

Richard Dolen: Snapshots from 60 Years of Go

I had heard of go in the 1950's and even received an offer to play, but didn't really learn till 1960 when Professor of Mathematics, Morgan Ward, gave a public lecture demonstration at Caltech. Thought I understood the rules after the lecture, but when the demonstration began (3 dan players from Rafu Kiin) I didn't understand a single move. So I decided to look into it further. At a Japanese bookstore, bought Arthur Smith's "The Game of Go", bought a board and stones, and started to figure it out.

A Chinese graduate student at Caltech gave me 9 stones a couple of times. Then I found out about Rafu Kiin, the Japanese Go Club in downtown Los Angeles. Went often and started entering the quarterly tournaments.

Most of the players there were not interested in teaching. But the club, being an official branch of the Nihon Kiin, subscribed to the monthly go magazine Kido, and there were occasional copies lying around. Didn't understand a word of it, but I was interested in languages, and thought it would be cool to learn Japanese. I thought it would take me only a couple of years to learn enough to read the go diagrams.

So another trip to the Japanese bookstore yielded volume 1 of a very old fashioned Japanese textbook, which didn't even have the modern forms of the characters. But I didn't know that till later, and I plugged away. As I learned the language, I became interested not only in go, but in everything else Japanese, the literature, history, culture, food, etc. In a couple of years, I could in fact read the go diagrams, and even understand the people at Rafu Kiin when they talked about go moves, though little else.

On vacation trips to New York, my home town, I discovered the go activity at the Japan Club, a coffee shop in Greenwich Village where they sometimes played go, the American Go Association and the monthly Go Letter of Takao Matsuda. He was about 6-dan, and very dedicated to teaching go to Americans. The Letter was for a while the source of all truth about go, and he continued producing it for about 6 years, when the general decline in the subscriptions discouraged him from continuing.

It was in New York, at the Japan Club, that I met the delegation of three professional women go players sent by Nihon Kiin. Playing and watching them play others was an eye-opening experience.

In this period, I never missed an opportunity to teach others to play. I started a weekly go club at Caltech. At Rafu Kiin, I started a series of Tuesday night lectures, based on material that I got from go magazines and go books. I spent hours preparing each talk. At summer consulting jobs I taught go classes at lunch. At the Rand Corporation, when I was 2 kyu, I met and played with the game theorist Lloyd Shapley who was about shodan. (In 2013 he was a co-winner of the Nobel Prize in economics.)

Both the Nihon Kiin and the Kansai Kiin started to send professional go players on visits to Los Angeles. I became the contact person for such trips and was frequently called upon to entertain them. This was a wonderful opportunity to meet professional players, but very often I would get a call from Japan only a day or so before the visit. Once, the call informed me that the players were waiting at the LAX airport to be picked up, and by the way, could I find them a place to stay. Many were the trips to Disneyland in those days before Japan had built its own.

I persuaded Rafu Kiin to invest in an hour phone call to accept a phone match offer from New York's Takao Matsuda to play a Rafu Kiin player.. (I don't remember whether he initiated the match or whether there was some intermediary, but he was the player and winner against our Inoguchi.) There was no technology involved, both sides would simply say the coordinates over the phone. A mistake was very embarrassing and tedious to correct. I was the coordinator and scribe for a number of such matches. At one time a Japanese player offered to sponsor a match with Rafu Kiin, but wanted a non-Japanese player. So they picked me; I remember losing that game. Later Sam Zimmerman came out with

teletsuke, a remote playing technology, which was promising, and helped a little, but far short of the modern go servers.

In spite of all the go activity, I managed to write a PhD thesis and applied for a Fulbright fellowship to the University of Tokyo. The thesis defence exam was on September 29, 1965; the next day I was on the plane to Tokyo. Those were the days of the student riots against the US Japan Security Treaty and the Vietnam War which practically shut down the University. I was treated very well by almost everyone, but I spent most of my free time at Nihon Kiin. I was about 2-dan at the time. Through the kindness of some of the professionals I had met in Los Angeles, I was introduced to the players and go study sessions of the Kitani family. They generously allowed me to watch professional games and even play insei.

At Kitani Sensei's house I played a 9-year old insei, who couldn't quite reach over to my side of the board. This was a 4 stone game which I lost; we then played another during which he was coached by an older player. Together they managed to force me up to a jigo. The insei was Cho ChiKun.

Back in Los Angeles I resumed the Tuesday night go classes; at UCLA I started a weekly go club.

Started going every other summer to play go in Japan. Those were the days when many Westerners got fascinated by particular aspects of Japanese culture, and ended up going there to study, some of them permanently. Whether it was judo or ceramics or Japanese prints, or go, they formed an interesting community in Tokyo. In the summer of 1970 they organized a Gaijin Meijin Go Tournament (Gaijin is a non-polite term for foreigner, and Meijin was written not with the usual character meaning "brilliant", but with a more suitable one meaning "confused") I won, and still remember key points in several of the games.

Starting about 1973 a go delegation from Santa Barbara would come down to Los Angeles for the go tournaments at Rafu Kiin. Among them was a 10 year old Michael Redmond who had been taught go by his mathematician father, Peter who was about 1 kyu. Michael was liked by everyone during his first tournament, and lo! by the second or third one he started winning, bringing back prize 100 pound sacks of rice to his astonished mother, None. I played with him also and encouraged his interest. On one of Iwamoto Sensei's visits to Los Angeles, a student in the Tuesday night class piloted us up to Santa Barbara in his private plane to teach the Santa Barbara group. The highlight of the trip was Michael going up to the magnetic demo board and correctly solving a classic double-play-under-the stones life-and-death-problem proposed by Sensei while his mother was in dismay seeing so many of Michael's stones being captured in the process.

