

We Are the (City) Champions Search

Brian David-Marshall
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The Road to Worlds started for a gaggle of North American players this past weekend when the second season of City Champs came to a close in 35 cities. At stake? A precious berth at either U.S. or Canadian Nationals, with byes to Regionals for the rest of the Top 8. I caught up with a handful of the winners to find out about their experience, plans for Nationals, and thoughts on the current and future state of Standard.

The Guest List

Shea Miller is a high school student from Chalfont, Pennsylvania who had more to celebrate on the 12th of April than just qualifying for Nationals.

<https://www.wi>

Shea Miller - Red-green Mana Ramp

Main Deck

60 cards

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 4 Highland Weald | 2 Garruk Wildspeaker |
| 2 Mouth of Ronom | 4 Harmonize |
| 7 Snow-Covered Forest | 2 Incinerate |
| 5 Snow-Covered Mountain | 4 Into the North |
| 1 Snow-Covered Swamp | 1 Primal Command |
| 4 Treetop Village | 2 Search for Tomorrow |
| 1 Tresserhorn Sinks | 4 Skred |
| <hr/> | |
| 24 lands | 2 Sulfurous Blast |
| <hr/> | |
| 4 Chameleon Colossus | 21 other spells |
| 3 Cloudthresher | |
| 4 Siege-Gang Commander | |
| 4 Wall of Roots | |
| <hr/> | |
| 15 creatures | |

Sideboard

- 1 Cloudthresher
 - 3 Deathmark
 - 4 Mwonvuli Acid-Moss
 - 2 Primal Command
 - 2 Sulfurous Blast
 - 3 Void
-
- 15 sideboard cards

Jeff Santoro is a 25-year old in Business Development from Saranac Lake, NY. A long-time casual player, Jeff returned to the game more seriously around the release of *Ravnica*.

Jeff Santoro - Red-green Mana Ramp

Main Deck*60 cards*

3 Highland Weald	2 Garruk Wildspeaker
2 Karplusan Forest	4 Harmonize
2 Mouth of Ronom	3 Incinerate
7 Snow-Covered Forest	4 Into the North
4 Snow-Covered Mountain	2 Search for Tomorrow
1 Snow-Covered Swamp	4 Skred
4 Treetop Village	1 Sulfurous Blast
1 Tresserhorn Sinks	1 Void

24 lands

21 other spells

3 Cloudthresher
 4 Siege-Gang Commander
 4 Tarmogoyf
 4 Wall of Roots

15 creatures

Sideboard

2 Akroma, Angel of Fury
 4 Chameleon Colossus
 3 Extirpate
 3 Pyroclasm
 1 Sulfurous Blast
 2 Void

15 sideboard cards

Kyle Sanchez is a 20-year-old alleged Irish Hand Model ("They love freckly phalanges," claims the cheeky Sanchez.) from San Antonio, Texas. Kyle is a premium columnist for Star City Games and was nominated in the Storyteller category for last year's **Magic** Invitational.

Kyle Sanchez - Wizards**Main Deck***61 cards*

4 Adarkar Wastes	4 Ancestral Vision
3 Calciform Pools	4 Cryptic Command
4 Desert	2 Oblivion Ring
1 Mouth of Ronom	1 Pact of Negation
11 Snow-Covered Island	2 Remove Soul
1 Snow-Covered Plains	4 Rune Snag
3 Tolaria West	

17 other spells

27 lands

1 Arbiter of Knollridge
 1 Arcanis the Omnipotent
 2 Magus of the Tabernacle
 3 Teferi, Mage of Zhalfir
 4 Vedalken Aethermage
 3 Vendilion Clique
 3 Venser, Shaper Savant

17 creatures

Sideboard

2 Evacuation
 4 Flashfreeze
 1 Island
 2 Magus of the Tabernacle
 1 Oblivion Ring
 2 Pithing Needle
 1 Plains
 2 Teferi's Moat

15 sideboard cards

Don Morway is 28-year-old Sales Associate at Wal-Mart from Barre, Vermont. Don has been playing the game since the release of *Revised*. Don apparently has a leg-up on the majority of married **Magic** player when it comes to preparing for events.

