

Chris Kirscher on Frank Fukuda

When Frank Fukuda arrived in Seattle in the late 1970s with his young family, he was an up and coming business manager for a Japanese timber company importing fine quality timber from the US and Canada. At that time, the go action was at the Last Exit On Brooklyn, a coffee house that allowed games such as Chess, Bridge, Risk – and Go. My father, coming in once to find my brother, described it as a real life version of the inter-planetary cafe scene in Star Wars. NOT a place where you would expect to find a representative of the Japanese business community. But if that was where the go action was, that was where you would occasionally find Frank. Years later, Frank confided to me that “When I got home I had to immediately put all my clothes into the washing machine and take a shower.” In those days, a “no smoking” rule in any restaurant (much less a coffee house) was unthinkable. And not all the smoke was from tobacco.

In 1985, the Last Exit Go Club was invited to organize the second US Go Congress in Seattle, and Frank eagerly joined the organizing group. I was (and remain) unsure of why this prototypical Japanese business man was willing to join this rag tag subset of the aforementioned said Star Wars cafe. It can only be that his good business judgment was out played by his passion to help us promote go in America. His portfolio was “hospitality”. We expected he would handle the Japanese pros who we were told would come, just as they had the year before. Not a huge job, I thought, but valuable. I learned then that Frank doesn't just take a job and get it done as expected. He grabs it in both hands and molds it into something much better. Tour groups from Japan were unheard of before Frank, but now, a Congress without them would be a stone with a big chip removed. Frank said, “I have an old school buddy in Japan who can help us get a tour group”. Next thing we knew was that the group was 20 strong and growing.

In the years to come, Frank's ability to work both sides of the ocean were demonstrated again and again in increasingly dramatic ways. In 1994, we learned about the possibility of an Iwamoto-sponsored Go Center on the West Coast. Being a small “market” we needed a strong advocate. Frank was right there with advice on who to write, and what to say. By this time, Frank's friend was working at the Nihon Ki-in, so he had true inside information. As time passed, it became clear that Seattle would not be approved without the Nihon Ki-in getting some sort of financial guarantee that the Center was not going to come back needing more money from the sponsor. Frank consulted his good judgment and correctly calculated that the “Star Wars Cafe” crowd would not be able to provide that, and then promptly shoved that source of wisdom into the darkest corner of the basement behind the hot water tank and under a long forgotten and broken lawn chair – and decided to provide the guarantee himself. The Seattle Go Center Board was formed, and the rest is history.

Frank has always been a background contributor, quietly getting things done but staying out of the limelight. Though he never took an official role in the AGA, when the AGA needed advice on issues related to the Nihon Ki-in, Frank was always willing to make the discreet inquiry that would lead us to presenting the right ideas to the right people at the right time, and in the right way. Many times, in discussions of how to approach a problem involving the Ki-in, I, or someone else would say, “maybe Frank can help us out here.” And he always did. 2004, he persuaded the Seattle Asian super market, Uwagimaya, to provide a go teaching table on Wednesday evenings, and he has been there teaching nearly every week since. Often, when new players show up at the Center and we ask how they discovered us, the answer is, “I saw your table at Uwagimaya.

At the Go Center, the role was formal – and stipulated in his acceptance of “financial responsibility”. Frank was our link to the Ki-in, and their link to us. In bad times, he explained our difficulties, and they accepted that our loan payment would be delayed. In good times, he made sure they were aware of what we were doing. When other difficulties arose that threatened the good relations with the Ki-in and thus the survival of the Go Center, he interceded, and enabled us to survive and prosper.

We have had and continue to have wonderful people to lead, manage, and teach at the Go Center. All have contributed mightily, and what would be beyond any reasonable expectation in any ordinary situation. But here, it is normal. In the presence of Frank's quiet leadership by example, no one can give less than their fullest contribution.