

Brian David-Marshall
Friday, January 25, 2008

Hopefully everyone had a great time this past weekend sampling the new *Morningtide* cards. I had a family commitment that prevented me from getting near my local event, although I did get a chance to do a couple of drafts this week with friends who won product. I am looking forward to the opportunity to try out the Sealed Deck format when the Launch Parties occur on February 1st, but in the meantime I going to try and get as many drafts in as possible between now and Pro Tour–Kuala Lumpur.

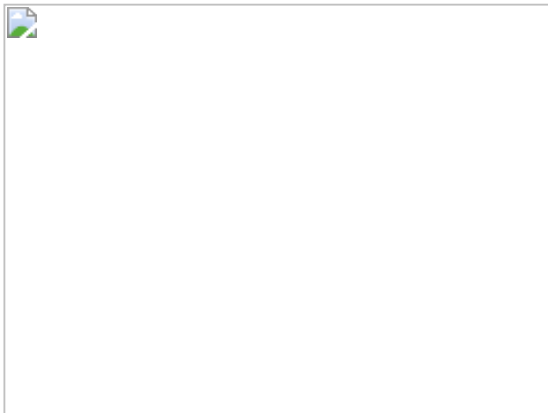
I get a lot of email from readers who want to know more about what is like to be a coverage reporter/commentator for **Magic**. One of the best aspects is being able to draft a new set and chalk it up to research. With the new season looming and a lot of new faces on the coverage team over the past couple of years, I thought it would be interesting to get to know coverage regulars Rich Hagon, Bill Stark, and Tim Willoughby. I let them answer some of the questions I get regularly about **Magic**, coverage, and how *Lorwyn* will be impacted by the introduction of *Morningtide*—and tried to work in my own answers whenever possible.

BDM: *I got started doing event coverage back in 2002 at the first of the two Boston team Pro Tours. I had been doing some writing for The Sideboard, and had just started doing work at **Magicthegathering.com**. I went to Pro Tour–Boston because it was not far from where I live and I ended being conscripted on site by my Sideboard editor to help out the coverage team. I have done coverage at every Pro Tour since then—in one medium or another—and Kuala Lumpur will be my 25th event as a reporter or commentator.*

*What was the first **Magic** event everyone else covered and how did that opportunity come about for you?*

Rich: I saw the opportunity to do a radio show for **Magic** as long ago as 1998, but the technology for downloading was prohibitive. When I returned from playing in Pro Tour–Philadelphia 2005 with Craig Jones, on the flight home I told him about moxradio. With my father imminently dying, it seemed that things had come together to actually pursue something I really wanted to do, and this was it. I approached Wizards of the Coast in Europe and my first tournament was Grand Prix–Torino 2006, followed up by starting Pro Tour coverage in Geneva.

Bill: Pro Tour–San Diego this past season. Originally I was supposed to help out with Grand Prix–Columbus but I accidentally kept winning that weekend and wound up making the Top 8. Instead the 2HG Pro Tour was my first event, and I believe I was given the opportunity to do coverage in the first place after years of building a voice in **Magic** as a writer and editor for numerous **Magic** content sites. Eventually I got a bit fortunate and a combination of a number of veteran coverage reporters suffering a lack of availability combined with the right people being familiar with my work at



the right time provided me the chance to do official Play time's over, Stark—get back to your laptop! event coverage.

Tim: Pro Tour—London 2005. I'd done a whole bunch of coverage of other TCGs, but I'd been playing **Magic** since Revised, and I was really excited about it coming to my home town. Fortunately I already knew you and Ted Knutson from some events, and I was more than happy to get the chance to join the team working for free to become part of the Pro Tour experience.

BDM: *My first event was three-person team Rochester Draft and I remember struggling to keep up with three different sets of games at the same time. It was also really frustrating to focus on one specific matchup and then have the results of that match rendered moot by the other two matches resolving first. While three-person team events have been the only events I have ever won money at on either the PT or at a GP, I was not unhappy to see them go from a coverage angle.*

What do you guys remember most about your first coverage experience?