Donald Morway - BitterBlue



Main Deck

60 cards

3 Faerie Conclave
 4 Island
 4 Mutavault
 4 River of Tears
 4 Secluded Glen
 2 Swamp
 4 Underground River

25 lands

4 Mistbind Clique
 4 Pestermite
 4 Scion of Oona
 3 Sower of Temptation
 4 Spellstutter Sprite

19 creatures

4 Ancestral Vision
 4 Bitterblossom
 4 Cryptic Command
 2 Nameless Inversion
 2 Terror

16 other spells

Sideboard

4 Bottle Gnomes
 4 Deathmark
 2 Familiar's Ruse
 2 Terror
 3 Thoughtseize

15 sideboard cards

Stephen Hines is a 29-year-old looking down the barrel of getting his Ph.D. in Computer Science from Florida State University. His card-playing history dates back to 1994 and he recently qualified not only for Nationals but Pro Tour-Hollywood.

Stephen Hines - Jagged Elves



Main Deck

60 cards

2 Forest
 4 Gilt-Leaf Palace
 4 Llanowar Wastes
 3 Mutavault
 1 Pendelhaven
 1 Snow-Covered Forest
 2 Snow-Covered Swamp
 2 Swamp
 4 Treetop Village
 1 Urborg, Tomb of Yawgmoth

24 lands

2 Garruk Wildspeaker
 4 Nameless Inversion
 4 Profane Command
 3 Thoughtseize

13 other spells

Sideboard

3 Cloudthresher
 4 Deathmark
 4 Extirpate
 2 Krosan Grip
 2 Sudden Spoiling

15 sideboard cards

4 Bramblewood Paragon
3 Chameleon Colossus
4 Imperious Perfect
4 Jagged-Scar Archers
4 Llanowar Elves
4 Wren's Run Vanquisher

23 creatures

BDM: Congrats on adding *City Champs* winner to your **Magic** resume...what else is currently on it?

Shea: MSS scholarship Qualification and a top 16 at Philadelphia Regionals is about it— besides various local tournaments. But, I hope to do more once I start entering PTQs.

Jeff: This is my first win at a larger event—even if it was only 13 people. I had a PTQ Top 8 during *Time Spiral* block season.

Kyle: One GP Top 8! Several money finishes at other GP's n' PT, SCG weekly writer, and nominated for the Invitational last year. I'm also in the process of trying to get a GP or PT in San Antonio. We're the 7th biggest city in the nation, and we still haven't had any major events down here. The city is gorgeous, the weather is wonderful, and the downtown area is sprawling with culture, attractions, and lovely ladies who like to lick lollipops. I don't see what the holdup is? Dallas smells, Houston is too humid, Austin is just plain weird. It just doesn't make sense, where's the love Wizards?

Don: I won a PTQ in 1997 for LA but was unable to attend the PT. I made Day 2 at Grand Prix—Montreal in 2001.

Stephen: PTQ Hollywood 2008 winner - Mobile, AL 2/9/2008; four other PTQ Top 8's (monoblack Necro, Oath of Druids, *Urza's Saga* Sealed, Ichorid); and many old school Vintage (Power 9/cash) wins from the way past.

City Champs Top 8 Decklists

Looking for more Standard lists from last weekend's events? Tune in to magicthegathering.com next week to see more than 200 decklists from across North America.

BDM: How did you start playing **Magic**? And how/when did you start playing competitively?

Stephen: My friends and I started out with Star Trek (back in December 1994) and when it was sold out, we started buying *Revised* and then *Fallen Empires*. We couldn't get enough **Magic** and soon started driving to Orlando to play and trade with others. We would play multiplayer games at the kitchen table for hours. We worked our ways backwards through the past **Magic** sets, picking up a lot of powerful old cards through trading and tournaments.

I started playing competitively throughout central Florida when I was about 16 and was able to drive myself or go with my friends to tournaments. We would drive at least an hour each way to play tournaments once or twice a week. Most of the tournaments we attended alternated between Type 1 and Type 2 (which was a brand new distinction at the time). It was Black Summer and Necropotence was pretty much the dominant deck. I played a version in Type 1 with blue and white for power and removal, while I would switch to a monoblack version for Type 2. We started drafting when *Weatherlight* was released.

