

A TRIP WITH YASUDA SENSEI

by Jean DeMaiffe

I have visited educational institutions, including preschools, elementary and junior high schools, as well as institutions for the mentally handicapped. The game I advocate is the capture version of Go, which does not involve complicated rules. In fact, anyone can enjoy the game by understanding a single, simple rule. . . . I've experienced amazing results. I have seen children and adults alike regain the sparkle in their eye. . . . While communicating with others around the board, or when a group of players becomes united as one while playing a team game, we find ourselves enjoying interacting with other, leaving social status behind. In the process of considering the next move, and discovering the right answer on our own, we realize our own great potential. – Yasuda Yasutoshi¹

In 2001 I was selected by The American Go Foundation to tour several Japanese schools and care facilities with Yasuda-Yasutoshi 9-Dan, a well-known Go teacher in Japan and the author of *Go As Communication*. Here are some impressions from that trip.

Yasuda-sensei always started his lesson with the kindergartners with a couple of warm-up questions. The first had to do with whether or not the children still suckled at their mothers' breasts when they went to bed at night. That cracked the children up. He would ask, "How many of you are sleepy?" "How old are you?" "How many of you are 5?" "How many are 6?" Then he'd ask who eats their boogers (crusty nose bits). They'd all laugh some more and deny it vehemently. Then he'd say, very seriously, that some of his other students did eat theirs, so he had asked one what boogers tasted like. The child had responded, "Delicious! It's salty, like potato chips." By this time, the kids were all firmly on Yasuda-sensei's side and were eager to hear what he had to say next.

With the elementary school children, he took a slightly different approach. He would ask them to raise their hand if they liked to take tests. Naturally, few if any would raise their hands. Then he would say that if there had been more children who liked to take tests, he would have told them how to get an extra ten points. But instead he would go on with the lesson.

Another grade-school ice-breaker was the question, "Who likes to study?" "Who doesn't like to study?" Then he would admit that he didn't like to study much when he was young.

With older children, Yasuda would ask, "How many of you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend?" To the fifth and sixth graders, he said, "I'll teach you how to win a lover." The children all laughed. Then he showed them how to place a stone on the board. When he'd done his standard opening demonstration, he asked for the boy whom all the girls hated. Then he asked for the boy who was brightest in math. He had those boys come up front and be captains of their teams. Then he let each boy choose one girl for

¹ Yasuda, Yasutoshi, *Go As Communication*, Slate and Shell Press, Richmond, VA, 2002.

that boy's team, and Yasuda-sensei chose another girl for each team. After the game, he told the first boy, "I'm sure the girls will like you in the future."

"What do you want to do when you grow up?" Yasuda would ask. "What do you think I wanted to be? No one ever guesses - at three years old, I wanted to drive a garbage truck. Then I wanted to be a singer, then a baseball player. But at nine or ten, I hurt my ankle. I still can't bend it all the way, the way it should go. So I began to study Go instead. In junior high, I went to Tokyo to study Go. I studied Go so hard that I slept through my other classes. But even while sleeping, I thought about Igo.

"If you believe you can do something, you can do it. But if you don't believe, or only hope a little, you won't be able to do it. Sometimes you hit a wall. Don't give up then. Try hard to climb over it. Then you hit another wall, and climb over that, and it goes on, again and again. Sometimes I was so disappointed at not doing well that I cried. One time, I cried so hard, I filled my pillow with bloody tears."

Yasuda often began the lesson by talking about *kanji*, perhaps drawing the pictogram for a running horse, getting the kids to say which way the horse faced. After that, he would talk about the characters meaning Igo. Moving to the demo board, Yasuda-sensei would explain the concept of intersections, placing a stone on a central intersection and asking for a volunteer to come up and put a stone on another intersection. If they got it wrong (seldom), he would move it to a correct position and ask them to put another stone on an intersection. When they got it right, he'd thank them and let them sit down again. Then he'd place a few more stones and ask if they were correctly positioned.

