

Promoting Go in the UK: 30 years of Youth Go in Cambridge

Increasing the size of the Go community in the UK is not easy because very few people in the UK know what Go is. Even after the publicity of the AlphaGo match with Lee Sedol, a survey showed that only 4% of UK adults were aware of Go.

There are few opportunities to discover the game. Shops that sell board games are likely to stock Chess, Scrabble and a variety of modern board games such as Catan and Carcassonne, but except for a few specialist shops none stock Go. Bookshops rarely stock Go books. This situation is in many ways worse than it was 50 years ago when Ariel and Spears Go sets were common, and Iwamoto's "Go for Beginners" was in many shops.

At the time of the AlphaGo match, Go was featured in TV and radio news programmes and some British Go players were interviewed and gave out information about the British Go Association and how to get involved with Go. The BBC news website had an article about Go and a link to the BGA site. But all this publicity didn't lead to many new Go players. In the light of this, it seems clear that it's very hard to promote Go at a national level. A more fruitful approach might be to promote Go in local areas and build up groups of players in particular towns and cities.

There is a network of Go clubs in the UK, and there are tournaments somewhere in the country on maybe half the weekends of the year. But many of the clubs have very few members and may not meet very regularly. Clubs and tournaments often lack double digit kyu players, so any beginners find themselves far away in strength from potential opponents.

It's more likely for people to take up Go as children or students than as adults. However, even promoting Go for children is difficult. Schools are not likely to be enthusiastic to start a club for a game that they have not heard of, and parents are unlikely to see the value of their children playing Go. They are more inclined to be keen on chess, as they can see that there are many school clubs and junior tournaments so their children would be joining a large community of enthusiastic players.

Despite these difficulties, we have had some success in promoting Go to children in Cambridge, although it has taken many years to find good ways to do it! We think we now have a model that could be applied successfully in other places, at least in the UK and similar countries,

Youth Go in Cambridge - Stage 1 - Chess & Go Club

We are lucky that there is a well-established Go Club in Cambridge University which dates back to the 1960s. Because of this Cambridge has generally had a reasonable number of local Go players, both current students and people who studied at the university and then stayed in Cambridge afterwards.

In the early 1990s however, there were no school age players and we felt that the local Go community would never thrive unless there were opportunities for local children to learn to play. But we had little idea where to start. If we just started a club aimed at junior players then it was likely there would be little or no interest.

At this point we had a stroke of luck. We knew some people at the local chess club, particularly the chess club president, Patrick Ribbands. He told us that they had been running a children's club but no longer had enough helpers to run it so it was likely to close down. We suggested joining forces to run a Chess & Go Club for children and he was very keen on the idea. We applied for a grant from the Ing Foundation who gave us enough

money to buy some Go equipment and to advertise the club to local schools. In these days, schools wanted paper flyers to distribute to each class teacher. We spent a lot of time producing these and cycling round Cambridge giving them out to schools. This was successful; we got enough members to have 20-30 children coming regularly to the club, most of whom could already play Chess but very few knew about Go. However, most children wanted to learn both games and many came to love playing Go as well as Chess.

Youth Go in Cambridge - Stage 2 - Small Board Tournaments

Once we had taught some children to play Go, it was not clear what the next step should be. Some of the children were enthusiastic but club meetings were quite short and there was little opportunity to do much teaching, especially as we were often both teaching the rules to beginners and also organising Chess. The children learned to play on 9x9 and 13x13 boards but many Go players advised us that they should move up to playing 19x19 games as soon as possible. This didn't seem practical given the length of the club sessions, the limited experience of the juniors who were only playing Go once a week, and the concentration span of the younger players.

We think the situation may be very different in countries where Go is played traditionally, where there is an expectation from parents that children will study the game and become stronger. Here parents didn't in general see the value of Go and there was no opportunity to give children homework or set up longer meetings.

The adult players at tournaments were much stronger than the children in our club, and at this time there was only one youth Go tournament each year in the UK. We organised a small Go championship within our club, played on 13x13 boards, but there seemed little chance of the children getting involved in the wider Go community.

To address this, we created some new events, in particular we worked with the British Go Association to set up a national tournament called the UK Go Challenge. This was a blatant copy of the UK Chess Challenge, run by a chess player called Mike Basman. Any school or youth club could organise a heat from which players could qualify for a regional final (Megafinal) and then a National Final (Gigafinal). It's very successful, and at one point there were more than 70,000 children taking part each year. With Mike's permission we copied his concept; he also gave us free advertising in his mailings which went out to over 2000 schools.

The UK Go Challenge was set up as a 13x13 competition to make it accessible to schools with short club sessions and mostly beginner level players. 23 schools and clubs took part in the first year. There was only a heat stage and a national final. Since then, the competition has not really thrived; the national final has continued to take place every year but very few clubs run heats. However, in our Cambridge club it has been very important: in each Spring term we hold a heat of the UK Chess Challenge and in the summer term a heat of the UK Go Challenge. This means that children have the chance to play Go competitively in a national event and it shows the parents and children Go being taken seriously in a similar way to chess.

Children from our club also joined in a rapid 13x13 handicap tournament called the Sonoyama Trophy, run regularly by the university club; and the national 13x13 Go championships which we helped to revive and hosted in Cambridge several times.

