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Playing It Cool: Part 1

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Recently, Washington has been in the grip of a terrible heat wave. The temps have been brutal, made worse by the fact nobody in this state seems to own air conditioning. What does one do when you need to beat the heat? Why, break out the *Coldsnap* packs, of course! Now, I don't mean to suggest that *Coldsnap* cards are somehow more frosty than other **Magic** cards. That would be ridiculous. It's just that playing **Magic** is so cool, you can't help but chill out whenever you're dueling a fellow wizard. Tip to GenCon attendees: Bring a parka.

These next two weeks will be dedicated to exploring and mastering Limited with this newest set. If you haven't yet, I urge you to read Mark Rosewater's "[Feeling a Draft](#)" article. It contains a lot of tips and insights on navigating *Coldsnap* for Limited play. A guide is pretty helpful - while *Coldsnap* is certainly not as diverse as *Ravnica* block drafting, it does provide some rather unique opportunities compared to sets in the past. In addition, getting a handle on this environment has quite a bit of merit. The drafting days of many major events are using *Coldsnap*, in addition to *Coldsnap* appearing on *Magic Online* on August 14th. So for the next two weeks, LI will be devoted to exploring the subtleties of *Coldsnap*'s cards and mechanics.

Snow or No



One of most revolutionary concepts out of *Coldsnap* is this supertype and its mana. Snow permanents are a key theme in the set, and their status and their mana require some exploration. Within the snow category, there are cards that are enhanced by, and cards that punish, snow. Do the rewards outweigh the risk?

Well as far as snow punishers are concerned, there are really very few. The cards that strictly punish your usage of snow permanents are: *Freyalise's Radiance*, *Zombie Musher*, and *Ronom Hulk*, and the Musher is kind of a wash anyway, because it enjoys snow as well as exploiting it.

Since there's very little reason not to play them, we must ask ourselves: is there enough reason to go for snow? Player buzz, tournament results, and the set itself make that answer a resounding yes. The white stuff is like a dash of sugar on your Frosted Flakes - a good thing made *better!*

Rimewind Taskmage is one of the quintessential snow appreciators, a card that gets leagues better frostified. As long we're on the subject, ask me about the combination of snow and *Skred*. (Hint: It's good.)

Instead of the oh-so-obvious, let's instead examine the innocuous seeming *Goblin Rimerunner*. On the surface he appears to be a fine, reasonably costed creature with a useful ability; a quality dude, even sans snow. His status as a snow creature is a bonus, but again, there needs to be other stuff for that to matter. However, when we can power up his snow-mana activated ability, a whole new dimension opens up. From a little guy with a relevant ability, we get the option of *Gray Ogre*, *Goblin Chariot*, or a rather unique combat ability. That's quite a bit of flexibility for a red common, and snow is what makes it happen.

Something like *Frost Raptor* or *Zombie Musher* work in similar ways. The distance from a *Wind Drake* and *Severed Legion* to *Shimmering Glasskite* and *Flayed Nim* is about the span of one Snow-Covered Island. It's not that every card benefits from snow, it's just that snow makes some very solid cards even better. Since there's little reason not to play snow producers, the next logical question is, how high should you draft snow-covered lands?

Going back to MaRo's article, we find this relevant gem:

"How do you make sixty-five commons get as much mileage as possible in draft? Make them all relevant to Limited. That is, cut the bottom percentage; the part that never gets drafted."

The "flattening of the power band" is one of the more intriguing aspects to drafting *Coldsnap*. Creating a high percentage of playable commons mucks with some very fundamental rules in drafting, which makes the whole experience feel rather unique. Nowhere in *Coldsnap* is this more relevant than drafting snow-covered lands. Basically, since the boosters contain a much higher incidence of maindeck-worthy cards, sacrificing a pick here or there shouldn't devastate your finished product. If the boosters have a reasonable collation, and you're reading signals correctly, you should still be able to end up with 22-24 quality cards in two colors. Sometimes you'll play a third color for a splashed *Chill to the Bone* or Snow Faeries, but for the most part, two-color decks are both viable and recommended (Grand Prix--St. Louis had zero three-color decks in their Top 8, versus Grand Prix--Malmo's two). So assuming you're actively trying to draft a quality, consistent deck, finding enough playables should not be a major concern. Therefore taking snow lands, even at relatively high picks, is a sustainable strategy in triple

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Coldsnap.