Next, he would have a volunteer surround a stone. Usually, they'd use eight stones to do it. He'd thank that child, then he'd say, "You could do it with only four stones. Who wants to try?" Often they would get it wrong, putting the surrounding stones on the diagonals. Then Yasuda-sensei would say something like, "not quite", and let them reposition the stones. He then showed capturing on the side and in the corner.

Then he would get teams to play each other at "First Capture" (the first team to capture a stone wins), one row of kids against another, girls against boys, teachers against students, then teachers against teachers. They used "rock, paper, scissors" to see who would go first. He instructed the children to kneel and bow and say "*Onegaishi masu*" (roughly, thank you for what you are about to teach me) before play. If a team escaped capture, he would show them what would have happened if they hadn't made the escaping move (capture). If a player took a long time making a move, he might pretend to snore, or he might say, "Everyone plays well", or he might move the child back away from the board a bit, so she/he got an overall view. After every move, he'd say "okay", or "good", then he'd gesture to the next player and say "*Hai, dozo*" - yes, please to encourage them to approach the board and take a stone to play.

In team Go against stronger players, he wouldn't let the stronger player(s) resign; he'd let the beginners see for themselves what the winning moves would be. Some kids get very excited and shout "*Abunai! Abunai!*" (Danger! Danger!) when their stones were in *atari*. (Yasuda never used the word *atari*.)

Yasuda-sensei always smiled encouragement to slow players, shy ones, nervous ones. He would kneel down to be on their level, look them in the eyes, pat their heads or their rumps. When a student resigned, Yasuda-sensei said, "It's very important to be able to give up." "I'm very impressed with how well you all played." Then he gave pairs the cardboard sets and let everyone play. After each game was over, he had the teams say "*arigato gozaimas*", the Japanese equivalent of "Thank you for the game". He only paid attention to the game and the players. Other kids who were playing patty cake or tag didn't get any attention. (Of course, there were teachers there to ensure that no behavior got out of control.)

During some games, Yasuda-sensei would have a teacher or other adult who didn't really know the game very well say "Stop" at any time that the kids could win if they got two moves in a row. He might coach the teacher so that they would say "stop" in time. He let the children figure out for themselves where the two moves would be; then he would say, "Very good."

He always made certain that all of the teachers and children and observers got a chance to play. After all the team go, he would ask the children who hadn't had a chance to make a move yet to come up to play with him. He'd say that because he's a 9-dan, he's so much stronger than them that he can play them in his sleep; but he must concentrate, so they must be very quiet. Then he'd write the grid numbers around the edges of the Go board. He'd demonstrate 4-6 moves, showing how to read the grid, across, and then down. Then he'd have one of the children blindfold him, and he'd sit with his back to the board.

The children would play first. If a child took a long time deciding on a move, Yasuda-sensei would mime falling asleep, and make snoring noises, and all the children would laugh. Yuki Shigeno, my translator, coordinator, and the kindest advisor throughout most of the journey, would act as his assistant, and place the white stones on the board for him. She would make funny faces to the children, showing fear when stones were in danger and triumph when they made good moves. (And, yes, he would always win.)

Finally, if the weather was nice enough and we were dealing with nursery-school children, he'd ask them if they'd ever played the game where they were the stones. He'd take hands with three of them and draw them over to surround a fourth child and take the 'captured stone' to their home territory. After the demonstration, the teachers, Yuki, Jasmina and Zoran Mutabzija of Croatia (my European counterparts) and I would each choose three children to be on our teams. The rest of the children would be the stones and would scatter over the playground. At Yasuda's word, the scattered children would all squat down and become stones for us to capture. When all the scattered children had been captured, the teachers would count off the number of children in each group - patting each one on the head and having him/her sit down when they'd been counted. Then Yasuda-sensei would announce the first place, second place, down to the last place-team.