Don: I started playing **Magic** during *Revised*, a local New Age shop that sold some gaming supplies decided to carry starter decks. I started playing competitively in 1997 but most of my **Magic**-related traveling was in 2001 when I went to Denver, Montreal, New Jersey, and Cleveland GPs.

Kyle: I was one of those eager Pokémon kids who was easily swayed from the cartoon world to the grown-up world, where minotaurs with battle axes and knights on horseback do battle in blood-soaked lairs. I actually started with a casual group during *Mercadian Masques*, but didn't start playing in any tournaments until post-IPA. Once I had some players around me that knew what they were doing I was able to pick the game up pretty quick by watching and asking questions. God, I miss Blastoise.

Jeff: I started playing casually when *Fallen Empires* came out. I was 100 percent a casual player at that point, I didn't even know there was a competitive **Magic** scene! I left for college around the time *Exodus* came out and didn't play at all from that point up until *Ravnica* came out. One of my old high school buddies got in touch with me when I got back from college and let me know dual lands were coming back in *Ravnica*, so we split a case (we had actual jobs at this point). From there I meet a few other people around town and started driving an hour plus to play in FNM's and release events. From there I meet some more serious players that were into the PTQ/GP scene, and eventually played my first PTQ during the *Ravnica* Limited season. I've been hitting as many PTQ/GP events as I can ever since.

Shea: I started playing casually about seven years ago watching older children at a summer camp play, and I became interested in competitive **Magic** after reading about the Junior Super Series three years ago.

BDM: *How did you qualify for the finals of City Champs?*

Jeff: There is a pretty small group of players in my area, so I just made sure to attend enough events to land in the T8 for the store finals and took it from there.

Don: I play-tested a lot with my wife, Jamie Joy, and we both really liked blue-black Faeries. She probably would've been able to play in City Champs too but we had to play each other first round of the store finals. I played blue-black Faeries in a couple of tournaments prior to the event as well.

Stephen: Finishing up my Ph.D. this year meant that I would be working even more next year (hopefully in academia). **Magic** is such an enjoyable hobby and I have always wanted to play at the top level. Thus I put a lot of effort into improving my game play, and it has paid off. I recently qualified for Hollywood and I feel like my **Magic**-playing ability gets better by the week (thanks mostly to my Monday night playtesting group in Tallahassee). With my wife also working hard to finish her Ph.D., it is hard to find time to play a lot of **Magic**, but I decided to devote time to the Saturdays that had City Champs tournaments at my local store (Tara Angel's). I won the first draft event and then played in two subsequent events (one Standard playing blue-green Faeries and one draft). With only four total tournaments to count for the store rankings, I skipped the final Standard tournament, although I loaned a deck to a friend who placed second.

My brother Frank has always been great at designing/tweaking decks as well as playing **Magic**. He helped me put the finishing touches on the Next Level Blue deck that I won the Mobile PTQ with. He had been working on a green-black Elves build for a while that he really liked. Fortunately for me, it was also just the style of deck that I wanted to play (Aggro-Control). I didn't have a fourth Thoughtseize, so I substituted a Squall Line as Profane Command number five in the deck that I played at the store finals.

Being a smaller area of **Magic**, I knew pretty much everyone at my store finals. I draft and playtest with many of them every Monday night. In the first round, I played against my friend Pat playing blue-green Pickles. It was hard fought, but I managed to draw Profane Command at just the right time in Game 3. I then played against Jared with blue-black Faeries, which was a deck that we really tuned against. This match



went exactly according to plan, so I was in the finals with my friend Jason playing a similar green-black Elves build. Since the tournament was Swiss, we decided to draw, knowing that both of us really wanted to play the City Champs finals. We played a decider match just to see what would have happened and I was able to win 2-0, primarily due to playing more Profane Commands than he had access to.

Shea: I qualified for the City Championships finals by sweeping my store's Top 8 and winning a few of the store qualifying tournaments before that.

