

Slightly Less Early Draft Though Search

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When last we left I had mused about the impact the white, blue, and black cards would have on *Lor-Lor-Mor* draft in anticipation of next weekend's Pro Tour in Kuala Lumpur. Since then *Morningtide* has been released, celebrated with worldwide Launch Parties, and the Pro Tour has inched within one week on the calendar. I am going to wrap up my initial impressions of the new set and then talk a little but about what storylines to watch for next week in the Tournament Center.

Red

Like many players, when I first started drafting *Lorwyn* I was drawn to the Elementals. Thanks to Smokebraider they had the ability to make big, splashy plays with turn-three MulldrifTERS that stuck around, the Soulbright Flamekin/Ceaseless Searblades engine trampling all over the red zone, and the occasional Horde of Notions.

In the third pack, players can find a replacement for the missing Smokebraider in Brightearth Banneret, although it does not allow for the same kind of shenanigans as its smoky predecessor. The Banneret is also a replacement for a missing pack of Stinkdrinker Daredevils since most giants tend to be warriors as well. This might be the best of all the Bannerets because of the reinforce ability that makes drawing a 1/1 for two mana on turn eight a lot less disheartening—and as we will see a little later in green, the ability to put a 1/1 counter on a creature at instant speed could be the difference maker in many a game.

Warriors are an overarching theme through these two colors. You have Giant Warriors, Goblin Warriors, Elemental Warriors, Elf Warriors, and Treefolk Warriors—not to mention a piece of Warrior Equipment that we will be talking much more about later. When you add in their proximity to some key removal spells, Warriors give you a nice insurance policy in the third pack regardless of how you start out tribally in the first two packs.

Still...I can't seem to get away from Elementals. Pyroclast Consul is an uncommon that can dismiss any Merfolk deck's chances with one hit from its kinship ability—and Elves, Kithkin, and Rogues are none too happy to see that creature across the way either. He will create some deckbuilding challenges if you really want the kinship effect to be lopsided but cards like Rage Forger allow you to buff up all your Shamans—and there are a reasonable amount of them in the Elemental tribe. Rage Forger is pretty unique among all the class boosters in that he boosts Shamans already in play, where others (such as Bramblewood Paragon) offer bonuses to subsequent creatures.

Of course people are going to want to be red just because there is so much removal to be had in that third pack. Release the Ants is just a back-breaking card against some archetypes and I am looking forward to seeing how the best and the brightest players in the game find windows to clash this card back time and time again.

Rivals' Duel is what I have been calling a "lose more" card. There is nothing worse than having to salvage a draft that has just not come together tribally only to have your opponent blow out your first two creatures with this Dead Ringers descendant. It can be pretty tough to get blowout results against a tribally tight deck, but you can always use the card as an ersatz Arena and target your one of your own creatures. My best results with this card have come within blue-red Elemental decks with

the inscrutable Amoeboid Changeling. The changeling had already gone up in value with the addition of *Morningtide* for his ability to muck with Kinship, but he turns Rivals' Duel into a pretty consistent two-for-one.

Usually it is going to be slightly precarious spot removal spell, but Roar of the Crowd can be a Fireball in some decks and have seen it splashed as such in non-red Merfolk and Elf decks. Ego Erasure is a straight-up counterspell against this card and in general seems to have gone up slightly in value with addition of *Morningtide*. Shard Volley also comes at a significant cost—sacrificing one land to cast it—but you can't argue with Lightning Bolt. For a long time I thought this card required you to sacrifice a Mountain as opposed to any land and I would still consider splashing it. It is probably the second best non-rare red removal spell in the new set.

Spitebellows is the top-line removal spell that I have seen so far—bringing us back to the Elementals. I don't even view this card as having a mana cost, having only evoked it to remove big bad monsters. If Chameleon Colossus actually becomes the Constructed staple that many players seem to think it will be, then I expect to see this card hunting it down in the 60-card realm.