Tim: Pro Tour—London was an event that was so nearly turned upside down by bombings in London on the Thursday before it all started. What should have been a simple 30-minute tube ride to the venue turned into a four-hour walk across London while nobody really knew what was going on. When I got to the site though, the staff was really doing everything they could to turn things around—drafts were free and everyone was having a whale of a time focusing on **Magic**. By the end of the weekend, for me, the fireworks were forgotten—I was just excited that my friend Tomi Walamies had made another Top 8, and that along with a whole mess of pros, I got to see him do his standup routine.

Rich: I was concentrating soooo hard at Torino to get everything off the ground, and halfway through the third day I had five quiet minutes. I turned to my color man Dave Sutcliffe and said, "Didn't they have the Winter Olympics here?" "Sure." "But there aren't any mountains." "Turn round." Behind where we had been sitting for two and a half days was the most breathtaking view of mountains imaginable. I believe the term is "focused."

Bill: No matter how much it's already been mentioned I will never forget the story of the Sliver Kids. Jacob van Lunen and Chris Lachmann were perhaps two of the most unexpected Pro Tour champions in the history of the game, but they truly deserved to win the event that weekend. And talk about pressure! Somehow I managed to get assigned to covering the finals match. In addition to my first time dealing with the lights, camera, and excitement of the finals of a Pro Tour (believe me, you do not want to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when they start filming...), I had to capture the happenings of the shortest finals ever with twice as many players as usual! In the end it all made for a dramatic and exciting day that I don't think I'll ever be able to forget.



Hagon's podcasting goes beyond the matches, letting the players share their Pro Tour experiences in their own words.

BDM: *Back in 2002 there was print coverage and photo coverage. While five years does not seem like a lot of time coverage has completely changed since then with the advent of blogs, podcasts, and video. Even though you guys are all relatively new to the coverage squad, you have no doubt been following the PT for some time. What do you think have been the biggest changes to the way events are covered?*

Bill: To be fair I've only been on the team for the past year but in that time I have to say the most important thing I've noticed on the coverage team is how seriously the people involved take their job. At the end of any event everyone has had a lot of fun and enjoyed themselves immensely (even during a Valencian flood), but they've accomplished what they came to do and begin looking to improve performances for the next event. Whether it's looking at the numbers of viewers we get for the print coverage, how many people are downloading podcasts, the amount of subscribers on Youtube, the coverage staff—like many of the players they cover—are always looking for the edge that will make coverage more successful than it already is, that will improve things for the viewer at home just a tiny bit more.

Rich: People are extremely demanding in terms of what they would like us to provide. Although we'll probably never be able to bring them everything their hearts desire, we do have some new wrinkles for 2008 which I'm really excited about, especially catering to those people who don't have two or more hours free each day for listening. We'll reveal more come KL.

Tim: I think that the biggest change has been in the knowledge and demands from everyone out there reading (and now watching) the coverage. With the addition of multimedia coverage and so much in the way of articles, people reading seem better informed than ever. It makes writing pretty daunting at times but has made me a better player as I've been forced to get really familiar with formats that previously I didn't play a great deal.

BDM: *I think my all-time favorite player to cover is Bob Maher because his mental game is just so acute. I remember one Grand Prix where he was able to glean information about what cards his opponent could have possibly drafted based on a couple of pointed questions and the positioning of the stamps that are used to mark the cards used in high-level events. Of all the players you have had the chance to watch in the Feature Match area over the years...who is your favorite to cover and why?*

Tim: I really like covering Gabe Walls. For me the perfect feature match has a good mix of entertaining banter, interesting decks, and good quality play. When Gabe rocks up to the feature match area, you can normally rely on him for all three. He plays pretty fast, which can sometimes be a challenge to keep up with, but it's totally worth it.

Bill: Only being on the team for the past year makes this question a bit tougher for me than some of the more seasoned vets on staff, but I'm fortunate in that I was tasked with covering the Nassif/Chapin semifinals match at this year's World Championships. Even setting aside what happened during the match (in which I'm pretty sure I wore out the exclamation point key on my laptop), Nassif and Chapin were the perfect players to sit in the feature match area. Tight technical play from both combined with their constant good-natured jabbering back and forth kept everyone involved pretty captivated. They even managed to play to the crowd, and when you combine their consistent success over the history of the game and their noted positions as innovators you end up with two players I'm always happy to see headed for the feature match area.

