



*Saijo helping out reviewing one of the games. Photo: Harry v/d Krogt*

# Saijo sensei

This story is based on a conversation between Saijo, 9p and Rob van Zeijst, written down by Rob van Zeijst



Photos: Harry v/d Krogt

**A**t the age of 15 my father, who is a mere 5 kyu, taught me go. I have played shogi even longer and with a strength of 2 to 3 dan amateur, I am a reasonable player. As a matter of fact I loved shogi a lot more than go, but during my university years, I played go a lot. “

## My go career

“After university, I started working for a small trading company, but I quickly found out that working for a company left me with little free time and freedom to do my own things. I quit and started helping Sakai Yasuo, 6p who was running a go club. He persuaded me to take the go exam which I passed at the age of 22, but I had to wait a few months before being introduced into the professional ranks of the Nihon Ki-in at the age of 23. Since top players usually turn pro before the age of 16, or at most 18, I had no dreams of achieving great things. However, I am still count-

ing my blessings for becoming pro. I really love the game, but I am afraid I was not very good as a tournament pro. I am talking in the past tense because I retired as an active tournament go player at the age of 63 and am now drawing a pension from the Nihon Ki-in. I enjoy my lifestyle a lot more now and it also earned me promotion to 9-dan. When a pro retires, he is automatically promoted one dan rank, and he earns another one dan promotion post mortem. So in a sense, I didn't play optimally, because that would have required me to be promoted to 7-dan only, then retire to earn 8-dan status, and finally acquire the top rank by dying.”

## How to play

“My weak point was that I never studied after turning pro. The reason is that I am very lazy and I don't like working. However, I don't feel that teaching is work so I enjoy that very much. But I dislike the competitive element of go. The majority of the pros love winning and hope that

the opponent will make a mistake, so they can win. On the other hand, especially the pros in Japan also think of their honor and don't want to play a game they are ashamed of. I think that is good, but I don't like to have to think about winning. Because, in the end, you have to be realistic. The more you win, the more money you make. As soon as you start thinking about that, you start to worry. And these worries about having to win ultimately interfere with the pleasure of playing, with the esthetics of the game, and in my case, I got a stomach-ulcer around the age of 35. During my entire career after that, I had stomach problems that didn't seize until I retired. So during my career as an active tournament pro, it was a constant battle between the need to win and the esthetics of the game. For this latter aspect, my great example is Hayashi Utaro. He is not famous, because he didn't have a great record. What I admire in him is that he played the moves that had to be played, regardless of whether these moves would win him the

game. So, he didn't really belong to the world of competitive sports. I don't either. At the end of the day, your happiness comes from winning, but that means your opponent must lose and become unhappy. So, I can only become happy by making other people unhappy."

Why go?

"What I love about go above many other games is that it is about construction, with a lot of freedom. You can play your stones freely and create your own positions and there is no king which puts restrictions on the freedom of other stones. Being able to do this made me very happy during the earlier years of my career. Looking back, I think I was probably happiest when I turned pro and the period just after that. Unfortunately, reality calls for concessions which short-circuit the beauty of the game and which made me lose my innocence. As I mentioned before, from the age of 35 this had severe repercussions emotionally and I couldn't concentrate for longer than about 10 hours a day. During that time, time limits for many tournaments, including the Oteai and the

Kisei preliminaries, etc. were 5-6 hours plus byo-yomi. So if games carried on after about 9:30 PM, I would get a headache and would lose my concentration. Of course, this would often change the result of games. I didn't like myself for these weaknesses and started to have self-doubt and even hated this inclination of myself. After I turned 8-dan I started thinking winning is less important and when I was able to play a good move or a good game, I was satisfied. Of course, the best kind of satisfaction comes from the kind of games in which your opponent plays well, but you play better – that is the pinnacle of a good game for me. But in fact, I am really a teaching pro. I love to teach. My students are in general older people, so there is no pressure to make them into top players. I used to try to be their teacher, but now I just try to be a good friend. Some of my pupils have been with me for 25, and even 35 years."

Teaching

Talking to some of his students who were in Groningen, I found out that they love Mr. Saijo for his personality and his teaching style. They find him accessible and that he doesn't talk as if he knows everything. He is foremost a human being and only secondly a go pro. He is wise and has experience in real life. He is not, as is the case with some pros, removed from the real world. One of his pupils said he believed Saijo could have been a top pro, but that he lost in the half-finals to Takagawa due to tricky play. According to the student, this left deep scars with Saijo and he never completely recovered.

About his popularity in Europe, Mr. Saijo is very down-to-earth.

"I love teaching low level players, because they stick to the basics. Stronger players start to lose sight of the basics and often get lost in trivialities. They also always try to make their stones work better, which is good, but the mark of a



Photos: Ronald Verhagen

truly strong player is that he has a thorough understanding of the basics. “

“One of my strongest pupils is Catalin. When I was thinking of adopting him as my deshi, my wife was opposed to the idea of having a live-in pupil. Fortunately, some of my other students offered solutions and gave Catalin a place to live and money to make a living. I thought it would be very good for Europe if they had a pro from their own surrounding who could be their example and who could teach them in a manner and language they understood. I think he had a difficult time in Japan but hopefully he is happier in Europe. In the end, I think this was a very good experiment.”

Catalin commented that Saijo sensei was very patient with him. He doesn't try to change you and gives you a lot of freedom. Of course, sometimes he was severe, but that was good. The best thing about his teaching style is that he taught me how to play a natural style. Often when looking at my games, we would discuss what is natural.

#### Go in Europe

Mr. Saijo believes European go shows a lot of progress.

“In the first place, the top has grown a lot wider, there are many players now who play at a near-pro level. The level has also been rising steadily. In the old days, Guo Juan 5p, was able to win about half of the tournaments she participated in. Those days are over. Also Catalin 5p has not lost any of his former strength when he played as an active tournament pro. If anything, he was more relaxed in Japan, which probably enabled him to play a more concentrated game. He played a powerful kind of go but lacked detail. I think he has calmed down a lot. Maybe he has lost a bit in sharpness, but he has gained in wisdom.”

“I love teaching in Europe because I am special. In Japan I am just a run of the mill pro, but here

I have a special status. I would be lying if I said I don't enjoy that. Another factor is that in Japan, the players can best be described as 'omnivores', while the Europeans are 'carnivores'. The Europeans may lack knowledge, but they make up for that with their creativity. Japanese, on the other hand, have a lot of knowledge but get into trouble if the opponent plays something that deviates from the regular move. They are often too focussed on this knowledge because they just copy and repeat, which makes their play rigid. Of course knowledge is important but Europeans have a different style and are more flexible. I can also detect the influence of Korean go in the European style. It is more pragmatic. On the other hand, this shouldn't be idealized. I believe that,

yes, the Japanese have become a little weaker, but one of the biggest problems on the international stage is that the Japanese have given in and adjusted to the time system with only 3 hours each. I don't think that the Japanese can be number one again, but I do believe the Japanese would improve their score with more time. Already from an early age the Japanese pro are used to a time allowance of 5-6 hours each. It will take a generation or so to adjust to the international time system. As far as Europe is concerned, I believe that due to the influence of the internet and easy spreading of information, its level will continue to improve and in 50 or a 100 years, all countries can compete at the highest level.”



Photo: Michael Steffenson