

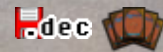
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Friday, January 11, 2008

Happy New Year everyone! I hope your holiday season was reasonably stress-free and that you are up to the task of the fresh Extended PTQ season for Pro Tour-Hollywood. While there had been a PTQ at Worlds, the season kicked off in earnest this past weekend with a half-dozen tournaments in North America alone.

I was not able to attend my local tournament but I kept close tabs on how everyone was doing and was shocked to hear that the Top 8 players out of the 180 competitors at New York's Neutral Ground were all sporting four copies each of Tarmogoyf and Dark Confidant. That's right, a full 32 out of 32 Tarmogoyfs and Dark Confidants occupied the Top 8 table. On top of that there were 20-plus copies of Doran, Vindicate, and Cabal Therapy. The Winter King tournament held over the break between Worlds and the start of the PTQ season had transformed the New York metagame into a tangled jungle of Treefolk lightly populated with a Zoo of creatures.

Kentucky's Bluegrass Magic is quickly becoming a leading indicator in Constructed metagames. You may remember that in the weeks leading up to last season's U.S. Nationals they held a Standard tournament that propelled Blink-based decks to the forefront of the metagame. The newly minted Winter King tournament seems to have had an even more resounding impact on Extended, with Owen Turtenwald's winning list from that event (or close approximations of that list) taking six of the Top 8 berths at the New York PTQ with the other two spots going to the always popular Domain Zoo archetype.

Chad Kastel



Main Deck

60 cards

- 1 Bloodstained Mire
- 1 Forest
- 1 Godless Shrine
- 1 Okina, Temple to the Grandfathers
- 2 Overgrown Tomb
- 1 Plains
- 2 Polluted Delta
- 1 Shizo, Death's Storehouse
- 1 Swamp
- 2 Temple Garden
- 4 Treetop Village
- 1 Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth
- 4 Windswept Heath

22 lands

- 4 Birds of Paradise
- 4 Dark Confidant
- 4 Doran, the Siege Tower
- 1 Elves of Deep Shadow
- 3 Eternal Witness

Sideboard

- 3 Extirpate
- 4 Gaddock Teeg
- 3 Harmonic Sliver
- 3 Pernicious Deed
- 1 Profane Command
- 1 Putrefy

15 sideboard cards

- 4 Cabal Therapy
- 1 Chrome Mox
- 3 Smother
- 2 Thoughtseize
- 2 Umezawa's Jitte
- 4 Vindicate
- 16 other spells

2 Loxodon Hierarch

4 Tarmogoyf

22 creatures

As you can imagine, this caused quite a buzz over the weekend and emails were flying about on various mailing lists about the New York results. Was it going to be like this all over the country? Would there be 192 Tarmogoyfs in the six Top 8s? As reports began to trickle in from around the country, it became apparent that the local metagames were getting wildly different results than the New York tournament, with fewer copies of the Doran deck in the Top 8 of the other five North American events than were in the Top 8 of New York. What was also apparent that there was some pretty amazing national networking going on with some of the younger PTQ players hungry to participate in their first Pro Tour.

While the PTQ Top 8 decklist page is not updated until Wednesday each week (and I am sure the tech starved among you descend upon it almost immediately after it goes live), that was not good enough for Gavin Verhey and Asher Hecht. By Sunday evening I had the following scouting report blinking from my inbox from Gavin (I have included links to each individual result so you can see how close this info was, as of Sunday evening):

New York

6 Doran (!)

2 Domain Zoo

Orlando

1st place- Dredge

2nd place- Dredge

3rd Place- Domain Zoo (losing to Dredge)

4th Place- Domain Zoo (losing to Dredge)

5th Place- Dredge (losing to Dredge)

6th Place- Chase Rare Control- (Losing to Domain Zoo)

7th Place- Doran (Losing to Domain Zoo)

8th Place- ??? (Losing to Dredge)

Detroit

1st place- Domain Zoo (WINNER)

2nd place- Next Level Blue (Chapin, scooped in finals.)

3-4th place- U/G Tron

3-4th place- Ideal (Adam Yurchick)

5-8th place- R/G

5-8th place- U/B Countertop

5-8th place- Flow (Cedric Phillips)

5-8th place- Next Level Blue without Living Wish (Owen Turtenwald)

Roanoke

1st place- Next Level Blue

2nd place- Doran

3-4th place- Dredge

3-4th place- Dredge

5-8th place- "Jugan" blue

5-8th place- Doran

5-8th place- Affinity Green w/Goyf

5-8th place- Intruder Alarm Elves



Boston

1st/2nd place- U/W/b Wizards (???? First or second place.

Asher says first, other reports say second)

1st/2nd place- Red aggro (domain zoo I think,)

3rd place - Doran

4th - R/G Aggro

U/W tron

???

???

???