Rich: Frank Karsten. The man sweats blood for this game, and you can practically hear the pistons working in overdrive.

BDM: *I won't bother with the debate over the top two players of all time as those spots are occupied by pretty obvious choices. Once you get past Jon and Kai, who are the third through fifth best players of all time? And can any of those players cover the distance between themselves and the top two?*

Bill: As a long time student of the game I truly believe there is no third-to-fifth best player of all time. I believe more accurately there is a list of about 5-10 players vying for those slots, all of whom have credible arguments that can be made for their inclusion. At the end of the day to really nail down the list you wind up quibbling over minor details and statistics with no two persons' lists exactly the same. That said, mine would definitely include Zvi Mowshowitz and would probably include Gadiel Szleifer, whose numbers are absolutely meteoric and who winds up being "forgotten" simply because his star burned a little too brightly a little too fast and he has since moved away from the game a bit (though that doesn't mean he can't Top 8 a Grand Prix cold, as he did in Columbus last May). That fifth slot? Should it be Gabriel Nassif, who ended Kai's reign as incumbent Player of the Year? Or Kenji, despite the fact he has yet to win a Pro Tour? I think the discussion proves my initial point...



Willoughby and one of a coverage writer's best friends, the clipboard. Another best friend? The 2 a.m. draft.

Tim: This conversation comes up in the back room at every Pro Tour, and it doesn't get any easier. I have to temper my voting based on those that I have watched play in person quite a bit. I would say Gabriel Nassif, Kenji Tsumura and Tomi Walamies. Each of them is someone that I would describe as a genius. They don't necessarily do things the way that anyone else does, and are each formidably good, in spite of (or perhaps because of) that. They also have the aura of just knowing. They know what they are doing the whole time, and they know what you're doing too. I'm almost certainly doing a disservice to a great many Pro Tour stars in my choices, but I stand by them. If the resultant discussion helps Tomi make the Hall of Fame, I couldn't be happier.

The funny thing is that none of these three have won an individual PT. In order to catch up with the big two, that has to be the first step, and it's one that I think Gab and Kenji could well do in 2008. To catch up with Kai on numbers would take either of them a couple of seasons, but I see each as being capable of virtually locking in their spots in the top five.

BDM: *Of the players currently on the tour who would you expect to see join that pantheon of all-time greats?*

Rich: If Constructed alone gives you a shot, then Guillaume Wafo-Tapa is such an obvious candidate, as his lifestyle is set up for longevity in the game, and boy oh boy he can play. That applies to Mark Herberholz too.

Tim: I can easily see Mark Herberholz getting there, and I can't help but think that we still have a lot of great **Magic** to see from the likes of LSV, Guillaume Wafo-Tapa and Paulo Vitor Damo Da Rosa.

Bill: I think Paul Cheon and Luis Scott-Vargas are already on their way, though significant challenges lie ahead. First and foremost is keeping the competitive fire burning; many a player has reached the level of success they've achieved over the past few years and faltered under the stress and pressure. I think it's safe to say they've demonstrated the fact that they're the real deal with consistent performances but the history books place a greater value on Top 8 appearances than consistently moneying Pro Tours and Grand Prix—a distinction they'll need to make over the next few years to ensure their place in that arena. Despite those challenges they're definitely my picks with no hesitation.

BDM: *Okay...okay...I have to ask... My pro-Jon bias is pretty well established, which could stem from the fact that I consider him a friend and have watched him play since he was tearing up the New York tournaments before the PT was even imagined. If you had to choose, would it be Jon or Kai for No. 1 and why?*

Bill: Jon. He was the first wunderkind and growing up through middle and high school you could always count on Jon winning, look forward to his success. Part of it is pure patriotic pride, part of it is the fact that he was the first player who let you justify playing **Magic** because he kept winning at it.

