

Chapter 1

A Fan's Introduction to Go Seigen

He played like the birds fly: swift and light. Suddenly the position could get frozen though, and then one would get a glimpse of the universe of variations hidden below the sky that Wu had spanned in the earlier stages.“
— *A friend (Jan van der Steen) on Go Seigen's (Wu) game*

Go Seigen is my idol. For two simple reasons:

1. He won games
2. He won games in his unique manner. Always.

Maybe a few other professional players can qualify the above criteria. “Ancients” like Kitani Minoru and Sakata Eio, and the “super players” of the 80’s: Rin Kaiho, Otake Hideo, Kato Masao, Takemiya Masaki, Cho Chikun, and Kobayashi Koichi. And don’t forget the big man in China: Nie Weiping.

These are all big winners. But none of them is as big a winner as Go Seigen. Go Seigen once *ruled* Japanese Go profession for *one third* of a century! And that was a 1/3 of century when Japan was the only land where Go was blooming. I (Jim Yu) think it’s fair to say that a new generation of professionals come out about every ten years. Then, Go Seigen would have to hold off the challenges from three generations of best Go players in Go history. And that he did: First there was Kitani Minoru, who, perhaps, would have been rated as great as Go Seigen had he not faded after World War II. Then there was Fujisawa Kuranosuke (who later changed his name to Fujisawa Hosai), the first ever professional 9 dan (Go Seigen was the second) after the death of the last Meijin, Shusai. Finally, in the 50’s, Sakata Eio and Takagawa Shukaku emerged as the top challengers to Go Seigen. But none of them was able to take away the No.1 seat that belonged to Go Seigen.

And we can’t say these challengers were weak. In fact, any of them was a definition of the *opposite* of “weak.” Kitani, along with Go Seigen, discovered the revolutionary “New Openings.” He might have been more famous of his magnificent disciples (5 of

the 6 “super players of the 80’s” mentioned above, except Rin, were his pupils), but as a player, according to Go Seigen, he was “first of [Go Seigen’s] toughest opponents.” They two together wrote the historical period called “Go-Kitani Era,” a span of about a decade before WWII.

Fujisawa probably spent his entire playing career in Go Seigen’s prime, and that produced another memorable rivalry. There was only one player who was strong enough and being strong *long* enough to play three 10-game series with Go Seigen, and his name was Fujisawa Kuranosuke (later Hosai). And let us not forget: Go Seigen lost only one 10-game series in his life, and that was to Fujisawa (it happened during WWII; Go Seigen was unbeatable in 10-game series thereafter).

Sakata Eio. We know his stories – the man has won more major championships than any other Japanese players in modern Go history. I don’t remember the exact number, but it’s close to “70 titles when he was 70 years old.” How could he win so many?! One has to wonder.

Takagawa Shukaku, whose first name originally was “Kaku”, without “Shu.” In Japan, only Honinbo title holders would add a “Shu” in their names, and Takagawa certainly deserved this honorable character – he once won 9 straight Honinbo titles. And that was the time he started to challenge Go Seigen. There were total of seven 3-game series, or 21 games, between the two. Takagawa lost the first 11, and what he did? He won 7 out of the next 10. That spelled “tough.”

So here we have the picture: Kitani, Fujisawa, Sakata, and Takagawa – any of them was a great player who was talented enough to dominate his era. Yet it did not happen. It did not happen because of one man: Go Seigen. Go Seigen was the winner of winners; Go Seigen was the genius of geniuses.

Watching Go Seigen’s game always brings me pleasure. It’s not that I fully understood his moves and was thus appreciated (that, in fact, is still a long way to go); rather, the shape of his stones and the tempo of his moves seem to always lighten me up.

Go Seigen seemed to have an extraordinary ability to simplify local (on the board) conflicts. Especially in openings. Often he would play “tenuki” moves – moves that locally ignore opponent’s previous move – although that would lead to some local loss, globally speaking, he would gain. Because he preferred to play fewer moves at the opening corners, his games were usually on a fast pace. Quickly, middle-game fights started. That’s the kind of game I would enjoy to watch (and play, of course, if I *can*).

Going to middle game, Go Seigen was again showing extraordinary power. He settled his weak groups quickly; he started to attack his opponent quickly. By “quickly” I don’t mean he played twice or thrice as fast as his opponent (although he indeed often did), but I mean he could use only a few simple moves to start or end, again, a local conflict. Gradually, since his opponent was unable to catch up with his high efficiency, Go Seigen started to lead – a lead that he, in his prime time, would never surrender.

Thus Go Seigen’s endgame very often became exceptionally simple. Well, endgame seems to be a phase that one cannot really simplify. If there are, say, such many unsettled boundaries, both players have to finish them off, unless – unless it’s like in many of Go Seigen’s games, the game was over before the endgame started.

That’s all I can see from Go Seigen’s game. I am unable to visualize his local or global “feelings”, and I am unable to carry out his deep calculations. All I can see is a surface of his game – yet, it’s a surface that’s clear enough to reflect his manners.

Go is a game full of conflicts, and if a man could handle all these conflicts in a simple manner *and* win – I would say, he is a genius. This genius was Go Seigen.

This reminds me of a biography of Albert Einstein. The author convinced me that to describe Einstein, “simplicity” was the word. Einstein was a man who handled things in simple ways. I don’t know if this book on Einstein had unconsciously helped me to understand Go Seigen, but as of today, I am convinced that, if these two geniuses of the 20th century had nothing else in common, they shared one word: “simplicity.”

I suddenly feel sorry for being born 50 years too late. I want to play games with Go Seigen. I might lose every game to him, but I wouldn’t care. When one gets a chance to play with a genius, it’s not just a honor. It could well change his life: something deep inside his mind could suddenly light up... Yes, that’s why I want to play with Go Seigen; the more I would learn from him, the closer I would be with the truth of Go.

Go Seigen is my idol.