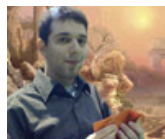


A Guide to Cooperating

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 Limited Information
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hey! This is Steve Sadin and this week I'll be your host for Limited Information.

For those of you who don't already know me, I'm a New York-based student and **Magic** player. I started playing **Magic** eight years ago and I haven't looked back since. A few weeks after the *Invasion* prerelease I decided to start playing in tournaments regularly. And I do mean regularly. During my first two years of tournament **Magic** I went to 45 of 48 Grudge Match qualifiers (a weekly tournament series very similar to City Champs) Needless to say, I was hooked.

My first Pro Tour was PT-Amsterdam in 2004. I was nervous as can be, but I started to relax a bit after I won my first 2 matches. I started thinking to myself "Wow, I can really do this. Maybe I'll even Top 8!"

Then the wheels came off and I promptly lost my next three matches, thus ending my first Pro Tour. But, if I thought I had the bug before, it was nothing compared to my post-Amsterdam fever.

Over the next couple of years I pretty much specialized my **Magic** focus on drafting and playing in Pro Tour Qualifiers. I qualified for a few Pro Tours here and there, but I didn't have any particularly good finishes (mostly due to my lack of mental toughness, but that's another story for another day) until last year when I was finally able to get myself onto the train. My season started off by winning Grand Prix-Columbus and reached an emotional peak when I decided to fly all the way to the other end of the globe to play in GP-Brisbane, a *Lorwyn Sealed / Draft GP*, to try to get the last points that I needed to reach what was then Level 3 (now Level 4). I was fortunate enough to get the Top 16 that I needed to qualify myself for Worlds in New York and every Pro Tour this year.

It's a year that has started off extremely well for me with a Top 16 at Pro Tour-Kuala Lumpur. I'm taking **Magic** very seriously this year, so expect to see me at a bunch of GPs this season while I attempt to reach Level 7 or Level 8.

Of course, the thing I love most about **Magic** is sitting down for a romantic candle-lit draft for 8 (or 6, I'm not picky).

Hrm, maybe I shouldn't have told you that last bit...

Negotiating a Draft

On my friend Matt Wang's suggestion I've recently begun studying a lot about negotiation. I'm absolutely fascinated by the field and its applications for all sorts of things, and especially **Magic**. One idea that has struck me as particularly relevant to booster drafts is the idea of cooperation for mutual gain.

I am sure that if you are a regular reader of Limited Information and/or someone who is actively trying to understand more about drafting, then you have already thought about the importance of not being in the same colors as your neighbors. Even if you have already thought at length about the idea of not stepping on your neighbor's toes, I think that you will benefit from thinking about a draft as a negotiation in which you can get considerable gains by cooperating with your neighbors.



In general, drafters cooperate not because they are excessively nice, altruistic people. Players cooperate in an attempt to help their neighbors develop and foster interests that are different from their own. If a player is interested in taking entirely different things then either of his neighbors, then this works out great for all involved parties.

If, on the other hand, you have a row of players who are all stubbornly trying to draft the same things, then they aren't likely to achieve anything other than making the draft easier for the players at the table who are

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cooperating.

In addition to figuring out what colors / strategies / specific cards the person to your right and the person to your left are probably drafting, if you want to successfully cooperate with your neighbors it is absolutely vital to recognize what the people on either side of you think you are doing.

So, how can understanding what other people think you are drafting help you? Well, just like you, your neighbors are looking to avoid conflict. So if they think you are doing one thing, they are probably going to try to avoid it. By this reasoning, it will often pay for you to be drafting what your neighbors think you are. There are plenty of times during a game of **Magic** where you are going to want to mislead your opponent. However, the draft just isn't the time for deception.

Once you realize what your neighbors think you are doing (or should be doing) you will be able to either comply with that or do something difference. No matter what you end up doing in any specific draft, it is important to understand why you are doing it and how your actions might affect the people around you. This is important to keep in mind because sometimes it's impossible to cooperate with both the person to your left and the person to your right. In this case, all things being equal, it is usually more important to cooperate with the person to your right as they are feeding you for 2 packs compared to the person to your left who will only be feeding you for 1 pack.

