


Brian David-Marshall
Friday, February 29, 2008

Welcome to the close of Rogue Week. What better way to celebrate roguishness—on Leap Day no less—than by me actually handing in a column on theme? I know that most of the other on-theme columns have talked about Rogues as a creature classification, but I wanted to look at the deck classification. People always talk about rogue decks but what does that mean? How far off from the norm does a deck need to be considered rogue?

Take Paul Cheon's winning deck from Grand Prix-Vancouver this past weekend. Dubbed Previous Level Blue, the deck breaks off from the herd of Counterbalance/Sensei's Divining Top decks that kill with Tarmogoyf by eschewing the *Coldsnap* enchantment for honest to goodness Counterspell and the unexpected Force Spike.

Paul Cheon -- Previous Level Blue		
Main Deck	Sideboard	
60 cards		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Academy Ruins 2 Breeding Pool 4 Flooded Strand 1 Miren, the Moaning Well 4 Polluted Delta 10 Snow-Covered Island 1 Steam Vents 1 Watery Grave <hr/> 24 lands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Ancestral Vision 4 Counterspell 4 Cryptic Command 3 Force Spike 2 Repeal 1 Rude Awakening 3 Sensei's Divining Top 4 Spell Snare 3 Threads of Disloyalty 4 Vedalken Shackles <hr/> 32 other spells	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Ancient Grudge 3 Sower of Temptation 4 Tormod's Crypt 3 Tsabo's Decree 2 Yixlid Jailer <hr/> 15 sideboard cards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Tarmogoyf <hr/> 4 creatures		

Paul credits his deck's origins to Eric Becker and explained that without Trinket Mage to fetch the Tops, it became much more difficult to reliably set up the Counterbalance Top lock. He also felt that the card was not as impressive in the current metagame with so many pesky goblins popping up.

"The idea of the deck was to curve out with your cheap counters, so you can start getting to the late game where you get card advantage off the Cryptic Commands and Ancestral Visions," explained

Cheon, now a two-time Grand Prix champion. "The only problem with this was that it made the matchups against the combo decks a lot weaker. I ended up playing against TEPS three times and went 1-1-1 and my win was pretty lucky."

After the Grand Prix lists were posted, I ended up having an argument with a friend about whether or not the Previous Level Blue deck was considered a rogue creation or a metagamed version of an already existing deck. Paul considered his deck to reside somewhere in the middle.

"A metagamed deck isn't necessarily something that's unheard of. It could just be a very tweaked version of a current deck in the format while a rogue deck is just something completely different that nobody really knows about or expects," Paul mused when asked if his deck met the classification of rogue. "I suppose this was somewhat of a rogue deck although several people outside of our circle did have the list. A good example of a metagamed deck would be The Rock, as there are so many options and the card choices are definitely based off of what the expected metagame for a given tournament would be."

One of the striking things to me about the event coverage from Vancouver was that it seemed like Dredge was lurking around every corner but once the Top 64 decks were posted there were only two—and neither made the Top 8. With Dredge on everyone's mind, I wondered if Paul had considered the possibility of beating up on the decks that beat up Dredge and letting other people fight that fight for him.



Cheon notched his second victory in the last four months.

"I was definitely concerned about the Dredge matchup as you can tell from my sideboard. I had four Tormod's Crypts and two Yixlid Jailers that I almost never used but the fact that Dredge could be played and it being the most powerful deck in the format forced me to dedicate slots in my sideboard for the matchup," said Paul. "We were definitely considering just not playing any Dredge hate in the sideboard as it requires at least six slots to have any effectiveness, but I just really did not want to be cold to Dredge."

To me there is nothing more rogue than attacking with lands. The highlight of Paul's list to me was the singleton Rude Awakening in his deck. It also made me curious about how key that card was to his tournament, and how much of a difference can a single copy of a card make in a deck over the course of one tournament.

