

# White Hat versus Oiled Mustache, Round Search 17

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The most iconic mirror images in all of **Magic** have got to be White Knight and Black Knight. Opposite numbers with lineages like Abraham each, these two murderers have stared across the Red Zone, seething with mutual dislike, but never actually tussling *with each other* despite thirteen years of rivalry, nevertheless setting the pace for quality two-drops way back in Alpha and serving as the inspirations, patriarchs, and measuring sticks by which a special cadre of Black and White "bears" have been gauged ever since. There is just something about the  or  mana cost that sets off our imaginations and connects us with that younger Dominaria, or at least alerts us to a kind of card analysis reserved for mana costs like , or to a lesser extent, ... It is that something that connects Longbow Archer automatically to White Knight, asks us to compare the two for purposes of the metagame or - like Hacker back at Pro Tour--Dallas - inspires us to play for the redundant two-drop for maximum consistency. Surely you know what I mean... The mana costs, iconic as the Knights themselves, differentiate Leonin Skyhunter from Mistral Charger before our eyes even stray to the bottom-right corner, or give us the nudge that Nantuko Shade might just be worth a second look.



Last summer's *Saviors of Kamigawa* gave us the most recent look at White Knight, and surprisingly, Black Knight. While Black was never at a loss for quality creatures, the tradition started in Alpha seemed heavily weighted towards White, especially in the most recent years. Black got no analogue to Silver Knight in *Onslaught* Block whereas White got the extra Stoic Champion; *Champions of Kamigawa* gave White a monopoly on 2/2 Bushido two drops up until Hand of Cruelty appeared to remind us just what one of these models of violent efficiency is supposed to look like. When I did the preview a year back, no one knew that Hand of Honor was going to join Hand of Cruelty, or what *Ravnica* Block had in store for us in terms of mana. While I suspected that the card might usher in a new tradition of two drop-driven Black offense (mostly in anticipation of Dark Confidant) - and let's not forget the success of "Black Hand" in *Kamigawa* Block PTQs - no one could have predicted the extremes of the Orzhov Guild.

## Olivier Ruel – Hand in Hand

### Main Deck 60 cards

4 Caves of Koilos  
1 Eiganjo Castle  
4 Godless Shrine  
4 Orzhov Basilica  
2 Plains

4 Castigate  
3 Mortify  
3 Umezawa's Jitte  
10 other spells

### Sideboard

2 Cranial Extraction  
1 Descendant of Kiyomaro  
2 Distress  
2 Orzhov Pontiff  
2 Phyrexian Arena  
2 Seize the Soul

1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse  
6 Swamp

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22 lands

4 Dark Confidant  
4 Ghost Council of Orzhova  
3 Hand of Cruelty  
2 Okiba-Gang Shinobi  
2 Paladin en-Vec  
4 Plagued Rusalka  
4 Ravenous Rats  
2 Shrieking Grottesque  
3 Teysa, Orzhov Scion

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28 creatures

2 Slay  
2 Terashi's Grasp

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15 sideboard cards

I suppose you can blame Olivier. Spam his Ask the Pro column, even. His "Hand-in-Hand" deck from the Top 4 of Pro Tour--Honolulu paired Hand of Cruelty with Paladin en-Vec (a sort of White Knight inheritor itself), which started a sort of anti-Orzhov Orzhov cascade *within* the many offensive options for that Guild. Ghost Dad, Ghost Husk, Descendant of Kiyomaro decks... Aggressive Orzhov has been one of the most popular deck styles since the release of *Dissension*, and one of the most effective strategies against the whole bunch is a post-Hand-in-Hand mish-mash boasting *all* the available Black Knight and White Knight wannabes. If you think about it, the option makes quite a bit of sense given the availability of both Godless Shrine and Caves of Koilos, as Hand of Honor and Hand of Cruelty are both just better cards than their more famous forefathers. Hand of Honor can tussle with a Watchwolf (even if it can't hit the 'Wolf's master quite as hard), and Hand of Cruelty - ever the one-upsmen since Black Knight elected to dodge both Swords to Plowshares *and* Terror at the outset - consistently trounces that 3/3 for two... And spits in the eye of the Zoo deck's accompanying Lightning Helix at the same time.



Hand of Cruelty, besides founding the Black Hand archetype one year ago, has been seen not only in Hand-in-Hand but some versions of Rakdos, and Hand of Honor, taking a back seat somewhat due to competition with Paladin en-Vec, was nevertheless a superstar itself during *Kamigawa* Block Constructed PTQs. This is despite heavy competition from Samurai of the Pale Curtain, whose ability to foil the savage triggers of Kokusho, the Evening Star and its coiling brotherhood. Hand of Honor made the cut in Block White Weenie for one simple reason: Protection from Black. While the efficient body - specifically power-to-mana cost ratio - establishes the baseline for Hand of Honor and all these creatures, and Bushido gives it a fighting shot at competing today against polychromatic Green's finest lineup since Wild Mongrel, last summer's Constructed rather valued the ability to dodge Sickening Shoal... That, or spit in the face of Ink-Eyes, Servant of Oni.

The point is that the most recent versions of Black Knight and White Knight have from the outset enjoyed, and are now continuing to see, heavy play in Constructed. This is significant for a couple of

reasons: When White Knight reappeared during *Onslaught* Block, few paid any attention. Silver Knight was a powerful weapon against Goblins, and Stoic Champion was an offensive powerhouse that could steal games from more powerful board control decks, but White Knight just seemed out of place and time, with no Lightning Rift to defy nor Goblin Warchief to stymie. Despite an unmatched tournament pedigree that spanned a decade and more, its return just didn't get much attention at all.