For example, if you get passed a pack with **Cloudgoat Ranger** and **Thoughtweft Trio** the person to your right is sending you a very clear signal that he wants you to draft white, however you are going to be sending an equally strong white signal to the player on your left when they get a pick 3 white bomb.



When you get passed a pack like this you have no choice but to start a conflict with one of your neighbors. In cases like this it is almost best to cooperate with the person on your right and take one of the white bombs. Not only will the person on your right be feeding you for two packs, but you might be able to force the person to your left out of white, giving you a chance for three packs of great white. And let's not forget that by taking one of these bombs, you get a bomb for your deck.

While you can't always cooperate with everyone, even if you want, during most early stages of a draft you are going to want to try to cooperate with your neighbors as much as possible unless you have an extremely good reason not to.

You can find a lot of clear-cut examples of when it no longer pays to cooperate during the third pack. Once the person to your left no longer has any power to disrupt your draft you will often want to cut cards from their deck if you think that removing the card from their deck will improve your chances of winning more than taking the best card for your deck.

Alright, enough about cooperation in the abstract. Lets take a look back at my first three drafts at PT-KL through the lens of cooperation.

Kuala Lumpur: First and Second Drafts

To give you some background, I went into my first draft at Kuala Lumpur with the intention of forcing Elves. As I've already mentioned, I finished in the Top 16 so as you can imagine it was a pretty great strategy for the tournament...

Not quite.

I went into my first draft and I forced green in a spot where it should have been painfully obvious to me that I should have been any other color but green. If I had paid just a tiny bit of attention to what was going on in the draft, instead of just trying to do my own thing I would have noticed that the best green card I got passed during the entire first pack was **Elvish Branchbender**. Though I did get passed three of them...

End result: My deck wound up being a nearly unplayable, with only a **Dread** as a reasonable route to victory. I was fortunate enough to get a bye in the first round before getting crushed in my next two matches.

I absolutely needed to go 3-0 in my second pod. I had already picked up two losses in my first pod, so even a single loss would knock me out of day two contention.

The first draft brought me back to reality, but I still (stubbornly) thought that drafting Elves was the right strategy. In my second draft I opened a pack that had **Incremental Growth**, **Wydwen, the Biting Gale**, and **Pestermite** as notable cards. I took the **Incremental Growth**, assuming that the person to my left would take the **Wydwen** and quickly cement himself into blue-black. I spent my next couple of picks trying to go green, but eventually something clicked in my head and I got the message that it was being drafted too heavily on my right for me to get a good base green deck even if I got passed a lot of green in pack 2.

I knew that the person to my right was in green and I assumed that the person to my left had gotten the message to go blue-black. I wasn't in a position to fight over a color with either of my neighbors and still get enough cards to build a deck that was capable of going 3-0. That realization made the rest of my draft pretty simple as I couldn't go green, and I couldn't go blue or black. With these constraints in mind I had no choice but to go red-white and hope that I would wind up with a deck that was good enough to go undefeated.

Things were looking a little bit scary going into pack 3, but my assessment of the situation was good enough that red and white **Giants + Shamans**, including two all-star **Rage Forgers**, just kept coming to me.

There was a lunch break after deck construction during which I went with Dave Irvine to drown our 1-2 woes in a big bucket of fried chicken. Fortunately, between a good deck, a clear head, and a stomach full of fried chicken, I was able to bounce back and get the 3-0 necessary to reach day 2.

In my first draft I had been punished for not cooperating with the player(s) on my right who was obviously dipping heavily into green. If I had recognized this early enough I would have been able to shift into a deck that would have been able to win a game by means other than my opponent getting terrible draws. In fact, my first deck was so bad that I wasn't even able to win the one game in my draft where my opponent got mana flooded.

In my second draft I got rewarded for sending strong signals and reading the signals that were being sent from my right. By taking these things into account I was able to figure out exactly what I had to draft to give myself a chance to win.

Now let's look at a draft where something a little bit strange happened.