"The card won me several games. I really wish I had a second copy of the card in my sideboard as I really wanted them against any control matchup as those games go to turn 14-15 pretty easily," said Paul looking back at his matches. "The most clutch Rude Awakening has to have been against Greg Peloquin of Seattle. We were on turn four of time and it was his end of turn. He was on six life and I activated my Top. No relevant cards on top...I cracked my Polluted Delta getting my second green and topped again...BAM RUDE AWAKENING. I killed him on turn five of (extra) turns with a Rude Awakening off the top thanks to my Top. I think one-ofs can make a huge difference in a deck, and especially cards like Rude Awakening where you can just go from a losing position, topdeck the one-outer and just get there. I have a tendency to play one-ofs in a lot of the decks and I've never been disappointed by them as the singleton card I usually play is a gamebreaker."

Despite his final win over Ben Lundquist (who has to be developing a flinch reflex every time he sees Cheon), Paul felt that the inevitable rise of blue-green Tron decks might make Previous Level Blue a poor choice for upcoming PTQs and Grand Prix events.

"I'm not sure if I could run this deck anymore as I'm still not convinced that Tron is a good matchup for this deck as if they hit Tron they just have such a huge advantage over you," said Paul before taking a moment to laud his freshly Hollywood-qualified final opponent. "And as far as Lundquist goes, that guy really knows how to play and I really hope he goes to more events as it'll be a shame for him to not be on the train."

Returning to the topic, Paul explained why he felt his deck might not be as good a choice in the coming weeks as it was for Vancouver.



"You're also relatively cold to TEPS especially if they just keep a hand with a bunch of lands and wait patiently to go off," he said. "You really can't put enough pressure on them to stop them from that game plan. The monored burn deck also seems to do pretty decently against this deck. Heck, Goblins doesn't even seem that great of a matchup. The only good matchups I've noticed so far were the Domain Zoo deck, Doran, and Counterbalance. The metagame seems to be shifting and these decks are seemingly getting less popular so the effectiveness of this deck won't be as great. I've also seen a ton of people playing Boils in their sideboards and that is not good times for a monoblue deck."

As a Level 8 Mage, Paul gets to start off his Grand Prix tournaments in the fourth round with three free wins. Because many of the players slugging it out in the first few rounds of an event have less experience or are perceived to be less polished than the bye recipients, you will sometimes see players choosing different decks than they might normally. The expectation is that the decks that will emerge unscathed after three rounds of play will be more polished and controlling, and therefore a three-bye deck needs to account for that. However, Cheon felt like he would have been happy playing his deck no matter his starting position.

"I had a sideboard prepared for the typical aggro decks you see in the first few rounds of a Grand Prix," he said. "I would probably have a better sideboard strategy against the monored Burn deck, possibly three copies of Delusions of Mediocrity or splash white for some Aven Riftwatchers. Flames of the Blood Hand is still pretty annoying so I'm not sure how great that would have been. Maybe Sphere of Law is better."

For players thinking about piloting Previous Level Blue at their local PTQs, Paul cautioned that you need to know your local metagame first.

"There are areas in the U.S. where people prefer to play a certain style of deck. The best players in a given area might like to play aggressive Zoo decks and in that case, yes I would play this deck in a heartbeat. But in an area where people like their TEPS, I wouldn't even think about sleeving these 75 cards. Overall I think this deck has a lot of game against random midrange decks and doesn't just lose to the 'random' decks so it could be a decent deck for a PTQ. Combo decks are its biggest weakness and I'm sure you can figure out some sideboard strategies against them. Gaddock Teeg could be a possibility as it gives a clock and it prevents them from casting their Mind's Desires and Enduring Ideals. I think after this tournament more people are going to be ready for monoblue variants and the surprise factor of this deck is now gone and will make it a little weaker. I had opponents where I Spell Snared his first two-drop and then he tapped out to cast a spell on the following turn as nobody really expects you to play Force Spikes and Spell Snares in a deck. That kind of stuff probably won't happen anymore as the better players will play around the Spike now."