Kyle: I honestly only played in four or so of those events. I just won them all, and several of the ones in our area didn't make, so I had the luxury to be able to sit back and ride it.

BDM: *What about the deck you chose to play in the finals? Tell us a little about it.*

Kyle: A near mono-blue Wizard deck structured around Vedalken Aethermage with a host of juicy targets aimed to prolong the game. Once you get to the late-game you typically use Teferi to flash out an Arcanis to keep a steady stream of counterspells and road blocks to overwhelm the opponent. Arbiter of Knollridge is one of the biggest players in this strategy because you generally take a lot of damage from aggressive decks that can drop a weak threat before the counter magic comes online. Against control decks all of the threats are instant speed, which means all the battles will be fought on their turn and will usually come down to Teferi advantage.

I've been testing and playing with the deck for the past couple weeks and the only games I've lost have been to mistakes on my part or mulligans below six. That said, the deck doesn't mulligan very often due to the high number of versatile lands. Sometimes it can be pretty awkward playing this deck, because oftentimes you won't actually cast a spell until turn four or five. The flash Wizards make up for the tempo loss since they all "do" something in addition to taking out a creature or adding damage to the table.

Don: I played Faeries. It's the best deck, even when a lot of other decks are hating against it. I thought about switching to Doran to avoid all the hate people have for Faeries but ultimately I didn't like the deck as much nor had I played it as much. I did make a couple of revisions to my deck right before the tournament by swapping out two Nameless Inversions for two Terrors and the Razormane Masticores in the side for Terrors. Other than that it is the same deck list that Yuuta Takahashi played at the GP in Japan. The Bottle Gnomes weren't useful at all but there were several monored decks, I just happened to not play them. My most difficult match was against monoblack rogues in the quarters, but I won 2-1.

Jeff: I decided on Red-green (splash black) Ramp. I think Faeries is probably the best deck in the format (as you can tell from **Magic Online**), so I wanted to play something that had a good match win percentage against that deck and didn't auto lose to anything else in the field. I was a HUGE fan of the Good Color Control deck that [Tiago] Chan and [Frank] Karsten played a year or so ago, and this deck felt similar in the way it went about wining games.

Stephen: I chose green-black Elves as it fits my play style quite nicely. It was originally designed by my brother Frank, but I made a few adjustments for the store finals, including removing two Wolf-Skull Shaman and two Boreal Druid for four Jagged-Scar Archers. I think that Jagged-Scar Archers are really underrated right now, especially since they completely wreck some of the better decks in the format (Faeries, Elves mirror). I had been talking about the Archers with Jason Maxwell for the past few weeks and we both ended up giving them a try. I think the experiment was a success as we both ended up splitting the store finals, and I ended up winning City Champs, while he finished with one bye for Regionals.

I absolutely loved my deck, as Profane Command allows you to really turn bad games around. It is so versatile in that it can take on a wide variety of roles, from pure Aggro (damage + fear) to pure control (return a creature and kill a creature) and all variants in between. It also makes Jagged-Scar Archers amazing when you return an Imperious Perfect (+2/+2 to archers) and give them Fear. I realized that the majority of games I won came down to Profane Command. This made me cut one Chameleon Colossus and one Thoughtseize (or Squall Line) to make room for two Garruk Wildspeaker. Garruk lets me power up my Jagged-Scar Archers or Profane Commands even more. This aggro-control deck has lots of gears and decisions to make, as you clearly can become the control deck, particularly after sideboarding. The mana base is also pretty solid with 24 lands including seven man-lands. I went 7-0 playing against five different opponents in the 10-player City Finals (4 rounds of Swiss with a cut to Top 8). I even managed to get a tiny bit of revenge against Jonathan Marsh, who was my only loss at the Mobile PTQ that I won.



Shea: I played an updated version of Chris Wolterreck's red-green (black) Big Mana deck with changes to help improve the blue-black Faeries matchup. I played this archetype because it is generally average or better against a lot of the field without having any poor matchups besides Reveillark Combo and blue counterspell decks, which I expected to get eliminated by anyone playing Faeries.