Today, though, there is a very real possibility that the rotation of *Kamigawa* Block Samurai will leave any number of decks severely and strategically short-handed. Some decks only need a Hand of Honor and a Manriki-Gusari to fend off any and all B/W overtures, and Hand of Honor is one of the few cheap creatures that can walk away from a combat with Paladin en-Vec. While its updates are not peer to the Bushido versions in terms of creature combat capabilities, *Coldsnap* is doing more than its part to minimize the impact of their losses.



You may notice something very obvious about these creatures, at least in relation to White Knight and Black Knight - they may have the **\*\*** and **♠♠** mana cost... but they are 2/1. While Black Knight and White Knight may be the grandfathers of these drops, they are by no means alone at the top of the legendary mountain. The original "second looks" at Black Knight and White Knight were highly successful and popular redundant drops. So popular that in *Fallen Empires*, each Knight - sorry, *Cleric* - got several changes of clothes.



These creatures were so well loved that they were copied almost *exactly* for *Ice Age*. Via a change in creature type and a little frigid flavor, Order of the White Shield and Knight of Stromgald were born, continuing the good works and villainy of the quick Clerics. When all three (six) were legal in Standard at the same time, debates raged. Which were better, the classic Knights from Alpha or the newfangled "pump" Clerics and their inheritors? The originals had their good points, specifically durability in the face of some kind of Cuombajj Witches... but simple math said that the young faux-Firebreathers had the edge in overall desirability. One point of toughness and a nominal expense on First Strike notwithstanding, three is more than two... and oh what an ability that third one turned out to be!

It was no accident that with increasing regularity Order of the Ebon Hand and Knight of Stromgald began to headline Necropotence creature counts, or that Serrated Arrows - a card that might not see play at all today - started earning comparisons to Wrath of God itself as a defensive first stringer. The reason was that *the "pump" Knights were so much better against control*. It wasn't until a playtest session in 1997 - a bit late, quite frankly - that Andrew Cuneo taught me that if the opponent were U/W, I should never cast a second creature past the first Knight of Stromgald. I could ride that Knight through 20 points, whereas the U/W opponent had to respect its Protection from White - meaning he could not fall back on Swords to Plowshares for spot removal - and that each and every one, worth three or four or sometimes more damage per swing, demanded a Wrath of God all by its lonesome. Given that White has just acquired a reasonable Swords to Plowshares stand-in by way of *Dissension's* Condemn, conservative restraint is a skill that modern Stromgald Crusader players will have to learn in the near future (they will, after all, have plenty to do with their mana).



Generally speaking, White Shield Crusader and Stromgald Crusader compare quite favorably to the original "pump" Knights... They are in essence the same drops, substituting Flying for First Strike. Flying is a much better ability because while First Strike sometimes allows a creature to *win* a fight, Flying allows it to avoid the fight altogether. In a world rife with Carven Caryatids, Flying seems

ideal... Incidentally, even with the pump action firebreathing, I don't see these creatures consistently trading with today's larger creatures (just as Swords to Plowshares made Knight of Stromgald an All Star a decade ago, it prevented the majority of players from running the six mana endgame threats that we see in every deck today).

White Shield Crusader is not *better*, per se, than Hand of Honor - because the samurai's contemporary purview has been to hold the ground against Watchwolf in the early game, deter an entire Orzhov lineup in the middle turns, or laugh off Kird Ape whenever, as its master lines up the rest of his board - but it is probably the more dangerous bear on offense because of the aforementioned and much ballyhooed Firebreathing. We have already started to see Rakdos decks that play relatively few creatures - Johan Sadeghpour's *Ravnica* Block deck ran only eight total, the near-burn Giant Solifuge and Cursed Scroll-reminiscent Rakdos Guildmage - and if ever there were an offensive drop that could masquerade as a Fireball in Rakdos, Stromgald Crusader fits the bill. One or both of these creatures should fit right into Guild decks as soon as *Kamigawa* Block rotates out of Standard, if not immediately.

We think of Black Knight and White Knight as precise mirror images, but the early pundits tended to value Black Knight over White Knight. While each creature boasted a lengthy text box full of special abilities, White Knight had Protection from Terror while by virtue of its color, Black Knight had Protection from both Terror *and* Swords to Plowshares. In the same way, I think that Stromgald Crusader has a slight leg up on its White Shield counterpart (still a fine card, of course) due to incidentals and other available playables. Both creatures can fly and play one-man army corps... but [barring the unusual and relatively recent Hand-in-Hand] only Stromgald Crusader can use its evasion and potentially scary front end to sneak down Okiba-Gang Shinobi. It's subtle, but the other difference is that White Shield Crusader is a Human Knight whereas Stromgald Crusader is a *Zombie* Knight. Along with its tangential Ninja affiliation, Stromgald Crusader comes free with a Lord of the Undead membership card. Might Zombies make a run to be the next Goblins (or at least the next Beasts)? They can certainly have picked up worse new recruits.

If the lay of today's Standard is any indication, both White Shield Crusader and Stromgald Crusader should be Constructed staples that contribute to Boros, Rakdos, and possibly Orzhov attack decks, not to mention whatever new archetypes *Coldsnap* has in store. One thing is for sure, though, and that is with the release of these two, Blue mages everywhere will be glad they have their Spell Snares on the draw!

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