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# Eight Roads to The Finals

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*Swimming With Sharks*  
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The Finals: If you haven't heard of it, the Finals is Japan's most prestigious invitation-only event of the year. Like a mini-premiere event, sort of the Japanese All-Star Game, the Finals only allows a select few (108 last year, 94 in 2004) to participate... and when the smoke clears, what a select few they are!

Last year's The Finals finals was a battle between [Pro Tour - Kobe](#) (the *other* Pro Tour - Kobe) Champion Masahiro Kuroda, with his tuned Eminent Domain deck, and Level 6 Mage Shuuhei Nakamura and his post-Worlds Hattori-Hanzo Tron. In the deciding match of the 2005 event, Kuroda's mana control was perfectly keyed to disrupt the center of Nakamura's core advantage - the UrzaTron - and turned it into a virtual mirror match...one where Kuroda had all the card advantage. The Finals in 2005 featured a star-studded Top 8 of Pro Tour Champion Shuu Komuro, Grand Prix dominator Masahiko Morita, and rogue flagbearer Akira Asahara. The coolest thing? Both Morita and Asahara played 240+ card [Battle of Wits](#) decks featuring lone copies of [Wandering Ones!](#)



The previous year had no less impressive a finale. While it wasn't quite the first Japanese Pro Tour Champion once more collecting top honors, Akira Asahara was no slouch as the Finals winner. The tournament took place at the height of Affinity's dominance, and the Standard portion was more than one-quarter [Arcbound Ravagers](#). Beating the best with a then-unusual u/G deck must have been all the sweeter for deck designer Asahara. His win over the legendary Erhnam, Jin Okamoto, was made with a rogue forerunner to what (in Affinity's absence) would itself become a Deck to Beat.

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### Masashiro Kuroda – Annex Wildfire

The Finals Champion 2005

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
1 Island	4 Annex	2 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	2 Boros Signet	3 Bottle Gnomes
1 Minamo, School at Water's Edge	4 Dimir Signet	2 Cranial Extraction
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	4 Dream Leash	3 Hinder
2 Mountain	2 Fellwar Stone	2 Persecute
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	1 Honden of Seeing Winds	1 Pyroclasm
4 Shivan Reef	3 Icy Manipulator	2 Smash
1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse	4 Mana Leak	
1 Sulfurous Springs	3 Pyroclasm	15 sideboard cards
4 Tendo Ice Bridge	2 Tidings	
2 Underground River	4 Wildfire	
4 Watery Grave		
23 lands	33 other spells	
2 Keiga, the Tide Star		
2 Kokusho, the Evening Star		
4 creatures		

### Akira Asahara – G/U Control

The Finals Champion 2004

Main Deck 60 cards		
3 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Birds of Paradise	4 Beacon of Creation
17 Forest	4 Eternal Witness	4 Kodama's Reach
1 Island	1 Meloku the Clouded Mirror	4 Plow Under

21 lands	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	2 Rude Awakening
	4 Viridian Shaman	3 Sensei's Divining Top
	2 Wood Elves	3 Sword of Fire and Ice
19 creatures		20 other spells

This year, a stack of players is once again gathering to be the next Asahara, the next Kuroda. They are sticking it out in [Pro Tour Qualifier](#)-like events for the opportunity to battle in The Finals 2006. Here are the Top 8 decks from a recent Standard Qualifier at [Pro Tour - Kobe](#).

Yuuma Shiota – Boros Deck Wins		Finals Qualifier Top 8	
<b>Main Deck</b> 60 cards		<b>Sideboard</b>	
4 Battlefield Forge	4 Char	4 Cryoclast	
2 Boros Garrison	4 Lightning Helix	2 Disenchant	
1 Flagstones of Trokair	4 Rift Bolt	3 Honorable Passage	
2 Gemstone Mine	4 Seal of Fire	3 Pacifism	
4 Mountain	4 Volcanic Hammer	3 Ronom Unicorn	
4 Plains			
4 Sacred Foundry	20 other spells	15 sideboard cards	
21 lands			
4 Giant Solifuge			
4 Knight of the Holy Nimbus			
3 Magus of the Scroll			
4 Savannah Lions			
4 Soltari Priest			
19 creatures			

This Boros deck is built on a 19/20/21 model but, unlike most that bias against a single card to add a land, keeps the full twenty burn spells in the "stuff" category and actually cuts a creature.