Kuala Lumpur: Third Draft

I started my draft by taking a **Lys Alana Huntmaster** over **Pestermite**, **Æthersnipe**, and **Plover Knights**. I still wanted to draft green so my second pick was a **Moonglove Extract** over **Goldmeadow Harrier**, **Æthersnipe**, and **Dreamspoiler Witches**. The third pack featured **Goldmeadow Stalwart**, **Goldmeadow Harrier**, **Peppersmoke**, and **Whirlpool Whelm**. I took the **Goldmeadow Harrier** figuring that I was being told to go white (though I did feel really bad that I passed that **Harrier** the previous pack, sending a semi-strong white message to my left). When I got passed a **Plover Knights** the very next pack I became pretty confident that white was open from my right and green was being drafted heavily by at least one person within two seats to my right.

My assumption that white was going to be easy for me to get was quickly confirmed as I spent the rest of the pack picking up good white cards, including another **Plover Knights** and a **Kinsbaile Balloonist**.

At the end of the first pack I figured I was well on my way to a very good Kithkin deck, with no clue about my second color. Blue was pretty much out of the picture as I had passed plenty of **Faeries** and **Merfolk** in my first four packs and then stopped seeing any notable blue cards. Green got completely cut off in the first pack, so that was probably out too. That left red and black as likely splash options.

I was ecstatic when I opened a **Nameless Inversion** as it was not only exactly the type of card that I needed for my deck, it also helped made my second color clear to me.

Or at least that's what I thought.

I was then passed **Imperious Perfect**. Because I was nearly mono-white at this point I figured I would have no problem doing a double splash for the **Nameless Inversion** and **Imperious Perfect** so I jumped on it. I then got passed **Immaculate Magistrate** and my jaw dropped.

I went on to draft an awesome white-green-black deck that I went 2-1 with. My only loss was against a green deck that had a better late game than my deck did.

So what ultimately happened in this draft was this: the person to my right went out of his way to pick up every decent green card in order to prevent players for several seats to his left from drafting green. He did this in hopes of getting a huge payoff in pack 2. While someone did get rewarded for his hard work, it wasn't him.

His signal was so strong that each player for at least the next three seats to his left correctly believed that green was unavailable. Because I kept my options completely open during pack one (I did this by taking nothing but white cards) I was able to reap the rewards of his hard work.

During the third draft I cooperated with my neighbors by doing exactly what they wanted me to do when the packs were flowing in my direction. In the first and third packs I did exactly what the people to my right wanted me to be doing (that is, drafting white). In the second pack I benefited from doing exactly what the people to my left thought I was doing, which was drafting white AND green.

While this draft might seem counter to my argument that you should try to cooperate with your neighbors as much as possible, there are times when this unique strategy of taking advantage of the messages that your neighbors are sending can pay off for you.

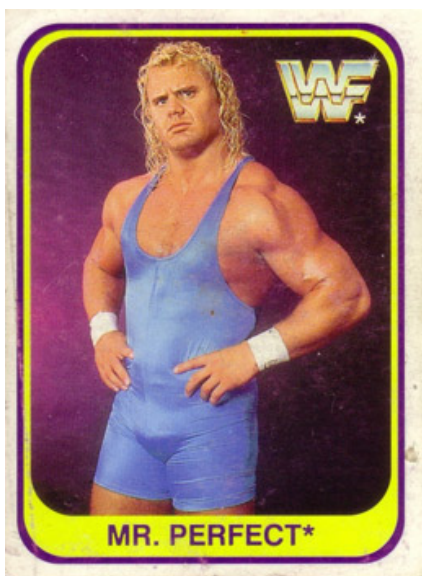
When I was talking to Zvi Mowshowitz about the idea of taking advantage of the work that the people to your right have put into cutting off a color he pointed out a great historical example to me.

During *Odyssey / Torment / Judgment* Booster Draft, which featured ridiculously powerful black in *Torment*, clever players would often go into black if they knew that the player to their right was trying to force black. They did this because, along with the help of their neighbor to the right, they would be able to completely cut off black. By doing this the leftmost player who was dipping into black would get the lion's share of the *Torment* black gold.

So, to sum things up:

- Pay attention to what your neighbors are doing.
- Pay attention to what your neighbors think you are doing.
- Always try to cooperate early.
- If all else is equal and you have the choice between doing what the person to your right wants you to do and doing what the person to your left wants you to do, side with the person to your right. The person to your right has your back for two packs, and you might be able to move the person to your left out of your color(s).
- And lastly, always try to make sure you can agree on at least a couple of things with your neighbors.

Have fun drafting,
Steve Sadin



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