A few summers later, Michael and his parents asked me if I would take him with me to Japan to study go. This was an easy decision for me, and we spent a couple of months getting him teaching lessons from famous amateurs and professionals that I had met earlier, or who introduced us to others. We even appeared on TV a couple of times. I also played with him many times, teaching him what I knew. It appears now that almost everything I taught him was wrong, but he has obviously recovered from this instruction.

The next year, Michael had decided to try to become a pro, and asked me to take him to Japan again. So during that summer, we made arrangements for him: he was enrolled as an insei at Nihon Kiin, and also in a Japanese Junior High School. Later he was accepted as a live-in pupil by Oeda Yusuke 8-dan. He was treated warmly and with great kindness by many people. Iwamoto Sensei was very helpful in smoothing paths and making good things mysteriously happen. I returned to Los Angeles, by then probably weaker than Michael, while he bravely set out on a career of his own in Japan.

James Chen, a businessman in Los Angeles area took an interest in promoting go, and through his many contacts in China, was able to host the visits of Chinese professional players to Los Angeles. When he arranged a reciprocal visit of Chinese players in Los Angeles to China, he managed to include me in the

group. So one summer I went with his group to tour major cities in China and play friendship tournaments with local go clubs. I met many Chinese professional players on this tour, Memorable was several dinners in the home of Nieh WeiPing, then one of China's strongest players, and his wife, also a strong professional.

Regrettable was my lack of being able to speak Chinese, especially so as I was the only one in our group, and among the people we were meeting, who could not. The amateurs we played were much too strong for us; they contrived pairings in which we had a nominal chance of winning. But some of the players were regional champs, the strongest among 200 million players in their province. And here we were strong players among one thousand players in California.. A year or so later, we went again with similar results on the go board. But they were wonderful trips from all the other aspects.

To further promote go in the US, James Chen founded the American Go Institute, to provide a framework to invite Yang YiLun 7-dan, a Chinese professional go player to come to America to teach. James did everything, but installed me as President. So we organized classes for children, and ran tournaments, and supported Mr. Yang in his efforts to get a visa, and set up a career teaching. One day I got a call from an Eric Cotsen asking if I knew where he could get go lessons. He had attended a public class from one of the visiting Japanese professionals and wrote down my name. So I arranged for him to meet Mr. Yang, and his lessons with Mr. Yang continue to this day. The annual Cotsen Open tournaments are an outgrowth of this relationship..

In the first few years of the Cotsen Tournaments, I wrote the software to run the tournaments and do the pairings. Eric Cotsen was the sponsor, Mr. Yang the judge, I was the TD and Larry Gross the chief administrator. We did this for about five years.

About this time, Mr. Yang started to come to the US Go Congress. One year, James Chen won the first place of the 5-dan section, and I came in second.

Jimmy Cha, at the time a talented amateur go player appeared at the Korean Go Club in Los Angeles. He would give amateur 5-dans 4 stone handicaps and win most of the time. Later he qualified as a Korean professional 4-dan and even beat Cho ChiKun in a Fujitsu Tournament match. He invited Cho HunHyun 9-dan to Los Angeles for a teaching visit. I ended up hosting a friendship tournament in his honor at University of Southern California. Later Jimmy Cha organized a trip to Korea to play friendship matches at clubs in different cities. He invited me along for two such trips. In Seoul I met many of the professionals at the Hanguk Kiwon. At that time, political relations between Japan, Korea and China were not wonderful, and very few visits were arranged. So after the Korea trip, I became one of the first people, amateur or professional, who had met the pros of all three countries.

In the first World Amateur Tournament held in Tokyo, I was the non-playing captain of the US go team. At the tournament I was designated to answer the welcoming address of the sponsors by a thank-you speech on behalf of the captains of the visiting teams. The English speech was easy, but then I had to repeat it in Japanese.

During this period, for more than 20 years, I became the default tournament director for almost all local tournaments except the Rafu Kiin quarterly tournaments, and the official tournaments of the Korean Go Club (Nasung Baduk Kiwon). When the Nihon Kiin held the first game of the Meijin tournament in Los Angeles, they wanted to run an amateur friendship tournament at the same time at the New Otani Hotel. Since the site was not at a go club, the boards and stones had to be borrowed from a number of local organizations and transported to and from the tournament site. I ran the annual New Year's go tournament sponsored by the New Otani Hotel. Similarly for the Ing Tournaments run by the AGA and many tournaments for the Go for Yu Club. For number of years, the Nihon Kiin sponsored a booth at the Los Angeles Convention Center as part of Japan Expo and held a friendship tournament, or continuous

teaching of go to the public during the three days of the Expo. I worked with Mr. Oki of the South Bay Go Club to run the tournament and staff the event with volunteers.

The Japanese community gave a celebration for Mr. Yamada, a long-time leader of the Rafu Kiin, on the occasion of his 104th birthday. Since the audience for this event at the New Otani Hotel was mostly Japanese, I gave one of the congratulatory speeches in Japanese.

I went to Japan with Mr. Oki as a playing participant to Nagoya, the sister city of Los Angeles, for a friendship tournament.

In more recent years, when the stress of competing in tournaments became too much for me, I started volunteering at the Congress as interpreter for the pros and other Japanese visitors, and also as a broadcaster for the AGA E-Journal. I think I have been doing this for the past 8 years and a couple of years ago, I traveled to Matsue, Japan to help the E-Journal and RANKA cover the World Amateur Go Tournament.