There is certainly a precedent for taking enablers early. In our recent *Ravnica Limited*, bounce lands were highly desired due to their allowing a drafter to play more colors and make more consistent land drops. Since *Ravnica* cards were so powerful, the means to play those cards were held in high regard. The situation is quite similar in *Coldsnap*. Cards, when fully enhanced by snow, are much more powerful than their thawed cousins. **Chilling Shade** and **Rimebound Dead** require snow to be even considered playable, but **Adarkar Windform** simply gets a lot better when it's unblockable on command. If the power band is flattened and everyone gets a high number of playable cards, you can't simply rely on their poor card quality to win the day. You'll need your cards to be better than theirs, and snow mana helps make it happen. There is some buzz on how snow lands are at least as high a pick as bounce lands were in *Ravnica*. I'm not ready to make that call yet, but for some color combinations, they're certainly close. Regardless on exactly where you rate them, the snow lands are penalty-free cards that enhance your base army. In my limited experience, some of the best decks seem to be snow decks. The two winning GP decks had thirteen snow lands between them. The fact that each winning deck also had a **Scrying Sheets** didn't seem to hurt...



Cumulative Upkeep

Cumulative Upkeep, making its triumphant return from *Ice Age* and *Mirage* blocks, is one tricky mechanic. A card designed to self-destruct is often pure card disadvantage; not a positive for limited play. Most Limited games are won through card quality or card quantity. Giving up the latter for the former is rarely a reliable strategy (see: **Fencer's Magemark**).



However, *Coldsnap's* cumulative upkeep cards are a slightly different animal. For example, in the case of **Magmatic Core**, you'll be willing to accept the possibility of losing the enchantment, right after it decimates your opponent's army. **Arctic Nishoba** or **Jotun Owl Keeper** have under-costed bodies to go along with a demise effect, and hence, are extremely good creatures in *Coldsnap Limited*. These cards have great stats and abilities, but that's not the only reason they're high picks.

Consider cumulative upkeep, besides causing a card to blow up, also puts a moratorium on your development. That means that not only are you going to eventually lose a creature, you're also missing out on playing new cards along the way. That's a rather harsh restriction, although there are ways to offset this. In our previous cards' example, the Owl Keeper and Nishoba all give you something extra on the way out. Therefore, your development wasn't really lost, it's merely channeled in a new direction. Instead of playing, say **Boreal Griffin**, you've been throwing your White mana into bird futures. That's not bad at all, especially when you get to beat face with a 3/3 in the interim. The Nishoba doesn't give you something concrete, but its death grants you back your lost time (Time = Mana + Life). With 6-10 more life to play with, your opponent's exploitation of your frozen development is undone. Then of course there's that 6/6 trample bit. Again, these cards are of a very high quality.

There are two tips I can give you when playing with cards with cumulative upkeep. The first is making them one of the last cards out of your hand. Losing development time means a lot less when a) you've got lots of extra mana to spare, and b) don't have any cards left in your hand to play anyway. Something like **Survivor of the Unseen** is a horrible early or mid-game card. Since its upkeep is so restrictive, drawing extra cards won't much matter. You won't be able to play what you've already drawn, much less anything new you find. However, it's an excellent card in the late game, when you're laden with lands and out of gas. At that point you've got the mana to pay for the Survivor itself, as well as anything it finds you, at least for a few turns. Two Survivors of the Unseen would be my absolute maximum, and even that might be pushing it. Drawing more than one is pretty bad. However, finding one in the late game, especially in a defensive deck that's more likely to live that long, can go a long way to overcoming a parity situation. It's a high price, but a personal **Howling Mine** does win Limited games.

The other component to maximizing cumulative upkeep scenarios is aggression. Since they're not going to be around forever, and you won't be casting much while paying for them, you may as well send them into the red zone. The best way to negate the disadvantage of a creature not long for this world is to make your opponent kill the creature before you'd have to. Ideally, this would happen after a chump block or two. **Ronom Hulk** is a monster in this category. As mentioned above, **Ronom Hulk** is a snow punisher, and the big one at that. It's simply gigantic, and its upkeep is quite manageable. Generally speaking, it's going to require a gang block, **Frozen Solid**, **Chill to the Bone**, or a big **Skred** to handle. All those responses work well for the Hulk player, since he gets his development back and doesn't lose any card advantage. Basically, the Hulk requires extreme measures to handle, usually way before the upkeep becomes problematic. It's just so big! If you don't want to lose out on card advantage, and you don't have one of the few answers, your other option is out aggressing it. Throwing some speed bumps in the way while your **Thermopod** and some Aurochs swing back is highly effective. An excellent counter to cumulative upkeep in general is forcing their creatures on the defensive. As soon as their **Phobian Phantasm** is held back for blocking duty, you're in very good shape. If you've got **Ronom Hulk Smash™** issues, smash back!