St. Louis

There was a dredge and a red aggro deck (Domain Zoo probably) in the top eight of the Saint Louis PTQ, but that's all I know.

It would turn out that Turtenwald was playing Living Wish, the intriguing Fish/Wizards list finished second at Boston, and that Dredge won St. Louis but considering that the report came in less than 24 hours after the last of these events reached its conclusion, it was remarkably on target and a pretty useful tool for anyone who wanted to squeeze some extra days out of this week for playtesting. I followed up with both Gavin—who has appeared in this column multiple times—and Asher to find out a little bit more about how they were gearing up in their efforts to play in a Pro Tour for the first time, which they both cited as their goal for this PTQ season.

As Asher has watched a close friend elevate his game to the next level, it has served as his inspiration to do the same.

"The idea of playing a game that I love with some awesome people at a professional level is just so insane," marveled Asher at what it would be like to finally play on the Pro Tour after serving several years in the JSS/MSS ranks. "I have recently, in the past few months, become even more motivated to succeed at **Magic** because of my friend Steve Sadin. He went on a tear after Grand Prix–Columbus to make Level 3 and during that process we talked about how much he wanted it. He was so hell-bent on achieving his goal that he traveled around the world (a bit further than I am willing to go for a PTQ). Him reaching his goal has further galvanized me to get my act together and qualify. I guess that by being in contact with him while he was really motivated transferred 'the fire' to me and now I am doing pretty much everything in my power to increase my chances of qualifying. This means looking at and testing tons of decks and clocking as many PTQs as possible."

Both players began their preparations for this season by testing stock decks out against each other. In addition to the more recent Winter King lists, they chose decks that did well at Pro Tour–Valencia (which included looking beyond the Top 8 at decks like Thomas Refsdal's Cephalid Life deck and the much feared Dredge decks that everyone was gunning for at Valencia). Gavin was concerned that based on the incredibly powerful deck failing to take a Top 8 berth in Valencia players would make the mistake of easing up on their sideboard plan for the deck. Based on the deck's dominating performances in Roanoke, St. Louis, and Orlando, that was clearly the case in some regions of the country.

"Dredge won two PTQ's this past weekend because I don't think the majority of people realized how powerful it is," explained Gavin with what I can only imagine was a sad shake of his head. "It takes far more than four sideboarded copies of Leyline of the Void, Tormod's Crypt, Gaddock Teeg, or Yixlid Jailer to beat it. People were assuming that they had time against Dredge and that Dredge wouldn't have good enough plans against sideboarded hate but half of the time you're just dead on turn two or



EXTENDED RESOURCES

Are you ready to roll up your sleeves and dive into the Extended metagame? Here are a few links you should check out on **Magicthegathering.com**:

- Hollywood PTQ Season Top 8 Decklists
- Pro Tour–Valencia Day Two Decklists
- Gatherer: Legal Cards in Extended
- Forum: Extended Format

three. If you want a chance at beating Dredge, you usually need at least six sideboarded cards if you're a deck that can apply quick pressure and preferably eight if you're a control deck that needs to take time to win. Knowing this kind of information by heart is a vital skill that playtesting stock versions of decks gives you."

With the knowledge of the format squared away it is time to build decks—whether that means choosing an existing list, tweaking those lists to suit the expected metagame, or creating something new that is up to the task of beating the enemy.

"In the past month, I have made over 30 rogue decks using cards from the obvious (Tarmogoyf) to the forgotten (Necrogen Mists) to the just straight-up unplayable anywhere else (Heal the Scars). Sure, some of these decks don't last more than an hour because I realize that they have no chance of winning a PTQ even if I put more effort into them, and no more than five or six actually found their way into serious testing sessions, but I also found a lot of niche strategies and individual cards that work against established decks," Gavin continued. "This format is so wide open that numerous cards and strategies remain unexploited, and I think that rogue decks have a better chance of winning in this format than any other."

Asher's testing process started a little slower than Gavin's.

"I began testing Extended decks a little bit after the Pro Tour," explained Asher. "I wasn't doing anything that extensive, but I wanted to get a feel for the decks that had been successful. After that I didn't play much until the week of Worlds when I decided that I was going to play in the PTQ on Friday. I really did not have that much information and just played the winning deck from Valencia. I did pretty poorly after being blown out by the original Jugan Blue and going on tilt after being stifled so many times—seven in two games! For the first 'regular' PTQ I tested a lot with Gabe Carlton-Barnes, as I was on winter break and had time off from school. We came up with a red deck that seemed very good, but then I went away for a week and came back to a metagame flooded with Doran."

Asher audibled at the last minute into an Affinity list provided by Josh Ravitz but did not fare well in the event, losing in the mirror match and to what he described as a Gargadon-ScepterChant-Balancing Act-Burning Wish deck. While people may have let their guard down against Dredge, the defenses were still in place for the ever-present artifacts of Affinity.