Kai is truly a great player and I wouldn't begrudge anyone to take him over Finkel but at the end of the day, Jonny Magic is always going to be my pick.

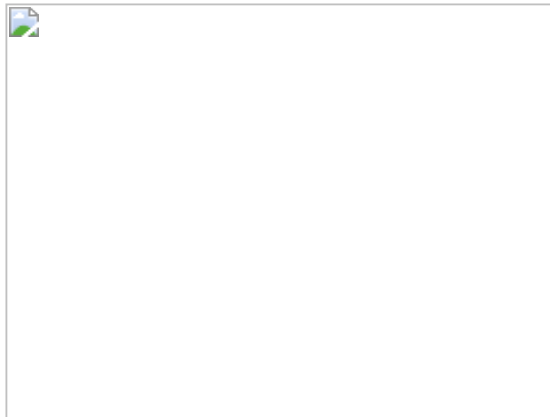
Tim: I'm a big stats guy, and on stats it's hard to argue with Kai's amazing conversion rate once he made a Top 8. However, if I had to make the pick, which I guess I do, I would still go with Jon. Both players at their height had an incredible hunger and presence, but there's something about Jon's effortless seeming talent that kind of puts the magic in **Magic**.

BDM: *I have many favorite pieces/experiences over the past several years highlighted by Finkel's bluff of Benjamin Caumes in the quarterfinals of Pro Tour–Yokohama, the debut of the blog format at U.S. Nationals a few years back, and wondering from the commentary booth where all the red Masashi Oiso should have been drafting was going at Pro Tour–London. What is your favorite piece of coverage you have done and why?*

Rich: I love anything with atmosphere. The flag ceremonies at Paris and New York, shadowing the Head Judge in Valencia, talking to the PT winners, the commentary matches....oh alright I admit it, I LOVE my job!

Bill: I'd have to say the stories I got to tell from Gen Con Indy 2007 are my favorite collectively. Premier-level event coverage like Pro Tours and Nationals have a specific expectation regarding coverage: you're there for a particular event and you're expected to do blogging, a few play-related features, and feature match coverage. At Gen Con, head coverage guru Greg Collins and I were basically going in cold with uncertain expectations. Wizards had never done event coverage for Gen Con before and we weren't sure what to expect, nor what exactly it was that we had to cover. By the end of the first day it became apparent that the task would be more akin to that of a beat reporter covering a specific beat than traditional event coverage. Anything of interest and I got to write it down: an annual league of players who only battle at Gen Con using Alpha cards with Alpha rules, a player who created a chain mail shirt of Black Lotus and Shivan Dragon, the largest Grand Melee tournament ever, Vintage and Legacy Championships...the cool things I got to see that weekend and the freedom we had to find those stories was definitely my favorite work as a coverage reporter.

Tim: I liked the feature I did on the Dampen Thought archetype at Pro Tour–London, which might be the first thing I ever had published on **magicthegathering.com**; I got to cover a lot of bases in one article with that one which was kind of cool—a draft walkthrough, explanation of the archetype, and a little history lesson in there too. On a different sort of level, I was also really happy with the photo I got of Nicolai Potovin when he won Grand Prix–Stockholm, kissing the trophy. A lot of readers might not realize that on GPs a lot of the time we writers also take the photos. That one turned out really well, and though there were a lot of posed shots taken later, that one remains my favourite.



Potovin's kiss at the conclusion of Grand Prix-Stockholm.

BDM: *For me the best part about doing coverage has been the ability to see so much of the world over the past half decade. From the open-air food stalls in Singapore to the Latin Quarter of Paris to sunny beaches of Hawaii I have many great memories that I owe to covering **Magic**. What is the most interesting place you have had the opportunity to travel to thanks to this coverage gig?*

Tim: For my entire life, I've wanted to travel to Japan, and this year, thanks to the Pro Tour, I got to visit for the first time with Pro Tour–Yokohama. It was every bit as good as I had hoped, and even only thinking about the sushi, I have now made it my goal to try to get to Japan at least once a year for the rest of my life.