One card I am expecting to be a Malaysian all-star is Sunflare Shaman. It has been steadily climbing the charts in my local drafts, going from late-pick filler to a card people cater their picks in the first two packs in anticipation of it in the third pack. Early on it is a solid 2/1 for two that fills a role in your mana curve. As the game progresses it becomes a ticking time bomb that your opponent cannot let you untap with in play. It is important to note that the Sunflare Shaman does not sacrifice itself to use the ability, rather it does X to the target and X to itself. You can bounce the Sunflare Shaman in response to using its ability to get multiple activations out of it. Reinforcing it so it has more toughness than you have Elementals in your graveyard creates a pretty formidable pinger. I have also seen multiple games end when a player activates a Sunflare Shaman and then sacrifices all their elementals to Seething Pathblazer to bring the game to an abrupt conclusion.

Green

Players can position themselves for three different green options in the third pack—or some combination of them. Elves and Treefolk both run rampant throughout the green picks in *Morningtide*. If a player can go into the third pack with a clear look at either tribe in the third pack—meaning no players for two seats to their right drafting the same tribe—the payoff should be pretty high.

Bosk Banneret is not a card that will offer much to non-Treefolk drafters. I guess someone could take it to reduce Shaman costs, but the reality is Bosk should find its way into the decks that needs it most. With plenty of clumsy five-cost Treefolk occupying the common spots in *Morningtide*, the Banneret can dial down the amount of time it takes for your crop to bear fruit.

Similarly, the Elvish Warrior—one of a couple of reprints in this set—is exactly what the Elf deck needed. It's an early drop that is not easily splashed (nor will other decks want to splash it) that lets the Elf deck go on the offensive earlier than it has been able to in triple-*Lorwyn* drafts, where the typical Elf costs three or four.



The third deck that green enables is Warriors which can straddle a number of tribes. There is no finer green card for this deck than Bramblewood Paragon, although Elf decks will need to jump on these early lest they start getting paired with Treefolk and Giants. Like Jon Becker pointed out to me the other day, "A 7/5 trampling Axegrinder Giant is much better than a 6/4 that doesn't trample." I have had multiple drafts where I was able to choose the Paragon and long-range an Elvish Warrior around the table.

I will be curious to see where Earthbrawn fits into people's green pick orders. I have often had to pass on this card to fill out the two-drops in my Elf decks. It is an easy replacement for one pack of missing Fistful of Force, but offers some additional choices for a player. While +3/+3 can often provide the extra reach on an unblocked creature to win a game, it is often overkill when trying to save a creature from a burn spell or combat trick. In those cases, the reinforce ability of the card is a permanent—and uncounterable—+1/+1 bonus for your creatures.

Fertilid is another card I am looking toward the top tables of KL for clarification on. While I have played with the card, I am not sure how good it is yet and whether or not what seems like a tempo-based format can afford to take a turn off to ramp their mana. On the other hand it allows you to trade creatures in combat and fix your mana. I will be excited to see where the game's best players draft this card and how—or if—they play with it.

War-Spike Changeling in red is going to be a no-brainer for almost any on-color tribal deck looking to bolster its forces. Game-Trail Changeling is even more clear—a huge trampler that gets all the tribal and class bonuses your deck can muster. In general all the changeling creatures have gone up tremendously in value thanks to the addition of all the class modifiers in *Morningtide* and there are few better than the red and green commons.

Hunting Triad is a little slower than Scatter the Seeds but offers much more versatility in the form of reinforce. All of the token generators in the Elf tribe make Warriors and following up a Bramblewood Paragon with three 2/2 Elf Warriors—or four if you also control Lys Alana Huntmaster—is going to put almost any deck under tremendous pressure. I remember playing in *Ravnica* draft and having to take a null turn on Vigeon Hydropon in order to make my three 2/2 tokens.