"I don't think the deck was very good for the weekend as Affinity was much more popular than we anticipated and people were very well prepared for the deck," sighed Asher.

There was no PTQ for Gavin to play in the Northwest but that does not mean he went without an outlet to test the decks in a competitive environment. For almost two years I have been organizing unsanctioned mock tournaments in New York that allow players to test decks, providing some very practical experience that is hard to replicate without a large playgroup. It is a great way to prepare for new formats, and it has become a regular event in Seattle every Monday and Thursday at First Pick Games.

"Dredge and Doran split the finals of the first mock tournament, although I can say with complete certainty that Dredge would have won if they had played," said Gavin of the results from his first event. "This is a great way to playtest, so if anybody reading this is in the Seattle area, these are worth coming to."

As soon as the blue envelopes were handed out around the country, I got the sense that both Gavin and Asher—as well as Iowan stalwart and coverage team member Bill Stark, among others—began burning up the Internet to get a sense of the national metagame.



"It started on the Wednesday before the PTQ season," said Gavin when I asked him how he tackled this data project. "I made a thread on my team forums where people would post what deck they were playing in the PTQ that weekend, and then afterwards how they did, what they would change, and what the Top 8 was."

Gavin has added confidence heading into a Phoenix PTQ this weekend thanks to his research. He fully expects that the first week's results will have a galvanizing effect on the metagame, and armed with that knowledge he has had additional time to test, refine, and gain an early advantage on the format.

For Asher the project began after a local post-PTQ BBQ dinner: "After I got home I immediately went online and tried to gather information about what did well elsewhere. This is part of having 'the fire.' I always want to be up to date on what is going on in the **Magic** world and have probably become somewhat obsessive about checking various websites for results. However, this is something you have to do if you want to maximize your edge. Having information is a necessity in making deck and card choices, and therefore I always want to know everything. I pretty much went onto a lot of websites and looked in the forums to see what people were posting. Rough sketches of Top 8s began coming and on Sunday I had a good idea of what performed the day before."

Dredge had been a non-entity at the New York tournament and as results began to pour in Asher was shocked to see how well it was faring. He fully expects players to dial up the volume of their sideboard hate for the powerful archetype.



"The three decks that are clearly separated from the field, in my opinion, are Doran, Zoo, and various forms of the blue deck," said Asher of his 'studies'. "The thing is if you wait until halfway through the week to know what did well the previous weekend you only have one or two days to test with good information. Getting the results early allowed me to test better throughout the whole week."

The clear trend to emerge from the six events was the rise of the Doran deck, which pushed more players into the Top 8 than any other single archetype and reportedly sprung up all over the Swiss.

"The reason for that is that it is a very strong, but yet relatively safe, deck to play with no obvious weaknesses," said Gavin of the deck's surge in popularity. "You can attack the individual cards that the Doran deck plays, but you can't play one all-encompassing hate strategy. Also, if you look at the deck, it has a very high general power level because it just plays the best cards in its colors. Birds of Paradise, Doran, the Siege Tower, Vindicate, Cabal Therapy, Thoughtseize, Tarmogoyf, Dark Confidant, and so on."

"The top decks from these results are clearly Doran, Domain Zoo, Dredge, and Counterbalance based blue decks. You need to be able to at least have a chance against Doran this weekend, and the next few weekends for that matter," agreed Asher about the identity of public enemy No. 1. "If you can't—well, I don't want to say something like don't bother showing up because different people go to PTQs with different goals, but I would bet that you are not going to win that PTQ. Getting through 10 or 11 rounds without facing Doran twice is not something I would gamble on. To win, you probably need to be able to beat at least two out of the three non-Dredge decks, and then have a sideboard plan for Dredge if you don't want to just lose to it."

"I also think that the results of Dredge are really profound," said Gavin, reiterating his earlier warning about under-sideboarding for that matchup. "A lot of people are just presuming they won't face it or that they don't need many cards for it. It is by far the most powerful deck in Extended, and it's not particularly close. I have lost very few Game 1s with Dredge against stock decks in playtesting. *If you do not significantly alter your deck after sideboarding, you will normally lose to Dredge.*"

Good luck to Gavin, Asher, and everyone else preparing for this weekend's PTQs all over the world. Sorry for the North American decklist bias, but if readers from the other Magic playing continents ask your tournament organizer to send me the results from the international PTQs, I will make sure they get into the appropriate hands and onto the decklist Top 8 page.



Firestarter: The Method to Your Madness...or Dredge...or Goblins...

I was very interested to hear how these two young and hungry players prepare for their ascent from the MSS ranks to the Pro Tour trenches. How do you prepare for your local PTQs? Head to the forums and share your process with me and the rest of the readers! I also encourage players taking part in this weekend's PTQs to use this forum to share their scouting reports of the Top 8 and Swiss metagames. Good luck everyone!

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