BDM: Will you be attending U.S. Nationals now that you are qualified, and if so how will you prepare?

Jeff: Absolutely! I've already made my hotel reservations and put in for the time off at work. I'm hoping a few other people in the area qualify though Regionals so we can all make the trip together. I think the deck preparation will be easier this year since we have a Pro Tour using *Shadowmoor* at the end of May and a Grand Prix in Argentina at the end of June. Even though *Eventide* comes out at the end of July, I think there will be a good foundation to work from.

Kyle: Yeah. I've never been to Chicago, but I hear they have crime wars, dark alleys, and Gadiel Szeleifers running around, so it can't be that bad. I usually just put decks together over and over and send them to a bunch of people on my buddy list to refine them. There's almost always someone online who wants to talk seriously about pretty much any format, so it's just a matter of finding the best of them to get the best input.

"I've never been to Chicago, but I hear they have crime wars, dark alleys, and Gadiel Szeleifers running around, so it can't be that bad." —Kyle Sanchez

Don: I haven't really given myself a chance to qualify for the Pro Tour or Nationals for quite a while and I think it is a pretty difficult thing to do. I will definitely be attending Nationals. It's a rare and special thing and it means a lot to me. I'll probably prepare by drafting a lot with friends and building a wide variety of different Standard decks. I have hardly ever used **Magic Online** and probably won't use it much before Nationals either. I'm going to be relying purely on live play.

Stephen: I am definitely going to be there, as I did my undergraduate degree at Illinois Institute of Technology right in Chicago. I still have a lot of friends/family there and I go back to visit whenever I get a chance. As far as preparation, I will be working with the rest of my friends and my brother in Tallahassee this summer. I have Hollywood to prepare for first, and then I hope to help them qualify at Regionals. Most of our playtesting is in person, rather than online as I don't use **Magic Online**. I know that it is a great tool, but I can't really afford to manage both a physical and digital playset of cards. The fact that I use Linux full-time also makes for quite the barrier to adoption.

Shea: I am fully expecting to attend U.S. Nationals this year, and to prepare I am going to attempt to practice drafting with the better players because I have always been a poor limited player.

BDM: *From what you have seen so far (from officially spoiled sources only, of course) what impact do you think Shadowmoor is going to have on the deck you played this past weekend.*

Kyle: Negatively, those red-green anti-blue cards make me furious. Not so much any one individually, but all combined in a trimmed deck its going to be nearly impossible to overcome them. The mana base will be able to support Wrath/Damnation thanks to those filter lands, so it might be good enough to cut some counters to fit it in.

Shea: I have not had time to really study any of the spoilers out there but from what I have seen, aggressive decks seem to get stronger—by a lot—which could potentially hate out some of the weaker matchups for Big Mana.

Jeff: It's hard to say at this point. I'm sure there will be some more threats for the Ramp deck to pick up and work with. From what I've seen so far, it looks like Draw-go blue decks won't be around which will really help out the mid-ranged decks.

Stephen: I have been following the spoilers quite a bit recently and I am not sure that I have seen too many influential cards to add to my deck or to worry about, for that matter. I do, however, think that *Shadowmoor* is going to shake up Standard quite a bit. Hybrid is an awesome mechanic with a lot of flexibility that really allows for some quite interesting deck combinations. I am really looking forward to the Prerelease this weekend, so I can see what the rest of the cards do.

Don: I don't think Faeries will be a good deck for Nationals as I think the best players will be prepared for it—the same is probably true for Hollywood. I haven't seen any good Faeries spoiled for *Shadowmoor* yet nor are there a host of cards that hurt Faeries, so I think the deck will stay mostly unchanged. However, other decks will get boosts and this may make Faeries less popular anyway.

BDM: *I know that at least one of you is going to Hollywood, but even for those you watching from the sidelines; what do you expect the Standard metagame to look like come the Pro Tour?*

Stephen: I really think that *Shadowmoor* will ultimately define this upcoming metagame, perhaps more so than any other single set has influenced a Pro Tour in the past. There seem to be a lot of powerful enchantments and large creatures in *Shadowmoor*, which is quite different than the small creatures and man-land metagame that we see today (Elves, Faeries, Merfolk, Kithkin ...). Big mana decks are also growing in popularity right now, and the pseudo-color fixing provided by the hybrid mechanic should only expand their possibilities. I think that is where I am going to probably start my quest to develop the best deck for Pro Tour-Hollywood.

