

GO FACTS 碁

1: INTRODUCTION TO THE GAME OF GO

Go is unique amongst games. Not only does its history stretch back 4000 years but the rules have remained unchanged throughout that very long period.

Go is a game of territory. The Go board, marked with a grid of 19 lines by 19 lines, can be thought of as representing a piece of land to be shared between the two players. One player has a large supply of black discs, known in the language of the game as "stones". The other player has a supply of white stones.

Starting with an empty board, they play alternately by placing their stones on the crossing points of the lines on the board. The players normally start by staking out their respective claims to different areas of the board which they intend eventually to surround and control. Enemy stones can also be surrounded and captured, but primarily Go is a territorial game and the player with the greater total area under his command at the end of the game is the winner.

2: HOW DOES GO COMPARE WITH CHESS?

It is interesting to compare Go with other "classic" board games for two players, such as Chess. Like Chess, Go is a game of pure skill, but there the resemblance ends. Obviously people will have different views on which is the better game, but there are at least three reasons for preferring Go:

1. To become even moderately strong at Chess, a player needs to learn many different openings. Failure to do this can lead to games that are lost at a fairly early stage. Go also has its own set of corner openings, known as "joseki", but players can become quite strong without learning more than a few basic patterns. Hence there is more scope for intuition in the opening.
2. The objectives in Go are to surround territory and capture stones; the winner of the game is the player who does this better over the whole board. It is thus possible to obtain a poor result in one part of the board but to win the game by doing much better in another part of the board. This also gives a player many chances to recover from a bad start.
3. A major feature of Go is the very effective handicapping system, which without distorting the game allows players of widely differing strengths to play each other. The less experienced player has a chance to learn from the stronger (and to win), while the stronger player must use his skill to the limits if he is to overcome the handicap.

3: A BRIEF HISTORY OF GO

The game probably originated in central Asia whence it spread eastwards. There are ancient records of Go in Nepal and Tibet and from there the game reached China. The earliest reference to Go in literature is found in the works of Mencius about 400BC. The game of Go reached Japan at around 500 AD. In both countries Go was initially played only by the aristocracy, but the game gradually spread among the other educated classes.

Although the standard of play in Japan was continually increasing, significant advances in Go theory did not take place until the start of the 17th century, when schools of Go operated by Buddhist priests received official sponsorship by the feudal government to assist their studies. A ranking system was also instituted at this time. The four major Go schools were the Honinbo, Hayashi, Inoue and Yasui schools. The top players from these schools competed for supremacy in a series of official games, some of which were played in the presence of the Shogun in his castle.

The patronage of Go by the government and the growing popularity of the game among the upper classes combined to provide a secure environment for the development of Go. The four schools competed in discovering promising pupils and devoted great effort to study. A leading player in the 17th century was Honinbo Dosaku, who developed the concept of pincer play. Another famous player was Shusaku (1829-1862), who invented an opening pattern that is still popular today.

With the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the restoration of the Emperor in 1868, Go faded in importance. The Go schools lost their annual allowances and met hard times. Fortunately, a reaction soon set in and at the beginning of the 20th Century Go was being played by all classes of people. Newspapers started to print Go articles and to sponsor major games. Enthusiasm for Go began to rise rapidly.

4: GO IN JAPAN TODAY

The first modern Go organisation, the Nihon Kiin, was founded in 1924 with the help of Baron Okura and did much to unite Go circles. The last of the great Honinbos, Shusai, joined the fledgling Nihon Kiin. His great rival Karigane joined a smaller group called Kiseisha and the confrontation between the organisations culminated in the famous match between Shusai and Karigane. Shusai won and thus ensured the ascendancy of the Nihon Kiin.

Upon his retirement in 1938, Honinbo Shusai ceded his title to the Nihon Kiin for an annual tournament between all leading players. Since then, other major contests have been introduced; the two most important are the Meijin and Kisei tournaments. The Sponsorship for the Meijin tournament is provided by The Asahi Shimbun newspaper. Go is also covered on television. There are now about 10 million Go players in Japan, of whom 500 are professional.

5: GO IN EUROPE

Although the game of Go had been described by Western travellers in the 17th century, it was not played in Europe until 1880, when a German, Otto Korschelt, wrote a book about the game. After this, some Go was played in Germany and Yugoslavia. However, the game was slow to spread and it was not until 1957 that the first European Championship was held.

Nowadays Go is played in most European countries. The standard of play is significantly below that of professionals in the Far East, but the gap is steadily closing. One reason for this is that several of the top European players have spent time studying the game in Japan.

6: GO IN BRITAIN

Go has been played in Britain since about 1930, but not on an organised basis until 1964, when the British Go Association (BGA) was formed. There are now over 40 Go clubs in Britain and the standard of play compares reasonably well with the rest of Europe. Matthew Macfadyen won the European Championship in 1980, 1984, 1987 and 1989.

7: WHAT DOES THE BGA DO?

The British Go Association is a voluntary organisation with elected officials which promotes the game of Go within the British Isles. Membership is open to all Go players on payment of a small annual subscription. The BGA aims to support Go players of all standards and to promote interest in the game. The three most important activities of the BGA provide benefit to all of its members:

A bimonthly newsletter is distributed to all members.

Each member receives 3-4 issues of the British Go Journal, a magazine containing news, game commentaries and instructional articles.

The BGA buys books and equipment that are available to members at moderate prices. Goods may be obtained by post or collected at most tournaments (see below).

8: SERVICES PROVIDED MAINLY FOR BEGINNERS

The BGA maintains lists of members and Go clubs. Both lists are available to all members (who may "opt out" of inclusion on the membership list). The club list is also distributed to people who write to the BGA asking for information.

The BGA encourages the formation of clubs (including school Go clubs) by distributing "starter packages" and lending equipment.

9: HOW DOES THE BGA HELP GO PLAYERS TO IMPROVE?

There is an extensive programme of Go tournaments, some of which are organised by the BGA. Other tournaments are organised by Go clubs, who are supported by the BGA in various ways. Most Go tournaments are run using the "MacMahon system", a method for determining pairings that allows players of all strengths to take part by matching them against opponents of approximately the same strength.

The BGA runs a game analysis service, provided by some of the country's strongest players.

Strong players are encouraged to visit clubs for lectures and teaching/simultaneous games - the BGA subsidizes travel expenses.

Two trust funds, the Castledine Trust and the Susan Barnes Trust exist to promote the playing of Go by young people.

10: SERVICES PROVIDED FOR STRONG PLAYERS

The BGA records the results of top-level tournament games and organises a grading system. Diplomas are awarded to those players who achieve "dan" rankings.

A three-stage British Championship is organised annually.

The BGA liaises with the European Go Federation and the International (World) Go Federation.

11: HOW DO I FIND OUT MORE INFORMATION?

This is done by writing to the address below or phoning

British Go Association Membership Secretary,

In return, you will receive a list of Go clubs, and a membership application form.