Despite Paul's own willingness to classify the deck as rogue, I was not convinced. The deck seemed like much more of a metagamed version of an existing deck played by one of the very best players

that **Magic** has to offer. I wish him luck at Grand Prix–Philadelphia but if I was looking for a true rogue, I knew I was going to need to scratch a little deeper than our former National Champion.

In my mind, it doesn't get any more rogue than Greg Weiss; an American player currently living in Sweden who has qualified for the Pro Tour eight



Greg Weiss at Pro Tour–Los Angeles 2005.



times—always on his own terms. His best finish came at the first team Pro Tour alongside Rich Frangiosa and Matt Urban as Team Urban Housing, when they finished in sixth place, just missing the cut to Top 4.

While his best finish may have come in a Limited event, regular readers of Mike Flores will recall Greg's name as a recurring cast member of Mike's favorite deck designers. Perhaps Greg's most famous creation came at the last Extended Pro Tour in Los Angeles when he made Day Two with the utterly unexpected and charming Elemental Bidding.

Greg Weiss -- Elemental Bidding



Main Deck

60 cards

4 Cephalid Coliseum
3 Flooded Strand
3 Island
3 Polluted Delta
3 Watery Grave

16 lands

4 Flame-Kin Zealot
4 Living Hive
1 Silvos, Rogue Elemental
3 Stinkweed Imp
3 Thorn Elemental

15 creatures

4 Cabal Ritual
4 Careful Study
4 Chrome Mox
4 Ideas Unbound
4 Mental Note
4 Patriarch's Bidding
3 Sleight of Hand
2 Twilight's Call

29 other spells

Sideboard

4 Baleful Stare
3 Boseiju, Who Shelters All
2 Cabal Therapy
2 Chain of Vapor
1 Dimir Aqueduct
2 Nightmare Void
1 Twilight's Call

15 sideboard cards

I caught up with Greg and asked him to explain what makes a deck rogue as opposed to a metagamed one, and whether or not that automatically means you have to have to make any concessions to competitiveness.

"Rogue or 'homebrew' decks are lovingly baked from scratch, and that's what I do," explained Greg. "Some would say this implies a more casual approach, but personally, I won't spend any time on an idea that I don't think can win. There is reputation at stake, but that's largely a function of winning. So in a practical sense, that's the only thing that matters."

Weiss was one of the first players I can recall to express a desire to build around Pyromancer's Swath. He began testing with all sorts of different decks and combinations long before the deck was popularized by the results at Australian Nationals and the Perilous Storm decks and Gassy Knoll from 2007 Worlds.


Kuan Tian -- Aussie Storm

Main Deck		Sideboard
<i>60 cards</i>		
2 Fungal Reaches	2 Chromatic Star	3 Ignite Memories
7 Island	3 Claws of Gix	3 Ornithopter
1 Molten Slagheap	3 Empty the Warrens	2 Pongify
4 Shivan Reef	4 Grapeshot	3 Spell Snare
4 Steam Vents	4 Hatching Plans	4 Wheel of Fate
<hr/>		
18 lands	4 Lotus Bloom	15 sideboard cards
	2 Mishra's Bauble	
	3 Perilous Research	
1 Ornithopter	4 Pyromancer's Swath	
<hr/>		
1 creatures	4 Remand	
	4 Repeal	
	4 Rite of Flame	
	<hr/>	
	41 other spells	

Patrick Chapin -- Gassy Knoll

Main Deck		Sideboard	
<i>60 cards</i>			
4 Fungal Reaches	4 Dragonstorm	2 Ancient Grudge	
4 Molten Slagheap	4 Grapeshot	4 Dodecapod	
12 Snow-Covered Mountain	4 Incinerate	2 Empty the Warrens	
4 Spinerock Knoll	4 Lotus Bloom	2 Ignite Memories	
<hr/>		3 Sulfurous Blast	
24 lands	3 Pyromancer's Swath	2 Wheel of Fate	
	3 Rift Bolt	<hr/>	
	4 Rite of Flame	15 sideboard cards	
	4 Shock		
4 Bogardan Hellkite	2 Tarfire		
<hr/>			
4 creatures	32 other spells		

Recently Greg emerged from his laboratory with Pyromancer's Swath as the centerpiece of an Extended deck that fuels up its storm package with Quiet Speculation for three "free" spells and—with Swath online—nine damage in the form of Lava Dart.