What is not unusual - but also not stock - is Shiota's two-drop suite of [Knight of the Holy Nimbus](#) and [Soltari Priest](#) (together hell on other Red Decks), but his choice of four-drops. I don't think I've seen [Giant Solifuge](#) main in a Boros deck outside of Pro Tour - Charleston...In this deck, the Solifuge is essentially another burn spell, a very good one that is the perfect post-[Wrath of God](#) play.

Yoshito Kawabata – Boros Deck Wins		Finals Qualifier Top 8	
<b>Main Deck</b> 60 cards		<b>Sideboard</b>	
4 Battlefield Forge	4 Char	1 Boros Garrison	
3 Boros Garrison	4 Lightning Helix	4 Disenchant	
4 Flagstones of Trokair	4 Shock	3 Giant Solifuge	
2 Gemstone Mine	2 Sunforger	4 Stone Rain	
4 Sacred Foundry	2 Volcanic Hammer	1 Wildfire Emissary	
4 Snow-Covered Plains	16 other spells	2 Worship	
21 lands		15 sideboard cards	
4 Knight of the Holy Nimbus			
2 Magus of the Scroll			
4 Savannah Lions			
3 Serra Avenger			
4 Skyknight Legionnaire			
4 Soltari Priest			
2 Wildfire Emissary			
23 creatures			

Aaron Forsythe has said that Development's agenda over the past couple of blocks has been to extirpate the Tier One card as much as possible and turn Standard into a sea of good, but Tier *Two*, cards. It is pretty interesting given that context to look at two different Boros decks from the same Top 8, recognize that both players went up the chain to the forbidden four-drop (with Kawabata even playing [Giant Solifuge](#)

himself)...Yet observing that the decks not agree about what that four-drop should be.

Kawabata's deck is really unusual. It is not, like most Boros decks these days, built on a 20/20/20 model. Maybe more unusual than its **Wildfire Emissaries** is the attempt to utilize a card that everyone already agreed was very good (but sees little play), **Sunforger**. Unlike some **Sunforger** attempts in the past with extravagant singletons and bullets like **Master Warcraft**, Kawabata's version can fetch only **Shock**, **Lightning Helix**, and **Char**, with **Disenchant** out of the board. Most games, they are probably enough.

One thing to be aware of in tuning your own Boros decks is to err your manabase's 21 (or so) lands more to the Kawabata model than older land bases. Obviously you want to play **Boros Garrison** - it's one of the main reasons you would go Boros over **Zoo at all** - but whether you play two, three, or all four guild-stamped **Karros** is less important than figuring a different specialty land. This format is one where **Smallpox** is a key threat, especially for small creatures in the early game. If you aren't prepared with one of the best cards in the format *for* one of the best cards in the format, don't bother showing up. Kawabata played four copies of **Flagstones of Trokair**; if you go Boros, you probably should, too.



### Kyouhei Kawaguchi – Glare of Subdual

Finals Qualifier Top 8

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
4 Brushland	4 Call of the Herd	3 Bathe in Light
1 Flagstones of Trokair	2 Glare of Subdual	3 Carven Caryatid
5 Forest	2 Stonewood Invocation	2 Condemn
1 Pendelhaven		3 Giant Solifuge
3 Plains	8 other spells	3 Seed Spark
2 Selesnya Sanctuary		1 Thelonite Hermit
4 Temple Garden		
3 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree		
23 lands		15 sideboard cards
1 Birds of Paradise		
4 Llanowar Elves		
4 Loxodon Hierarch		
3 Saffi Eriksdotter		
4 Scryb Ranger		
4 Selesnya Guildmage		
3 Spectral Force		
2 Thelonite Hermit		
4 Yavimaya Dryad		
29 creatures		

Kawaguchi's deck is thematically similar to the Burt Colorado Champs version we looked at last week, but predates it by a week or two.