Don: Many people will play Faeries just because it's good. Monored is a decent foil to Faeries so I think that will be popular. I think there are going to be Demigod decks that will make a breakout appearance at the Tour. I'm betting they'll run Bitterblossom because that card is so good.



Kyle: Seems hard to metagame for such an open and undefined format. Sure Faeries is at the top, and red-green is all over the place. But after that there's just a ton of tier-two unrefined pet decks. I'm probably going to show up with a deck that can do "something" very consistently, and if it can't, then hopefully you guys will let me do some coverage writing!

Jeff: Well, with a new base set coming out with 301 cards.... I'm not sure anybody can predict what the meta will look like with any concrete accuracy. I'm sure Faeries will still be around, and it looks

like Burn Deck Wins is getting a fantastic one-casting-cost creature. There are a lot of very powerful cards being spoiled for *Shadowmoor*, so I'm sure we'll see lots of new decks.

Shea: I am not qualified and do not have any networking connections so I am not sure, but I would have to guess blue-black Faeries and decks that beat Faeries would probably make up a large portion of the field.

BDM: *What is the most powerful card in Standard?*

Shea: Bitterblossom is pretty ridiculous right now and there are very few quality answers to it.

Jeff: In a vacuum—Wrath of God/Damnation; In a deck—Reveillark.

Kyle: Cryptic Command.

Don: Bitterblossom, no doubt.

Stephen: Profane Command is without a doubt the most powerful card in Standard. The other two commands that see play (Cryptic and Primal) are also very powerful, but not quite as much. Getting two abilities out of the same spell can be very warping to the current game state. In the City Champs, I was able to Profane Command for five damage and give five creatures Fear, dealing a total of 13 damage on a single turn in the semifinals against a monored Burn deck. My favorite plays with Profane Command involve returning Imperious Perfect to play and giving Jagged-Scar Archers and other elves Fear for insane amounts of damage. That was definitely the recurring theme that facilitated my 10-0 record (store champs, City Champs) while playing green-black Elves.



BDM: *Favorite card of all time?*

Stephen: Necropotence. This is a tough one as I am a huge fan of **Magic** art, signed cards, *Beta* cards, unique cards, foils, etc. My favorite color combination has always been blue-black, so it is hard not to say Underground Sea (especially when I love playing my signed *Beta* versions in Vintage/Legacy). However, I think that I like Necropotence just a tiny bit more. It was the first *Ice Age* rare that I opened, and I started playing with it immediately. Of course it fit right into my blue-black Counter/Discard/Reanimator deck (with Underground Seas). I somehow knew it was going to be a really good card, so I owned quite a stack of them at one point in time. It also probably has won me more tournaments/prizes than any of the other cards that I currently own. During Black Summer, I had a 3-plus month streak (12-plus tournaments) of winning with Type 1/Type 2 Necro decks. I also made my first PTQ Top 8 (back before the pins) playing a similar Necro deck that featured maindeck Dystopia.

Don: I've always really liked Wrath of God. I hope that card remains legal forever. It's such an important tournament staple.

Jeff: It's a toss up between Reflecting Pool and Tradewind Rider.

Shea: Sakura-Tribe Elder just because I loved playing *Kamigawa-Ravnica* Standard and he was such a great card in that format.

Kyle: Island.

Thanks to everyone for participating, good luck at Nationals, and have fun this weekend at your local Prereleases!

Firestarter: Your Favorite Card of All Time

I am hard pressed to nail down my favorite card, but it might actually be Flare. Admittedly an underwhelming card, it was a key component of my early attempts to build a high-velocity semi-recursive blue-red deck after the unrestricting of Feldon's Cane in what was then called Type 2. There was nothing more exciting than a Flare taking down one of the mighty pro-white Knights of the dreaded Necro decks.

What is your favorite card of all time and why?

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