SpiceStorm			
Main Deck		Sideboard	
60 cards			
4 Bloodstained Mire	4 Burning Wish	1 Grapeshot	
4 Mountain	1 Deep Analysis	4 Leyline of the Void	
1 Polluted Delta	3 Desperate Ritual	1 Mind's Desire	
3 Steam Vents	2 Final Fortune	1 Quiet Speculation	
4 Sulfur Vent	2 Grapeshot	1 Rite of Flame	
4 Wooded Foothills	4 Lava Dart	3 Serum Powder	
20 lands	4 Lotus Bloom	4 Wee Dragonauts	
	3 Mind's Desire	15 sideboard cards	
	3 Pyromancer's Swath		
	3 Quiet Speculation		
0 creatures	3 Rite of Flame		
	4 Seething Song		
	4 Sensei's Divining Top		
	40 other spells		

"Of all the storms spells that immediately kill your opponent, Mind's Desire and Grapeshot—with help from Pyromancer's Swath—require the least storm buildup," Greg said when asked about his inspiration for the deck. "I built this deck to exploit the play of Quiet Speculation into multiple Lava Darts, which is nearly enough storm by itself to win the game. I put the finishing touches on SpiceStorm about a month ago, with help from Ryan Lockard, Danny Gardner, and A.J. Sacher. Since then, I've raised a 1600 **Magic Online** account all the way to 1796 Constructed."

While this deck may not have won a Grand Prix, Greg urges prospective builders to give the deck a try and consider it as an alternative to combo decks that people currently have lined up in their gun sights while preparing sideboard strategies.

"Compared to other combo decks like Ideal or TEPS, this deck easily dodges most anti-combo sideboard cards. Creatures like Gaddock Teeg and Meddling Mage are toast from the cheap red damage, while Tormod's Crypt is rarely relevant because you can cast Quiet Speculation and flashback the Darts without yielding priority. Blood Moon effects are mediocre because the deck can win without ever adding another color to its mana pool. Discard spells are relevant, but because this deck 'stores' its storm in the graveyard, you can win off a topdeck just fine," said Greg, who saved his most compelling reason for last. "Of course, it's also really fun to play."


"Any deck that tries to race is in for trouble," he said as he ran through the various matchups the deck might face. "This deck usually wins on turn four, but you can go for it turn three either by drawing all red cards or by casting Final Fortune to accelerate Lotus Bloom. I count Affinity, Zoo,

RDW, and other aggro decks as good matchups. Decks like Doran that are especially vulnerable to Lava Dart tend to be good matchups as well."

Greg was encouraged that deck's toughest matchup might actually become less prevalent in the wake of a certain former U.S. National Champion's recent GP win: "Counterbalance—the card itself—is very difficult to beat. That being said, Paul Cheon's GP-winning deck had zero copies, so things could change. Orim's Chant is another underplayed card that could easily rise in popularity and punish this deck. If that happens, some room should be made in the sideboard for a few Duresses."

If you have nay doubts about Greg's rogue credentials, let me leave you with this quote and decklist from the *Time Spiral* Block Constructed season: "Last season I made the finals of a PTQ with this monogreen TSP Block deck, featuring zero Tarmogoyfs!"