At the beginning of the lesson in one Hiroshima school, the children sang to us and presented us with a necklace of paper cranes. Then Yasuda-sensei introduced Zoran, Jasmina, and me, and Jasmina and I each sang a song back to them. We followed that procedure in most of the lessons and at a banquet one night. Jasmina has a beautiful

voice (she sings in a band in Rijeka, her home town) and sang a lovely song about a sailor who was far from home and lonely. I sang "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" sometimes, or "This Land is Your Land", or "Hobo's Lullaby", depending on the audience. One time it was my turn to sing, and I drew a complete blank. I couldn't think of anything. I was lucky that Jasmina could tell me to sing that one about 'this land is your land'.

Yasuda-sensei was always very supportive of the children. He would say things like, "This is not a real game - just practice - so don't get too excited" to someone who seemed over-anxious. To a child who hesitated, he might say, "Put the stone wherever you want." To a child who seemed confused by his classmates' shouts, he would say, "Don't trust what the others say. Trust yourself - it could be the best play." Sometimes when a child seemed to be taking a long time, Yasuda-sensei would gently take her by the shoulders and move her back away from the board, to get a better overview. At the end of a lesson, he might remind the children that even though they don't speak a foreign language, now they can play with children from all over the world.

In Hiroshima Prefecture, in classes where the children had never played before, Yasuda-sensei did his standard demonstration, then passed out cardboard sets for the kids to play each other. At the end of a short play time, he asked them if they'd like to keep their new cardboard Go sets. They chorused 'yes', then he had them put their new sets away and he did some more demonstrations.

Thursday, 11/23/00, Nakama City Children's Go Festival. Two hundred fifty children had made pictures of themselves playing Go - a whole corridor wall full of colorful pictures of children playing Go. After the teaching phase of the day, came the tournament. The children were each given a piece of colored paper with six large circular shapes on one side. Every time the child played a game, she would report back to her teacher and get a sticker. Jasmina, Zoran, and I played as many children as we could in the time allotted. Winning children got a sticker that was slightly larger than those for the losers; but everybody got a sticker for every game they played. The top ten players (who had won five or six games) got a certificate and a prize. The player who lost all her games got a special prize, too.

On the other side of their papers was a pattern of 3X3 cherry shapes. The children would write a different number on each cherry, then we all played *atari*-bingo. If a child could get three in a row, up and down across the center 'stone', thus capturing it, she would win a prize.

At Shikigaoka Elementary School, there were 140 fourth-grade students in the class. We had some free time one afternoon, so Yasuda-sensei told us how he began to teach children. It began about seven years ago. In Japan, as in the U.S., youth face many problems - poor education, violence, suicide. Yasuda-sensei had seen on TV the story of a fourteen-year-old who had committed suicide. Yasuda-sensei was deeply moved and began to think of what he could do to make a difference in the lives of young people. Because he was and is a professional Go player, he thought he could do something with the game of Go, but he wanted to do something different from the Nihon Kiin's usual style. He wanted to help children - even one child, and he thought Igo might be helpful to such troubled children.

Yasuda-sensei had read the fourteen-year-old's suicide letter and was very impressed by it. Like so many other suicides, the writer had told his parents "I'm sorry". It was too sad. Yasuda-sensei wondered why children didn't talk to their friends or their parents; clearly they couldn't. They are always thinking, inside; but they couldn't talk. Maybe they needed another way to talk. Yasuda sensei thought maybe Igo is the way. So he took Igo to Shounai City Kindergarten.

We know that Igo is good for education - for learning to control one's mind, but nobody taught Igo in the schools. Igo teachers say, "It's wonderful", but other teachers say "So what?" It's not important what we Igo teachers say; it's important what the regular teachers say, and they said, "We're too busy."

