W Bats decks you might encounter) is the fact that I didn't get to play Angel of Despair, so I had to figure out something else. Steve O'Mahoney-Schwartz played the same deck, and we agreed during the tournament that we didn't actually *want* Angels, that they would have been clunky in an otherwise highly synergistic Jamie Wakefield machine. The Gleancrawlers were awesome for me, and the Orzhov Pontiffs played Overrun even in matchups where I ended up siding them out.

As to Josh's "confused" comment, the issue is that I played a 21 creature deck, with nine of those 21 producing *additional* creatures... and yet I ran the format's primary Wrath of God as well. In practice, this is actually less "confusing" than it might seem in the abstract. First of all, my deck played tons of token creatures, which don't die to Hour of Reckoning. Second of all, you really want to be able to kill Simic Sky Swallower, and I did, repeatedly, throughout the tournament. Third, and most importantly, the specific combination of odd spells in my deck allowed me to do really fun – and quite frankly, rude and unsportsmanlike – things to my opponents. Consider:

My board is a Skeletal Vampire and some Bats. My opponent has some small guys but doesn't really want to attack, at least while the Vampire is active. He plays Pillory of the Sleepless on the Vampire (annoying, but doesn't actually stop the "Outpost" ability), and passes (he might swing first but it



doesn't really matter). On my turn, I Convoke Hour of Reckoning, leaving up six mana, and fail to regenerate the Vampire. It's dead. Then I play Gleancrawler, getting it back at the end of turn.

This is obviously quite distressing for the opponent, who has just lost his last two men, so he plays another Pillory on Gleancrawler (I quickly confer with a judge before taking my next turn). I swing with tokens and play Ghost Council of Orzhova. On my end step, I put Gleancrawler on the stack and respond by sacrificing it to the Council. Gleancrawler is now a creature card that was "put into [my] graveyard from play this turn," and qualifies for a rebuy. I would go into the next turn but with a bonus Vampire and bonus Gleancrawler in my hand and a dominating position on the board already... there wasn't one.

Like I said, fun, and mean-spirited *at best!*

In sum, I found Constructed Team Trios to be basically the best PTQ and Pro Tour format of all time. I really enjoyed preparing for this tournament with my teammates Steve Sadin and Paul Jordan, our extended family of Josh Ravitz, Osyp Lebedowicz, and Antonino De Rosa's squads, and doing my part to defrost Jon Finkel and the rest of team Antarctica. We had strong preparation despite missing a couple of things that might have put us over the edge, but that's the nature of a format as diverse, interesting, and blatantly nonconformist as this one; on the Pro Tour, you don't get a second chance to play a single tournament perfectly, but that doesn't mean that the experience, that the process you took to get there, wasn't amazing. Here's hoping that *Coldsnap* and *Time Spiral* are even half one-third as good.

Up Next: Speaking of *Coldsnap*...