The defining element of this deck is obviously **Scryb Ranger** synergy. Turn one **Llanowar Elves**, turn two **Scryb Ranger**, turn three **Spectral Force**! Rah! **Scryb Ranger** gets **Spectral Force** out a full turn faster and keeps **Spectral Force** a vigorous attacker and surprise (I mean if the opponent is *really bad*, at least) blocker even against non-black. With **Glare of Subdual**, **Scryb Ranger** doubles up the already robust **Glare** defensive capabilities.

One thing that I don't know if I've mentioned before but is probably important to point out is that **Spectral Force** tramples all over **Akroma, Angel of Wrath**. **Glare** is generally a dog to **Solar Flare**, but if **Solar Flare**'s eggs are all in the 6/6 basket, there are worse spots for the beatdown deck to be in than smashing with an 8/8 monstrosity, especially gripping **Stonewood Invocation**.

### Ryou Tamura – Glare X

Finals Qualifier Top 8

Main Deck 61 cards		Sideboard
4 Brushland	4 Call of the Herd	4 Giant Solifuge
1 Flagstones of Trokair	2 Demonfire	3 Seed Spark
4 Forest	1 Disintegrate	4 Serrated Arrows
1 Pendelhaven	3 Glare of Subdual	2 Spike Feeder
1 Plains	3 Stonewood Invocation	2 Tormod's Crypt

2 Selesnya Sanctuary	13 other spells	15 sideboard cards
3 Stomping Ground		
4 Temple Garden		
3 Vitu-Ghazi, the City-Tree		
23 lands		
2 Birds of Paradise		
4 Llanowar Elves		
4 Loxodon Hierarch		
3 Saffi Eriksdotter		
2 Selesnya Guildmage		
2 Spectral Force		
4 Thelonite Hermit		
4 Yavimaya Dryad		
25 creatures		

Here is a Glare deck that doesn't just roll up into a ball, suck its thumb, and weep itself to sleep in the corner when the opponent flips **Fortune Thief**. Utilizing the synergy between **Yavimaya Dryad** and **Stomping Ground**, Tamura works his **Birds of Paradise** a little bit harder than the average G/W while simultaneously changing the math many control players hold as sacrosanct.



Unlike many **Glare of Subdual** decks that sometimes stop on 19 when they can no longer penetrate the Red Zone, unlike the vast majority that can't deal with a utility creature, Tamura's packs X-spells: **Demonfire** and **Disintegrate**!

He's obviously got to cheat on the numbers (only two **Selesnya Guildmages** for instance), and I'm not actually sure it's *better* to splash Red, but Ryou certainly creates a wrinkle that the opponent can't ignore. Unless he is forced to expose his plan prematurely (showing a **Stomping Ground**, say), Tamura should be able to manipulate his opponent's expectations and steal games with this classic roguish tweak. I know more than one magician who would probably have slapped down **Fortune Thief** and expected a concession, only to bite it long to some nasty surprise.

Kenjiro Goto – Scryb & Force		
Finals Qualifier Top 8		 
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
4 Breeding Pool	4 Call of the Herd	3 Krosan Grip
8 Forest	4 Psionic Blast	3 Looming Shaman
2 Island	4 Remand	4 Repeal
1 Pendelhaven	3 Stonewood Invocation	3 Shadow of Doubt
4 Yavimaya Coast		2 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir
19 lands	15 other spells	15 sideboard cards
4 Birds of Paradise		
4 Llanowar Elves		
3 Mystic Snake		
4 Plaxmanta		
4 Scryb Ranger		
3 Spectral Force		
4 Yavimaya Dryad		
26 creatures		

Every time I read those 19 lands my eyes bleed. I'd recommend that you not try to get away with this particular mana count, but Scryb & Force seems firmly established at that sub-20 mana count, and it seems to be Top 8 every time I review decks. To be fair, Goto *does* run eight one drop accelerators, **Yavimaya Dryad**, and the namesake **Scryb Ranger**, which functionally jacks his primary mana count to 27, arguably as high as 58.3%. Just

don't get too comfortable against **Shadow Guildmage** (although if you can weather that *Mirage* bugbear just long enough to stick *oneSpectral Force*, it will likely be enough).