Greg Weiss -- Monogreen		
Main Deck		Sideboard
	60 cards	
16 Forest	4 Harmonize	3 Gaea's Anthem
3 Llanowar Reborn	4 Might of Old Krosa	2 Quagnoth
2 Pendelhaven	2 Summoner's Pact	3 Seal of Primordium
21 lands	10 other spells	4 Serrated Arrows
		3 Utopia Vow
		15 sideboard cards
4 Groundbreaker		
4 Magus of the Library		
4 Magus of the Vineyard		
4 Primal Forcemage		
3 Scryb Ranger		
3 Timbermare		
4 Uktabi Drake		
3 Wall of Roots		
29 creatures		

"This deck was such a blast to play because it could either bust out of the gates with an absurd amount of damage with Primal Forcemage and haste creatures, or fall back and draw an absurd amount of cards with Magus of the Library, Scryb Ranger, and Harmonize—at which point the first plan falls into place."

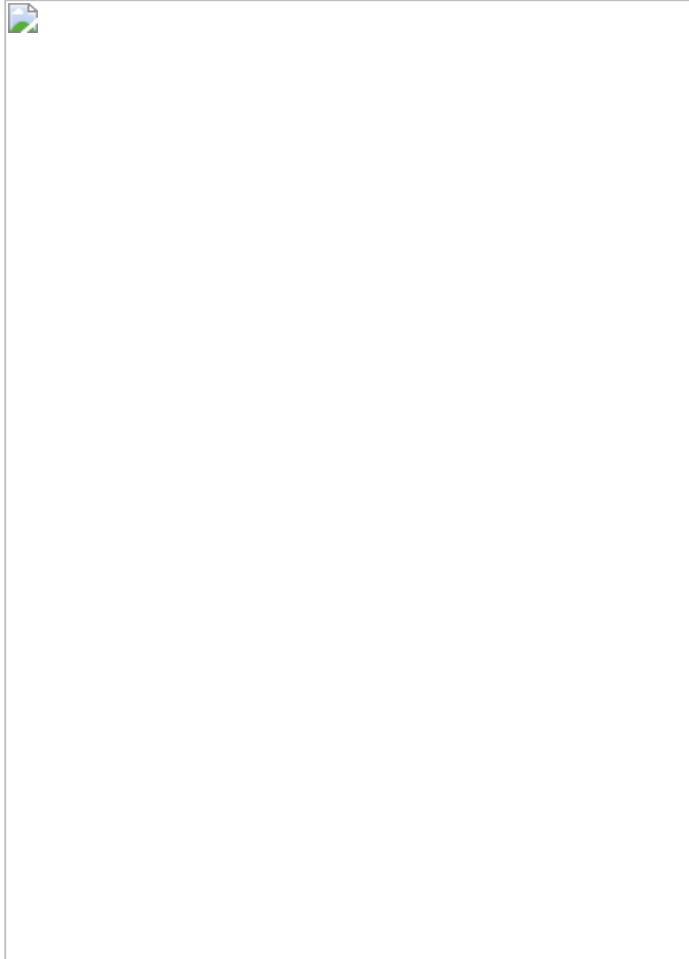
Paging Mr. Finkel

Last week in my interview with Jon Finkel, he expressed little desire to travel for Constructed Grand Prix tournaments but did say he would be motivated to play in Limited GPs if there were any. Ask, Mr. Finkel, and ye shall receive. The Grand Prix schedule has been updated and there are multiple Limited

events this summer—Brussels, Indianapolis, and Madrid. These events will feed the Constructed Pro Tour in Berlin, with Indianapolis and Madrid part of the Grand Prix Summer Series. For the most up-to-date Grand Prix schedule, [click here](#).

One More Shot at Tormod's Crypt

An extra day this month means that players will have to wait one full week to get their mitts on March's Friday Night **Magic** foil—Eternal Witness. On the plus side, it gives you one more week to fill out the sidebar set of Tormod's Crypt everyone needs to fight Dredge.



Firestarter: Rogue or Not?

Is Paul Cheon's deck rogue or just a finely crafted response to the metagame? What about Greg's SpiceStorm list? What does rogue mean to you? Head to the forums and share your thoughts and decklists there!