The real reason why Tim Willoughby likes Japan.

Rich: As an entertainer I've been lucky enough to visit more than 50 countries, but for as long as I can remember, or at least since I discovered American football, baseball, hockey, and basketball, I've loved the U.S. So San Diego (where I hadn't been) and New York (where I had) were highlights.

Bill: While I've been to some fascinating places doing coverage, I'm most excited about an upcoming stint with Pro Tour–Kuala Lumpur and Grand Prix–Vancouver the following week. Inside just 20 days I'll visit Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai, Tokyo, Seattle, and Vancouver. I'm sure there are jobs out there that would allow you to do that type of travel for work on the company's dime, but I can't think of one that lets you be involved with **Magic** while you're doing it.

BDM: *For me the 2007 season was all about Tomoharu Saito's tremendous dedication to winning the Player of the Year title. He even went so far as to skip the Invitational in order to chase Pro Points in Brisbane. Fortunately for him it all paid off in the end, and after two years of watching teammates win the title Saito has one for himself.*

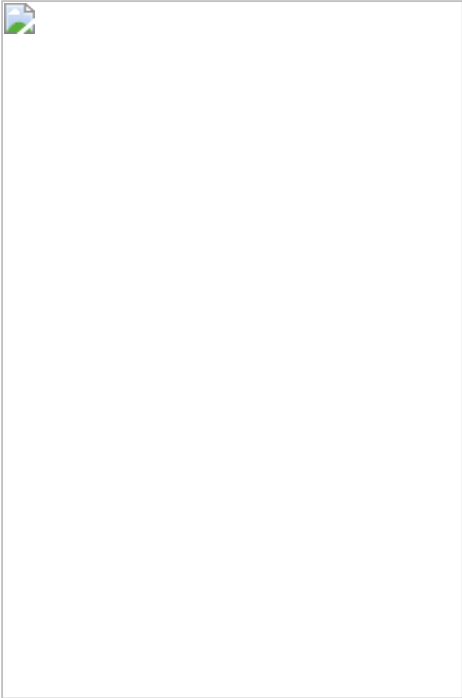
What is your favorite moment/player/story from the 2007 season?

Rich: Two matches. First, Karsten vs. Echeverria Paredes in the final round of Swiss in Yokohama. They hurled everything at each other in a titanic match, with the winner making Top 8. They drew. Second, Olivier Ruel vs. Paul Cheon, Grand Prix–Krakow. Two players at the top of their game, which turns out to be the top of THE game. The interactions were about far more than just cards, and it was a privilege to see these two compete head-to-head.

Bill: I think I'd have to say the flood at Pro Tour–Valencia. I was doing double-duty for that event as a competitor/coverage reporter thanks to my performance at Grand Prix–Columbus and I was really excited about the opportunity to visit Spain (I studied Spanish in college). When the rain started coming and just didn't stop there was a lot of concern about the future of the event, but the amount of effort the entire community put forth, players and staff alike, to salvage everything and make it successful despite the circumstances is, I feel, one of the shining moments of the 2007 season and a reminder of why this game and the people who play it are so great.

Tim: Mine comes from Worlds, right at the end of the season. Through a terrible bit of organization on my part, I found myself flying back a day later than I had a hotel room booked for. I was more than happy to be in New York for an extra day, but not 100 percent keen on stumping up for a cheap hotel near the airport for that last night. Fortunately, **Magic** came to the rescue! I ended up getting to visit the fabled Finkelhouse for my final night, and had a great time team drafting there until it was time to make my way to the airport in the small hours of the morning. Never have I been happier to 1-2 a draft than when my opponents were Rich Hoan, Nicolai Herzog and Jon Finkel himself!

BDM: *What stories/destinations are you looking forward to during the 2008 season?*



The eagle eyes of a Magic coverage reporter (note writing utensil strategically positioned for ease of use).

Bill: I'm actually really looking forward to the World Championships in Memphis, home of good man Zac Hill, and the Pro Tour in Berlin. During my first time on the Pro Tour abroad I traveled to Berlin with perennial PTQ champ Brandon Scheel and we absolutely loved it. There's such a rich history in that city and even though we literally spent an entire day walking around seeing the sites, I left with my curiosity more piqued than less.