As congruous as Goto's maindeck is with other Scryb & Force decks from Lord of **Magic** and some cribbed North American Champs lists, his sideboard quite interesting. Teferi is not someone I would expect...The Mage of Zhalfir is an absolute monster against **Restore Balance**, **Ancestral Visions**, or **Greater Gargadon**. **Shadow of Doubt** (vs. **Dragonstorm**), **Krosan Grip** (vs. **Enduring Renewal**), and **Loaming Shaman** (vs. various **Firemane** or **Wrathful Angels** deposited via **Compulsive Research**) all seem to point this sideboard's desire in one direction: "Let's have a fair fight."

How fair is it, really, when one guy packs an 8/8 for five?

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
1 Island	4 Compulsive Research	2 Annex
3 Shivan Reef	2 Demonfire	3 Cancel
4 Steam Vents	2 Dimir Signet	1 Govern the Guildless
1 Urza's Factory	2 Electrolyze	2 Pyroclasm
4 Urza's Mine	3 Izzet Signet	3 Volcanic Hammer
4 Urza's Power Plant	3 Mana Leak	2 Willbender
4 Urza's Tower	1 Rakdos Signet	2 Wrecking Ball
2 Watery Grave	4 Remand	
23 lands	3 Repeal	15 sideboard cards
	4 Spell Snare	
	2 Tidings	
	3 Wildfire	
3 Bogardan Hellkite	33 other spells	
1 Draining Whelk		
4 creatures		

We've seen many an **Urza's Factory**...but what about the twelve Urza's lands that have dominated Standard from Tooth and Nail and BlueTooth in 2005 to URzaTron at Pro Tour Honolulu through Tron-Wildfire and SSS 'Tron during the 2006 Championship Season? What about that fearsome threesome of Mine, Power Plant, and Tower?

For the past year, at least since 2005 Worlds and the environment-changing Hattori-Hanzo Tron, the mantra of UrzaTron players has been to run game like Blue Control but with more mana. At Pro Tour - Honolulu, Osyp Lebedowicz made his money and Top 8 by tapping out for Keiga and Meloku because, really, what can the opponent do that is scarier?

The question for *Time Spiral* UrzaTron players is *what are my Keiga and Meloku*? The current trend suggests, and Honda's Finals Qualifier Top 8 decklist seems to indicate, that the answers are **Bogardan Hellkite** and **Draining Whelk**. **Draining Whelk** is kind of a Keiga, but is also very limited, even if it echoes the Tide Star's two-for-one monolith role. **Draining Whelk** comes down, and comes down *big*. The disadvantage, though, is that where a year ago a 'Tron player could tap for Keiga and slap it onto the board to scare off three Boros creatures, a *current* 'Tron player has to wait for an opportunity, and can't proactively halt the opponent's advance, at least without additional setup, tools, or mana.

**Bogardan Hellkite** is obviously an amazing creature, and with the UrzaTron bankrolling it, can be more deadly to weenie strategies than even the Clouded Mirror of Victory. While in some sense ideal for 'Tron, there is still the question of hitting *eight* excruciating mana. No one is saying 'Tron can't hit...The question is whether the tempo shift can or will occur before an aggressive opponent has the big spell deck in burn range. While flash makes **Bogardan Hellkite** a reasonable test spell, eight mana is still a lot to ask against an opposing **Island**.



Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
3 Adarkar Wastes	3 Azorius Signet	1 Angel's Grace
3 Azorius Chancery	4 Cancel	1 Circle of Protection: Red
1 Flagstones of Trokair	3 Condemn	1 Condemn
4 Hallowed Fountain	2 Faith's Fetters	2 Disenchant
6 Island	4 Remand	1 Repeal
	1 Rewind	1 Rewind

5 Plains	3 Sacred Mesa	1 Serrated Arrows
2 Urza's Factory	2 Teferi's Moat	1 Spell Burst
24 lands	4 Think Twice	3 Spell Snare
	4 Wrath of God	2 Temporal Isolation
		1 Vanish into Memory
4 Court Hussar	30 other spells	15 sideboard cards
2 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir		
6 creatures		

This is one of the many looks at U/W Control available for Standard play. The rotation of the *Kamigawa* Dragons has really put the various Control finishers up for grabs...Different decks run *Akroma*, *Angel of Wrath*, *Tidespout Tyrant*, *Debtors' Knell*, *Windreaver*, sub-reanimation themes, or *Phyrexian Ironfoot* out of a Snow engine. Nishiwaki's victory conditions range from the mainstream (*Court Hussar* and *Sacred Mesa*) to the unusual (Teferi in U/W specifically), with *Urza's Factory* making yet another appearance in a long-game blue deck.