My first few drafts with *Morningtide* all featured multiple copies of Leaf-Crowned Elder and zero green drafters. I just assumed the card was uncommon because I saw them in every draft and at least one other player made the same assumption and we both set out in the same draft to anticipate the Leaf-Crowned Elders awaiting us in the third pack. We were fighting it out over every Lignify and Rootgrapple and ended up playing decks with the far less spectacular Everbark Shaman. That said...the Elder is one of the more spectacular cards in the set and will certainly lead to some flabbergasted blog entries over the Pro Tour weekend.

Archers are one of the oppressed classes in *Lorwyn* block, with only five creatures taking that career path. Lys Alana Bowmaster is certainly going to give the Rogue decks fits and will turn the tables on the Faerie decks that have been punishing players with Dreamspoiler Witches throughout triple *Lorwyn*. A well-timed Eyeblight's Ending can take down two creatures and a Gilt-Leaf Ambush can potentially go three for one when pulled from the quiver of this



Morningtide common.

Wolf-Skull Shaman is one of the most hyped cards from the new set...and rightfully so. I recently paired it with one of the least hyped cards, Cream of the Crop. Cream of the Crop is a card that seems incredibly powerful in Limited although multiple players better than me have been dismissive of the Sylvan Library/Sensei's Divining Top hybrid. Perhaps my perceptions of the card have been affected by playing it in a deck with Wolf-Skull Shamans and Masked Admirers.

The Best of the Rest

Each piece of the class-based Equipment in *Morningtide* is exciting in the appropriate deck—and sometimes even reasonable in the wrong deck—but none are more exciting than Obsidian Battle-Axe. Having had the opportunity to "wrath" away my opponent's team with Nath's Elite on multiple occasions, this is the card I go into LLM drafts thinking about. Like other Warrior-stamped cards, this plays well with Elves, Treefolk, Giants, and even Elementals and I expect to see the axe cutting a swath to many a 3-0 record at the coming Pro Tour.

Lifetime Pro Points Updated

I knew that Olivier Ruel was creeping up on Jon Finkel for second place on the all-time Pro Points standings, but I had no idea he was within three points of passing Jonny Magic going into Kuala Lumpur. That would mean that Olivier could close to within one point simply by showing up in Kuala Lumpur—unless Jon also was getting those two points. Well, it turns out that is the case. With only one Limited Pro Tour on the schedule this season, Jon is planning to use his Hall of Fame pass to participate this weekend.

The two players can jockey for the all-time second place berth throughout the tournament, but if Jon wants to put any room between him and Oli he may very well have to just win the whole thing. Jon's well-publicized aversion to Constructed formats means this is likely the only event he will attend this season.

Other point-total storylines to follow this season include the pursuit of the 300-point threshold by eventual Hall of Famers Gabriel Nassif and Jelger Wiegersma. Both players need less than 10 points to join an elite club that includes Kai Budde, Jon Finkel, Olivier Ruel, Raphael Levy, Darwin Kastle, and Antoine Ruel.

Speaking of Hall of Famers attending Kuala Lumpur, you can expect to see a newly revitalized Zvi Mowshowitz pursuing his first individual Limited Top 8 and Nicolai Herzog looking to pick up where he left off on the Pro Tour, now that both players have been enshrined in the Hall.

Name	Lifetime Pro Points
Kai Budde	478
Jon Finkel	392
Olivier Ruel	389
Raphael Levy	347
Darwin Kastle Mess	343
Antoine Ruel	328
Gabriel Nassif	296
Jelger Wiegersma	291
Kamiel Cornelissen	289
David Humpherys	288

Firestarter: Who's Your Pick for KL?

Even though the 2008 season technically started back with Shuhei Nakamura's win at Grand Prix–Stuttgart, Pro Tour–Kuala Lumpur feels like the kickoff to the season. Who's your pick to take home the title and the \$40,000 check? And will this be a springboard to a Player of the Year run? Let us know in the forums, and then come back next week at this time for the start of the Pro Tour.