Yasuda-sensei didn't give up. He taught teachers to play Capture Go and the teachers liked it very much. They played for two hours! The next day, a teacher brought a 9x9 set to kindergarten, and the children wanted it. What they really wanted was to play with their teacher, not to play Igo. At first, they didn't even play Capture Go, they just played with the stones. When the teacher won, she'd say, "I won"; but she didn't teach the rules of Capture Go or Igo. She is wonderful because she let them learn; she didn't always tell them how to do it.

Yasuda-sensei told us about a boy in one class who was an outcast, and he always had snot under his nose. After one month, he didn't have snot under his nose anymore. Sometimes kids do mean things to get attention. Now this boy got attention for playing Igo well. He had had snot under his nose because no one said, "Here's a tissue" or "your nose is running". He was always alone because he knew only mean ways to get attention. But he started going to kindergarten very early every morning and asked the principal to play Igo with him. They played every day, and the boy was changing inside. He found himself being interested in something cooperative, and the other children found that he was interested in cooperating. Now he has friends who tell him, "Hey, blow your nose!" So he doesn't have snot under his nose anymore.

After six months, this boy had become a leader amongst the children. He played Igo; he was good at art and handicrafts. His teacher was very impressed and told everyone about this big change. This made Yasuda-sensei very happy and hopeful.

At Nagano Prefecture nursery school, Yasuda-sensei told us, the teachers said, "Why should we learn Igo?" But after one lesson, they could see something new in the children's faces. They were so happy. They had a meeting then. Yasuda-sensei said, "I wish this to continue. Teaching Igo one time only is like having a party. But this should continue." One teacher was crying. She said, "This is the first time I saw [a five-year-old autistic boy] smiling," after having known him from birth.

Then Yasuda-sensei knew. It was his first experience to see truly handicapped children playing Igo, so he started teaching handicapped children as well as regular school children. He went to a school for the deaf. Some kids had trouble speaking, but when they were playing team Go, and everyone would be yelling to their team "Abunai! Abunai!" (danger!), they wanted to yell, too. Kids who could only walk with the help of a cane wanted to stand up. They all wanted to be a part of the game. Playing Go gives them a way to concentrate their energy. They have an outlet. Go brings us together and gives us another language to share – hand-talk. Yasuda-sensei said that

handicapped people have taught him many things. They are usually very isolated, but they have something special to give.

Once, Yasuda-sensei organized a tournament between some handicapped people and a group of children, but at first the children just cried. People were screaming and running - these people were mentally handicapped. But when the children began to play, they started laughing. "I won!" "I captured!" So the children began talking with the handicapped folks; they communicated and lost their fears. It took three years for nurses to get some of the handicapped to say "Good morning", but the children got them to do it in a few minutes.

The next year, a new class went to the hospital for the handicapped. One woman, a twenty-year-old who was in a vegetative state, would just lie in her bed. Then a six-year-old carried a 9x9 board to her. The child took the woman's hand and placed a stone. Then the child played her own stone. She took the woman's hand and played another stone and said, "Oh! Good play!" the way she'd heard her teacher say it to her. The woman started smiling. The little girl said, "She's laughing!" Yasuda-sensei cried. He had thought that the woman was not really alive, but the little girl gave her life. He wondered, "How many people before had contacted her as a human being?" Maybe her family, her doctor, and others treat her like she's not really alive; but the child doesn't care - she only wants to play Go and have fun with her. When the little girl grows up and has babies of her own, maybe she'll tell them about that smile.

Yasuda-sensei once received a letter from Guinea, Africa, from someone working for the minister of education. This man first saw Go in Paris. He wrote to Yasuda-sensei, "My country has 100 different tribes and languages, and they can't communicate with each other. Igo would be good for my country. If we teach the little children to play Go with each other, maybe they won't kill each other when they grow up. They will have a way to communicate."

Yasuda-sensei said that face-to-face, it's hard to kill another person; but missile-to-missile, it's easy. So we need a way to get people to communicate without languages - using the language of Go (hand-talk). Yasuda-sensei may visit the Congo in the next few years. He would like to make connections with people in Guinea, and he'll be able to go there, too. So if you have connections in Guinea ...