As for Memphis, I already shotgunned ZHill's apartment. He's one of my favorite writers and players on the Tour so I'm excited to get to see him in his own element and visit the region of the country he loves so much.

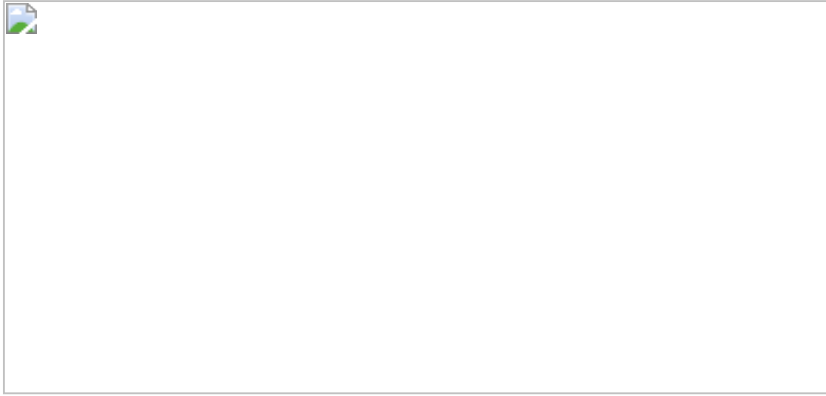
Tim: I am really looking forward to Pro Tour-Hollywood, both because of the location, and the format. A really top location can turn a good Pro Tour into a great one, and I think that both elements of PT Hollywood have the potential to be pretty special.

Rich: The opportunity for humor with Worlds in Memphis is positively mouthwatering. Elvis Handservant... Llanowar Elvis.....he ate so many burgers he was the Goblin' King.....he didn't shave for three days and was Elvis Of Deep Shadow...More seriously, with Pro Points up for grabs at Nationals, I'm hoping to be in town to see U.S. Nats in Chicago, which I've heard is a fantastic city in so many ways.

BDM: *I know I am going to be keeping a close eye on the last two Rookies of the Year—Sebastian Thaler and Yuuya Watanabe— to have big seasons this year. Is there any player you are looking forward to having a breakout season in 2008?*

Rich: With the Japanese, all depends on whether they are taking **Magic** seriously that given year, or whether they are (like 2006 World Champ Makahito Mihara was in 2007) having a dose of the 'real world' and **Magic** takes a back seat. If he's traveling to the Euro GPs like last year, Masami Kaneko (Grand Prix-Florence winner) struck me as a monster player. And another GP winner in '07 I wouldn't fancy playing against '08 would be Nicolay Potovin. I suspect Russia, or at least Eastern Europe, may be the next big story in World **Magic**.

Bill: I have a close connection with a lot of the Belgian players like Fried Meulders and Marijn Lybaert. Over the past year I've grown to respect their community and the way in which they work together to improve a great deal, so I'm looking forward to Fried and Marijn (as well as Stan Van der Velden, Jan Doise, etc...) making a good run this season provided work and school don't interfere.



This is just part of the crew that covered 2008 Worlds (left to right): Kelly Digges, Gijsbert Hoogendijk, Tim Willoughby, Rich Hagon, Bill Stark, Ben Coleman, Aaron Forsythe, Greg Collins, and Josh Bennett.

Tim: I'm not sure if it really counts as a breakout, because he's been pretty successful already, but I'd really like to see Stuart Wright have a strong season. He's been on the Tour for a while, but only cinched gravy-train status last year at Worlds. He's a really strong deckbuilder, and it would be nice to see more Englishmen at the top tables. The world needs to see Stuart's happy dance.

BDM: *Player of the Year for 2008?*

Tim: I feel like Shuhei Nakamura had a fire put under him when he 'only' made Level 5 at Worlds (now Level 7). While I'd love it to be Kenji, I have a feeling that this might be Shuhei's year.

