

Notes on the history of the Australian Go Association

(The following are some brief notes I put together in 2001 in response to a request from a Korean journalist on the history of Go in Australia; I thought it would be useful to put this into the public record before our history gets entirely lost. It is based on not necessarily very accurate memories — any additional material, corrections, and expansion of the comments on how Go started in other States would be most welcome.)

The earliest reference to Go in Australia that I know about occurred in an Australian Army newspaper during the war, in an article on Japanese naval strategy in the Pacific: the game of Go was explained and its relationship to strategic concepts developed; the author clearly understood the game reasonably well. There must for many years have been a number of people who played with friends, particularly among the expatriate Chinese, Japanese and Korean communities, but I believe that the first organised Go club was formed in Sydney in about 1960 as a subgroup of the Sydney Chess Club under the leadership of Kurt Flatow. I learnt about the game during my undergraduate days in Sydney, and I remember going to Sydney Chess Club meetings in 1961, which were at that time held in the YWCA building in Liverpool Street. My guess is that Kurt had played the game in Germany, probably in the '30s, and introduced the game to some Chess players (he was also a keen Chess player). There were about 6 or so players who preferred Go and met in a corner of the Club.

I left to study in the US for three years. In fact my PhD supervisor was Professor Ralph Fox, who was one of the key people in introducing Go in America. He had taught himself the game from books, and in fact had also taught himself to read Japanese just so that he could read Go books in the 1940's— there were only two books in English on the subject at the time! He evidently had no-one to play against for many years, certainly no experienced players; just by reading books he attained a level of about 3 dan before he met a proper Go player; he eventually reached 5 or 6 dan level. The Princeton Go Club which he formed must have been one of the first in the US, and he was very influential in spreading the game. His example of course inspired me to take up the game seriously.

When I returned to Sydney in 1965, the Sydney Go Club had gained considerably in membership, about that time separated from the Chess Club, and the level of play was slowly increasing with the help of at least one Japanese businessman. Still I think the strongest non-expatriate was probably barely 1-dan however — there were very few ways to learn technique and shape, as there were no really strong experienced players and no literature in English apart from a couple of old and rather poor texts (when did the Nihon Ki-in start publishing Go Review? It must have been around this time — and by the way, the editor, perhaps from the very beginning, of Go Review and then Go World, was John Power who is in fact Australian! I've never asked John about his history, but I rather think he might have learnt Go at the Sydney Club during my three year absence—in which case he quickly outstripped any of the Sydney players when he moved to Japan).

I moved to the US again in late 1968 to teach, returning in August 1972 to take up a position at the Australian National University. I quickly formed the Canberra Go Club with the help of a couple of diplomats from the Japanese and Korean Embassies. By 1977 there was also a club in Brisbane which was probably formed a year or so earlier; in that year, Bill Leveritt, the organiser of the Brisbane Go Club, contacted Clive

Davies, then President of the Sydney Club, and myself, with the proposal to form a National body. Thus the Australian Go Association was founded, with myself as President, Bill as Secretary, and Clive Davies as Treasurer. The first National Go Championships and the First AGM of the AGA were held in 1978 at St John's College, Sydney. The National Championships have since been held in Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Hobart and Adelaide as well as returning often to Sydney.

The timing of the formation of the National body was very fortuitous: the Nihon Ki-in in 1978 sent representatives around the world to meet with Go players to discuss the proposed World Amateur Go Championships and the International Go Federation; the AGA thus became a founding member of the IGF, and has sent representatives to every WAGC.

In about 1981 we became aware that a couple of Go clubs had recently formed in Victoria largely under the inspiration of Bruce Hatfield who was also looking to form a wider Association — it is a problem organising anything in a country this large, it's just so hard to know what is happening in other parts of the country! The Victorian clubs joined the AGA in 1982 as I recall.

The Association, particularly the clubs in Sydney and Melbourne, started to gather real strength of membership as well as playing level in the 80's. The National Championships raised the profile of the game in Australia, and was the springboard for much stronger contact between the local players and expatriates, particularly from the Korean immigrant community and Japanese businessmen, and later from the Chinese community (interestingly, in the early days we knew of only a very small number of Chinese players). The role of Dae Hahn (who lived in Melbourne, Canberra and then Sydney) in teaching local players not just technique but also the spirit of the game, and then in Sydney in developing the strong contact with Korean players which has transformed the Go scene in Australia, should be mentioned. Dae was also responsible for organising many of the visits to Australia of professional players from the Hankuk KiWon (the first professional player to visit Australia was I believe Kobayashi Chizu from the Nihon Ki-in). There have since been professionals from both Korea and Japan at almost all the National Championships.

As for other States:

In Hobart David Evans has for a number of years maintained a small Go club and for some years taught Go to primary school children. In Adelaide we knew of a small number of players since the early '80's, but a club was not formed until Jim Bates arrived from England (late 80's, 199?). The Perth Go Club was organised by Paul Clay in the early '90's, although I believe a small number of players had been active there for some time and had visits from a professional player.

The current situation is reasonably healthy:

In addition to the Nationals, State Championships are held each year in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane and Adelaide, as well as sporadic ad-hoc tournaments in Sydney and Melbourne. The NEC Cup, a handicap tournament with generous sponsorship from NEC, was started 4 years ago and is now one of the major events of

the Australian Go calendar. A recent addition is the Toyota-Denso Cup, held in Brisbane every second year, which is a regional preliminary to the Toyota-Denso Oza tournament.

An influx of immigrants from China and Korea has vastly increased the number of Go players, and our Credit Point system for the selection of Australian representative at the World Amateurs has been very successful in encouraging them to participate in the local clubs. There is handful of players in Sydney and Melbourne who could play professionals on one or two stones, followed by some 40 or more 6 dans. We have had less success than some countries in promoting Go in the schools, but this is an area which is crucial to the growth of the game; as always the problem is finding people with enough time!

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22 March 2001