Friday, 11/24/00. Nakama Primary School. 69 students, 10 and 11 years old. This time, after asking if they liked to take tests and if they had a boyfriend or girlfriend, Yasuda-sensei said, "You don't like to take tests, and you don't have a boy- or girlfriend. Why do you come to school?" They all laughed. He always had a way to gain the children's confidence. When he told the story of how he came to be a professional Go player, the children were rapt. When he talked about having a dream and following it, making it come true, then having another dream and another, some of the children would cry. Later he would make them laugh again.

Yasuda-sensei told the children he wanted to tell them a story. What would they like to hear about? They said, "How to do better on tests." He asked, "What do your parents say about your tests?" "They're angry." Yasuda-sensei wrote on the board the Chinese character for "study"; then he wrote the character for "learning". He asked them, "Which do you like better, studying or learning?" They responded, "Learning." Then he asked,

"What's the difference?" He showed them that the first part of the character for study means duty - it's something that you have to do; but the second part of the character for learning means to copy. When you want to do something, you copy what someone else does - someone who already knows how to do it. In the second character of "learning, the top part means "wing", and the bottom part means "100", like a baby bird that must flap its wings 100 times to learn to fly. The second character of "study" means "hard" or "strict" or even "strong".

Yasuda-sensei went on to say that when he was in middle school, he didn't study, so he got a zero. His teacher teased him, "You are very stupid." Yasuda said "I can beat [a certain smart classmate]." But he didn't want to change his habit of sleeping in class and studying only Go at home. The other boy didn't like to study, but he went to school a lot because his parents demanded it of him. Yasuda realized that studying was just another game, and he could learn to beat this boy at it because he could see it as a game. He said, "If you hate studying, it will be very hard for you. But if you say to yourself, 'This is a game I can win,' you'll enjoy it more and do better."

For their next story, the students asked, "What's the most important thing in a marriage?" One girl said, "To take care of the children". Everyone applauded. Then Yasuda-sensei asked a teacher, "What is the most important thing (in a relationship) before the marriage?" The teacher said that she used to think that it was most important that you and your fiancé have the same philosophy. Now, though, she thinks that philosophy is not so important. What is important is that they are happy together, even though they don't have the same philosophy.

Then Yasuda-sensei asked the principal what he thought was most important when he was engaged, and the man replied, "Her beautiful smile." Then I could see that the principal was weeping silently. Yasuda-sensei asked another teacher what was most important in her fiancé, and she said, "I thought he was kind, but he wasn't, so I divorced him."

After the stories, Yasuda-sensei picked up a cardboard Go set and started popping out the cardboard 'stones'. He asked the children, "Do you want one of these?" They chorused, "Yes!" and each one got a cardboard set.

That same afternoon at the Sunayama nursery school and senior center (it also had an afterschool care program) Yasuda-sensei taught a class of tots and elders. A 9x9 'board' had been taped off on the floor, and cardboard disks, about 12-15 inches in diameter, had been painted black on one side, white on the other, served as the stones. One of the staff who provided physical therapy to the elders explained that the movement required to place a stone on this floor-board (reaching out and downward) was therapeutic for the elders.

After going through the usual introduction of placing stones on intersections, surrounding stones, and connecting stones to escape capture, Yasuda-sensei had the tots compete against the elders. Then the staff played against the elders, and then the staff against the tots. After that, the tots and elders together played against the "champions" (Jasmina, Zoran, and me). The tots and elders would consult on moves, and the tots would act as the black stones, one sitting on each appropriate intersection.

Yasuda-sensei placed the white (cardboard) stones. In this game, the tots and elders were given two moves for every one of the champions' moves.