Bill: I think it will be surprising to see how the Japanese and European players keep up with the deflating value of the dollar; when you lose 40 percent of your winnings to bad markets it makes it harder to justify globetrotting to pick up those last few points, and rumor has it that even Kenji will have to focus a bit more on school this year. I think it's probably time for America to earn the title back for the first time in a decade, and I think to do that you've got to look to Paul Cheon or Luis Scott-Vargas. If I had to pick one, I'd say Neon simply because he's starting the season with the edge in Pro Points from last year.

Rich: Shuhei Nakamura had a horrible, horrible season last year. That shouldn't happen twice, and he starts the calendar year with 8 Pro Points in the bag courtesy of Grand Prix–Stuttgart. He would be my choice.

BDM: *I had family in town and could not get to Neutral Ground this past weekend—I am going to have to wait for the Launch Party on the 1st to sample the new cards. Did you guys get to play in the Morningtide Prerelease?*

Rich: I covered it.

Tim: I drafted my way through the Prerelease, going all-in on the blue/black rogue plan all day. Never has casting one-drops and riding them all the way (with some prowl-y help) been more fun.

Bill: You betcha. It was a blast.

BDM: *Looking forward to the upcoming Pro Tour, what do you think will be the top commons in each color at Kuala Lumpur?*

Bill: I think Distant Melody is very good in blue. Card drawing comes at a premium in this set and the Melody, like Mulldrifter before it, provides the extra cards at a splashable commitment to blue. The lack of a 2/2 body with flying is made up by the fact you potentially draw far more than two cards (the mind shudders at the thought of playing it with Summon the School or Lys Alana Huntmaster...).

White probably goes to Burrenton Bombardiers though Weight of Conscience is also really good. Violet Pall is solid removal that's even more so when you're in Faeries, so that probably gets the nod from black. Rounding everything up are Roar of the Crowd for red (who can pass on two-for-ones?) and/or Shard Volley, and Earthbrawn for green.

Tim: Green - Game-Trail Changeling or Lys Alana Bowmaster
Red - Shard Volley
Blue - Latchkey Faerie, though I have a soft spot for Mothdust Changeling
White - Burrenton Bombardier
Black - Violet Pall

BDM: *I have already heard rumors of third-pick Nightshade Stinger in anticipation of prowling through Morningtide. How has Morningtide impacted the Limited value of cards in Lorwyn? Has anything gone up in your estimation? Down?*



Bill: I did a triple-*Lorwyn* draft this week at the local shop after playing *Morningtide* all weekend and I have to say you start paying attention to the class of the cards you're drafting instead of just the race. At this point in time I'm not really sure what I'd say has gone up or down, but I do know watching both characteristics more closely will become en vogue.

Tim: I don't think that *Morningtide* has made many cards worse, more that some cards and strategies have now seen a bit of a boost. Drowner of Secrets now has some backup in the Merfolk milling plan, and a new best friend in the form of Stonybrook Schoolmaster. Hunter of Eyebrights is also a bit better now. With the new lords that throw +1/+1 counters around, and Reinforce there are a lot more targets all of a sudden. The first time you use Reinforce to turn your hunter into a killing machine is a happy time indeed.

Rich: The key for me is this: In triple *Lorwyn*, many decks were 'made' during pack three. The tribal shifts were well and truly settled, and you could expect to see highly Tribal cards coming extremely late in the final pack. (Think Wizeden Cenn, Wren's Run Vanquisher and the like). Now that expectation has gone, so this format may be more about who figures out best what's going to be missing from pack three rather than what's going to be in it, despite the fact that *Morningtide* looks powerful.

Firestarter: Champ or Chaff?

Distant Melody is an intriguing card to me from the new set. While I have seen cards get wildly varying reviews in the past, few have gone to such extremes as this one. I have seen this listed as the No. 1 blue common in the set and first-picked over solid creatures and removal and have seen other players roll their eyes and brand the card nearly unplayable. Head to the forums and let me know what you think about this new card-drawing spell. Will this be the difference-maker in Kuala Lumpur or will it lap around the table and limp into decks as a 23rd card?