That brings us to our little friend, one **Kjeldoran Javelineer**. In draft, this is a horrid turn 1 play, joining such luminaries **Straw Golem**, **Phyrexian Dreadnought**, **Mwonvuli Ooze**, and **Camel**. Playing the Javelineer on your first turn means you've chosen to stop playing future spells for your next x turns. In return, you *probably* won't be attacked for x turns. I say probably because if your opponent does want to off the little 1/2 and attack for 13 points, you can't really prevent it. In exchange for a temporary Peacekeeper, you get to preserve your starting life total and watch your opponent play a new and exciting creature every turn. *Maybe* you can set some elaborate trap with **Sunscour**, but more than likely, you'll be giving up around turn 6 and watch their creatures come crashing in. During this whole process, they get to stockpile their removal and use it on whatever creature they actually want to kill. You know, the ones that don't die to themselves. If cumulative upkeep cards are about aggression and minimizing development loss, a turn 1 Javelineer fails badly on both criteria. Is there a way to make the card work? You betcha.

Let's instead assume you spent your early turns leading with **Ronom Unicorns**, **Squall Drifters**, **Bull Aurochs**, and maybe a couple **Sound the Call**. Now you can play **Kjeldoran Javelineer**, and after it's built up enough ~~pointy stick~~ age counters, start sending your team in. This is a far better position for you - Javelineer is being used for offense instead of defense because you've spent your early turns creating board position. It's certainly not a foolproof plan... your opponent could destroy the Javelineer before the declare blockers step and eviscerate your army. Because of that possibility, I'm still not a real fan of the card. However, in the right deck, it does have some potential, assuming you can offset the inherent restrictions in cumulative upkeep. Played correctly, all the cumi' cards can be quite powerful. They just take a wee bit of finesse to maximize.



Ripple

Ripple is the last *Coldsnap* aspect we're going to talk about today, and it's a doozy. While there have been individual cards that fit the bill, there have not been many mechanics lately that have the potential to be as overwhelming to an opponent as a big ripple chain. The possibilities are immense, and they're more than worth exploring in detail. Here's how to play with, and against, the ripple cards of *Coldsnap*.

Surging Flame: The Red version is by far the most inherently useful card to cast with zero chance of copying it. Because of that, **Surging Flame** is going to be a high pick, even for players not going for a ripple-based strategy. Its consistent value and splashability means the need to combat it won't come up very often, as the quantity of **Surging Flames** should be spread pretty thin. The only way to really play around it would be to stop playing creatures, and that doesn't seem very sensible. The ripple *should* be a little random - I don't think the **Surging Flame** player or his opponent will be expecting a mass replicate turn. That means if they have a creature you want to kill, don't wait around for them to play a second low-toughness creature. Similarly, don't hold back on guys on the fear of losing them all to dupes **Surging Flame**. Most games, it will be a **Shock** with just the occasional bonus.

Surging Might: I was completely enamored with this card early on, but since then my estimation has dropped a bit. It certainly offers a lot of potential power, and as Green has plenty of good commons, these can go relatively late. My issue with **Surging Might** is finding the time to playing them. Early on, you can make a single gigantic creature, but that maximizes your risk to a lone removal spell. Later on, you could slip a few out on your big Green monsters, but frankly, those creatures should be the biggest creatures on the board already. Putting three **Surging Might** on three **Aurochs Herd** is certainly not a bad turn. I just don't see how that play will actually swing the game from a bad position to a good one. Eighteen points of attacking trample already looks more than appealing from this end. While *their* Might(s) may open up 2-6 points of extra damage, your normal deck should be able to combat, and you may even garner some card advantage along the way. For example, you'd still be tapping their **Karplusan Strider** with **Squall Drifter**, even if it wasn't a 5/6. For the **Surging Might** player, the sweet spot is in the early game, but with a ripple spread over multiple creatures. Double **Bull Aurochs**, maybe with a **Boreal Centaur**, all receiving a few +2+2s works very well. The deck that wants **Surging Might** is specialized, but it does exist. In that archetype it's a genuine danger.