After this lesson, we again had some free time, and Yasuda-sensei was able to answer some questions for us. For instance, we wondered if he ever offered continuations of his introductory lessons, and what he might focus on. I said that what is important is to understand correctly. He said that people say Igo is a territorial game, but to professionals, this is not so. Igo is about contact fights. We shouldn't think about territory, but about attack and defense. Many moves are made just to find out what or how the opponent thinks and to thwart her. Igo is the opposition of two ideas. The question is: which idea will be more successful?

In teaching beginners, he first teaches capture one, then capture three, then capture five. Just working on the successful capturing and escape from capture teaches the student the most. We saw two little girls, about eight and ten years old, who played on a 19x19 board one day. They chased each other all across the board, fighting to capture or stay alive. It was not a sophisticated game, but it demonstrated amply the need to keep track of stones in danger.

To demonstrate the usefulness of not playing next to your opponent's stones, Yasuda-sensei would set up a small board with three stones on the 4th line on one side of the board, and three of the opponent's stones in the mirror position on the other side of the board. Then he would ask, who controls the left side? Who controls the right? Who controls the center? After three or four demonstrations, the children can play on an empty 9x9 and not play right next to the first player's move.

Saturday, 11/26/00, Shounai Town center for the mentally handicapped. Today we came to a residential center for the mentally handicapped. It was an impressive place, regardless of Go potential. The residents made furniture and decorative wooden items at a workshop on the premises. At a textile shop, they wove their own cloth on handlooms, hand-tied rugs, and made their cloth into traditional peasant trousers and jackets and potholders, purses, and other items. There was also a pottery shop, where they made vases, dishes, saucers, and other art forms. They also had an extensive garden, where they grew flowers and fresh vegetables and fruits.

Before the lesson, some of the women residents got up and did a traditional costumed dance for us. After the usual introductions of us foreigners, Jasmina and I each sang a song. Then the lesson began.

As always, Yasuda-sensei demonstrated how to place a stone on an intersection, with hand gestures to reinforce what each of the three types of intersections looks like. He invited a few residents each to come up and place a stone on an intersection. He asked one to surround a stone, and then suggested that a single stone could be surrounding using only four stones, not eight, finally indicating that the lines radiating out from a stone were like roads or streets, and the resident should block off just the streets that led to and from the stone to be captured. After that, we had the usual games of residents vs. staff, residents vs. "champions", and one set of residents vs. another set.

The daily repetitions of watching the same basic technique demonstrated in different settings provided a sort of drill for me, helping to set the important concepts in my mind.

After a while, it's hard to think of a new way to write up the next iteration of the procedure, but being there was not at all difficult or boring. We saw so many different ages and abilities of people learning the basics of Go, and learning with very little overt teaching. A few minutes of demonstration of First Capture were all it took to get the newcomers started. After that, they were provided with lots of opportunities to see and practice the simple, basic skills.

I think that's the core of the lesson I received: teach very little; the students will learn on their own. Make a personal contact with the audience. Show the concepts clearly and simply. Reinforce learning with related, appropriate movement whenever possible. Involve everyone. Invoke a team spirit.

Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, I would like to thank Yasuda Yasutoshi for his incomparable and inspired teaching, honesty, openness, and love of children and for his patience with a gauche and crude American. Of course, I would also like to thank the Nihon Kiin and the AGA for sponsoring this trip, the AGF for providing the funds that made it possible, and Bill Cobb and Terry Benson for believing in me and providing me with invaluable advice.

In addition, I would like to give special thanks to Yuki Shigeno, who acted as translator, coordinator, and the kindest advisor throughout most of the journey, and to Jasmina and Zoran Mutabzija of Croatia, who were constant companions and who, along with Yuki, will remain in my heart forever as my good and kind friends.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank the people who translated for us (including Nobuko Takami, Kumi Itakura, and Yoshimi Nakao); the kind people from local clubs who made us welcome (including Mr. Hayashi and Mr. Takeuchi of the Hiroshima Igo club); and the host families who took us into their homes and their hearts.

From all the people whose names I have omitted, I ask forgiveness for my defective memory.