We believe that to get more children playing Go, it's very important to normalise competitive 13x13 Go events, and not treat 13x13 Go as being for beginners. With the smaller board, it's easy to have fast or arena tournaments and it's easier to set up competitions that feature a wide range of strengths. School clubs that have short meetings also work better with small board games. We are lucky that in the national 13x13 Go championships a lot of dan players take part so children can see that players of all levels can enjoy small board Go.

Youth Go in Cambridge - Stage 3 - Clubs in Local Schools

In the course of running our club, some parents of children who liked Go suggested that we might run Go clubs in local schools. We held a Go stall at some local junior Chess events and this brought us into contact with some teachers who ran school Chess clubs. As a result of all these contacts, we got the opportunity to start running some clubs in local schools.

Our first attempt involved four different schools, a mixture of before school, lunchtime and after school clubs. The most successful one ran for 12 years but after a while all these clubs closed because we didn't have enough helpers able to commit to running the club every week.

Once one of our main organisers retired from their job, we had more capacity to run school clubs again and currently there are four school Go clubs in Cambridge, three run by us and one run independently by a teacher.

Youth Go in Cambridge - Stage 4 - More Teaching

At around this time we had some visits from professional Go players and this really helped to boost our club.

But soon we ran into a problem when the local Chess club decided they could no longer be involved with the Junior Chess & Go Club. Fortunately, we were able to continue, being run by Go players and parents, sometimes with the help of enthusiastic local Chess players.

We had a short teaching session at the start of each meeting, which alternates between Chess and Go. We usually have three Go teachers which has given us the chance to split the players up into groups by ability and this has allowed the players stronger than 20-kyu to play a lot more on full size 19x19 boards. We have around 40 ordered lessons from our teaching sessions and we are trying to document these with attached Go problems and supporting activities. We've recently joined a group of other Go teachers from around Europe so we can work together on producing a Go curriculum from materials like this.

During the main part of our meetings the children play each other on a Go ladder but we also have a system where they play increasingly challenging games against the Go teachers. They begin on 9x9 boards with 7 or 8 stones and the handicap reduces each time they win. Once it is down to 3 or 4 stones, they move up to 13x13 boards with 13 stones and once they get the handicap down to about 4 stones, they move up to 19x19 boards with 13 stones handicap. This method seems effective in helping children to improve.

During the summer holidays we organised some Go teaching days with around a dozen children in each day. Each session was led by two teachers and we were able to charge enough money to make reasonable payments to the teachers. At about the same time a couple of the children started having private lessons which again allowed the teachers to be paid.

Youth Go in Cambridge - Stage 5 - Lockdown and Online Go

Things were going well in our club, with some of the Cambridge children doing well in national youth events and regular Go tournaments. Some even played at the European Youth Go Championships or were selected for the national youth team.

But then the coronavirus pandemic struck and all our face-to-face meetings had to stop, so we moved our club meetings online onto OGS. We started off with just a Cambridge youth meeting, but this was very successful so we helped to start a national youth online meeting at the weekend. We typically had 2 or 3 adult helpers at these online meetings and sometimes as many as 15-20 junior players at one time.

Many children had had their normal leisure activities stopped so they had more time for online Go. We helped the BGA organise some national online events that our local junior players could join in with. These included international matches against a team of juniors from Beijing, a team from a Go college in Hong Kong, and the Netherlands youth team. There was an England v Scotland youth match as well, and a match between top UK juniors and some adult players.

We still have an online meeting on OGS once a week (with a Zoom meeting held alongside so we can talk to the children). It is good for players who can't get to our other club meetings, and it's easier to review the games than at the face-to-face clubs.

Youth Go in Cambridge - Stage 6 - Present Day

We opened a second branch of the Junior Chess & Go Club in south Cambridge.

During lockdown, a European online 13x13 team event called the Euro City Youth Go League was set up by Marc Rieger from Germany. We helped to revive this, working with Go organisers from Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. The event was very successful, with 29 teams from 8 countries. Importantly, we were able to enter 5 teams of our local players (17 players in total) so they could play competitive games against players from all around Europe. This gave us many game records that we could review afterwards. It was also good that our club could have online Go teams, alongside our online Chess teams who play in the UK's national Online Junior 4NCL Chess league.

Cambridge University Go Club meet on Sunday afternoons at 4pm so we started some teaching sessions for the stronger local junior players in the 90 minutes before this meeting starts. The teaching is led by two dan players who are university students who are paid by the parents for teaching the children. Our strongest youth players are getting some high-level teaching with teaching games and game reviews on full size boards.

With these teaching meetings, the four school clubs, the two branches of the Junior Chess & Go Club and the online meetings there are in total 8 meetings each week of junior Go players in Cambridge.

There are about 8 adult players regularly involved in this but some don't have much spare time so we doubt that we have much capacity for further expansion without more helpers. We've had generous financial support from Cambridge Youth Go and the Youth Go Trust, enabling us to purchase equipment. We continue to promote our activities to the wider local community, for example at local youth Chess events.

There are more than 60 school age players actively playing Go in Cambridge now. Most are still beginners, but around 20 are stronger than 20-kyu and 9 are single figure kyus. Now that we have more formal teaching sessions, the strength of the players should improve more rapidly than before.

We hope that what we have done is copied or adapted in other places. It has taken us many years but if people can learn from our successes and mistakes maybe they can achieve more than us in a much shorter time!