*Sacred Mesa* is one of those cards that has really improved since its initial run. You can create a Pegasus token on upkeep and sacrifice the new one, which will allow you to swing with all your remaining flyers under Classic rules (in the old days you couldn't activate the Mesa until you had paid the upkeep). Especially with room for five basic Plains, I would rate U/W Control as another candidate for four *Flagstones of Trokair*.

Main Deck 60 cards		Sideboard
2 Adarkar Wastes	3 Azorius Signet	3 Annex
2 Azorius Chancery	3 Careful Consideration	1 Condemn
3 Caves of Koilos	4 Compulsive Research	3 Faith's Fetters
1 Godless Shrine	3 Condemn	1 Govern the Guildless
2 Hallowed Fountain	3 Dimir Signet	2 Mortify
1 Island	2 Dread Return	1 Persecute
1 Orzhov Basilica	2 Mana Leak	1 Resurrection
2 Plains	2 Persecute	2 Sacred Ground
1 Prahv, Spires of Order	4 Remand	1 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir
2 Swamp	4 Wrath of God	15 sideboard cards
2 Underground River	30 other spells	
1 Urza's Factory		
3 Watery Grave		
23 lands		
2 Akroma, Angel of Wrath		
3 Angel of Despair		
2 Skeletal Vampire		
7 creatures		

Okano's deck is nothing *really* out of the ordinary for a Solar Flare deck in the current metagame. He has a solid 23 lands and six Signets, making for more robust proactive development than some versions, or probably *Solar Pox*, and keeps the two *Persecutes* and four *Remands* that were staple throughout the pre-*Time Spiral* summer.

I actually really like *Skeletal Vampire* in Solar Flare. The more we have tested the big spell mid-range control decks against one another, the more I remember why *Skeletal Vampire* was so dominant in Charleston. More often than not, *Skeletal Vampire* on six is better than *Angel of Despair* on seven; the ability to produce tokens is really useful with *Dread Return*, and Tetsuya has not just four *Compulsive Researches* main, but three *Careful Considerations* to set up the graveyard.

As far as defense, Okano has literally no Mortifies main, which might not be a very good choice in the post-Champs meta with G/W *Glare of Subdual* a top deck, so *Angel of Despair* (especially from the graveyard, and quickly) becomes a more important defensive measure and racer.

The unique elements - and I think they are a good pair - are the two *Mana Leaks* starting (literally no one will play around them, especially now that *Solar Pox* has no permission, not even *Remand*), and *Prahv, Spires of Order*. *Prahv* was a minority - but exceedingly annoying - land at Pro Tour - Charleston. At sufficient mana, it will force the opponent to commit multiple permanents to the board, allowing Okano to get two-for-one or better with *Wrath of God*. *Prahv* is also superb in long game situations against big finishers as bad as *Akroma*, and can even stop *Disintegrate* (and, in lazy cases, *Demonfire*). This card, while very expensive, is not easy to beat from a topdeck situation and is probably underplayed overall.

Every day people ask me what the best deck in Standard is. I don't know. I don't know if there *is* a best deck. Right now there are so many great and unique ideas, it seems very difficult to get a legitimate edge, and as



players modify their Champs and stock lists, even secret elbow drops like Fortune Thief and the wildfire-hot Solar Pox are being outmoded or reinvented on a daily basis. While some of these decks from The Finals Qualifier Kobe weekend are a mite older than the Champs decks, I think that they, too, offer some interesting ideas that can be hybridized with other data as we continue to innovate and invigorate the *Time Spiral* Standard format.

Mike has been a leading voice in the game's strategy for as long as there has been a **Magic** Internet. He is the former editor of *The Magic Dojo* and a sometime Pro player. *Michael J. Flores: Deckade*, is a compilation of Mike's first ten years of strategy and theory (i.e. before he joined **magicthegathering.com**), and is available at <http://www.top8magic.com>.



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