Surging Sentinels: The Sentinels are the second most abstractly dangerous ripple cards, behind **Surging Dementia**. Unlike the discard spell, these cards are playable (although unexciting) by their lonesome. The scary part is that they're not particularly great without multiples, so they tend to fall into the lap of whichever White drafter is willing to take the plunge. You can be that guy, and even if you only snag three through the course of the packs, you still get adequate creatures. However, if you're the guy who can grab six or more, you've got the potential for a disgusting third turn. Simply put, six or eight power worth of creatures on turn 3 is a tough hole to crawl out of. Add that to the fact that the Sentinels player still has the rest of his hand to push them forward (e.g. **Kjeldoran War Cry**), and you've got a lot of represented danger

However, all is not lost for the Sentinels' opponent. First of all, ripple drafting is risky business. Sentinels or Dementia on their do not produce much impact. Weak or unusual packs can mean your first couple of ripple picks end up on the bench. Secondly, hate drafting's value goes up slightly in *Coldsnap* drafting. Again due to that flattened power band, people can squander their picks on more than just snow-covered lands. If the table wants

to prevent any one player from getting all of a particular ripple card, there's not a whole lot the stymied drafter can do about it. Defensive drafting is a flawed strategy in general, but if just half the table removes a single ripple card from a drafter collecting them, that deck takes a very big hit at very little cost to whomever did the hating.

Should you be concerned about a big Sentinels turn, and it will indeed happen sometimes, an opposing player still has options. **Martyr of Ashes** is an extremely effective retort; you might be able to snag a **Kjeldoran Outrider** on the way out as well! Feasts of Flesh can undo some early damage. Anything with three toughness is going to at least require another card from the Sentinels player to punch through. Then of course there's the possibility of not casting them on turn 3. Multiple **Surging Sentinels** simply look less imposing after the other side has already gotten their defenses in place. Their potential is genuine, but right now, I think the system has enough checks built in that turbo-Sentinel will be more of a fringe strategy than a fundamental one.

Surging Aether: Now this is a card I've been appreciating quite a bit in recent weeks. Even without a ripple, an instant-speed bounce spell is nothing to totally disregard. Even if it's a touch overpriced, this bounce spell does have the advantage of being able to hit all permanents. That inclusive ability has a number of advantages. You can take back your own **Surging Might** or **Surging Sentinels** for another spin. You can bounce your cumulative card when it becomes cumbersome. You can even bounce their lands before their upkeep, perhaps killing a cumulative upkeep creature with a tempo kicker.

Even with all those advantages, on its own the Aether probably wouldn't be a particularly powerful addition to a draft deck. Four mana is a lot to give up for an ephemeral return, flexible or otherwise. However, adding even a single ripple opens up a whole new world of potency. I would certainly pay an additional mana for an instant-speed Undo. I would be more than excited to pay four for a triple **Vacuumelt**. If you don't want to bounce blockers, casting a one-sided Sunder is also an effective way to press an advantage. The final appeal of a rippled Aether is its capacity to trump *their* ripple. Dementia aside, **Surging Aether** stacks up well against their **Surging Flame**, excellently against their **Surging Might**, and is a reasonable defense against their Sentinels. It's not the perfect card, but in this environment it's a lot better than it appears at first blush.

Surging Dementia: And finally, the all-in option. Usually this card is either bananas or downright terrible. The turn 2 **Wit's End** seems incredible, but oh so many things have to go right. Beyond the opening and drafting restrictions from above, you've got the issue of playing with a near unplayable card if you *don't* ripple. No other ripple effect can swing the game so decisively so early, but by the same token, no other ripple card has less impact than this does as a singleton. I don't want to say the 1-to-1 or 2-to-1 is completely worthless. With cumulative upkeep and an overall dearth of discard effects in **Coldsnap**, people *are* going to be playing out a lot of their lands. As such, you are slightly more likely to tag a business card, especially if you can get off a duplication. It's not particularly reliable though, and it will certainly be the last card you want to topdeck if you're getting beaten down. Once in a great while someone is going to rip a hand to shreds, but far more often people are going to try and fail. I would suggest going for it if you had no other way to win, but it requires *such* a commitment early on. I'd do my best to avoid this path, and the pros seem to agree. Here are the quantities of each ripple card appearing in the Top 8 decks of Grand Prix Malmo and St. Louis:



Surging Flame: 8
Surging Might: 9
Surging Sentinels: 12
Surging Aether: 9
Surging Dementia: 0

The environment is young, but those are pretty telling numbers. If you're still worried, allow me to allay your concerns with a simple reminder: There's absolutely nothing you can do about their massive turn 2 Dementia. If it hits, you're sunk. Good luck!

That's all for now, but come back next week where we continue to examine the **Coldsnap** version of Limited play. Until then, stay cool and thanks for reading

-Noah Weil



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