

This is a summary of my conversations with forty-four AGA chapter representatives over the past four months. Conversations were done by telephone, occasionally followed by supplementary email. The purpose of this phone campaign was twofold. First, it functioned as a public relations campaign, providing some contact with the AGA for chapter representatives and hopefully instilling a sense of community. The second function of the phone call campaign was to get a profile of what a typical AGA chapter looks like and to gather suggestions for improving and expanding the operations of the AGA.

From a public relations standpoint, this project was very successful. Chapter representatives were extremely receptive and universally positive about the entire program. Operationally the program was more difficult. Actually contacting the chapters proved to be a significant challenge, with many phone numbers having no answer despite six or more attempts. Given the amount of time spent chasing low probability contacts, a better approach in the future might be to begin with an email campaign followed by phoning interested chapters once a confirmed active phone number is obtained.

Initially my phone efforts began with chapters whose membership had recently lapsed. In some cases this was just an oversight on the part of the chapter rep, and several promised to immediately renew their memberships. The most common reason for lapsed chapter membership was the chapter was no longer active, which was particularly common for go clubs at high schools or colleges where the club's founder had graduated without passing on leadership responsibilities. In several cases, the former club contact was still available by phone, but did not know whether the school club was still active or who would be in charge if it was.

Collapsing clubs at schools was common enough that it is probably worthwhile for the AGA to invest some time considering how to avoid such situations in the future. Having contact info for a faculty sponsor on file rather than relying exclusively on the club founder would be helpful, especially for chapters receiving equipment donations. It would also be worthwhile advising school clubs (and other chapters in general) to have a some minimal structure that would allowing for transition of leadership. Reminding clubs at the beginning and end of a school year might help them survive the graduation of a key member as well as kickstarting activities after summer vacation. Transition of leadership would seem to be a particular danger for school chapters founded as a result of the Hikaru No Go phenomenon of the past few years. The founding members of those clubs will have already or will be graduating shortly and we may well lose other chapters.

The chapters that were still active were quite happy to discuss their activities and provide a general profile of their club. At a superficial level, clubs fall into two categories: small clubs consisting mostly of adults and larger clubs that draw more heavily on the local youth population. While the larger clubs get the most “press”, so to speak, smaller chapters outnumber their larger brethren. Figure 1 shows the number of “regular attendees” reported by each organizer for their club.

Regular Club Members

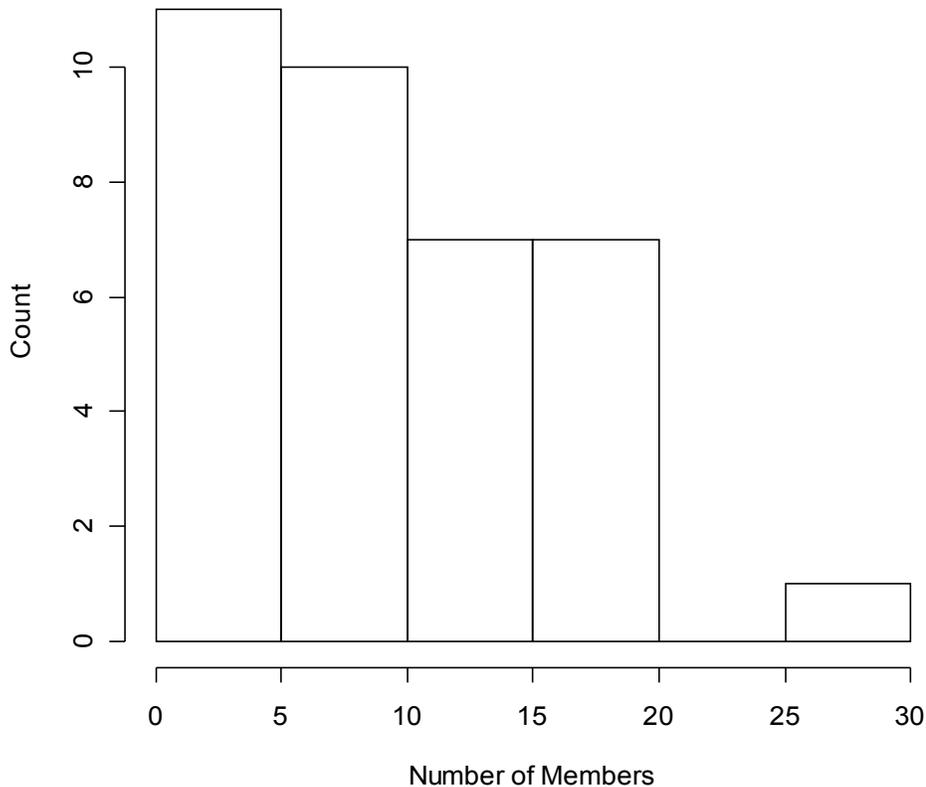


Figure 1: Reported regular attendees at AGA chapter meetings

The typical profile of a smaller club tend to be 2-10 regulars meeting once a week at the local book store or coffee shop and typically don't carry on activities beyond just running the weekly meeting. The usual description of such clubs given by organizers is “five players meeting once a week at the local coffee shop in the middle of nowhere”.

The second type of club tends to draw 10-20 regulars, with a larger fraction of its population being youth players. These clubs may be high school or college go clubs and usually meet on the school premises, either in a classroom, dedicated club or student activities room or in a public area such the food court of the student building. These kinds of clubs are also found in larger cities and come together as a result of a particularly dedicated organizer. Larger clubs tend to run regular events of various sorts, tournaments and go demonstrations being the most common.

When asked, most of the smaller clubs expressed an interest in outreach, but felt they lacked the resources, organization and/or talent make a successful effort of it. This was particularly true for advertising, which even among the larger clubs was done sparsely. The most common response was that clubs would love to advertise, but don't have suitable material. This would be a place that the AGA could provide assistance to clubs of all sizes. Some clubs who did engage in advertising provided

copies for placement on the AGA's web page, but a larger scale effort to help clubs advertise at the local level may be something that offers high payoffs.

Separation of Nearest AGA Chapters

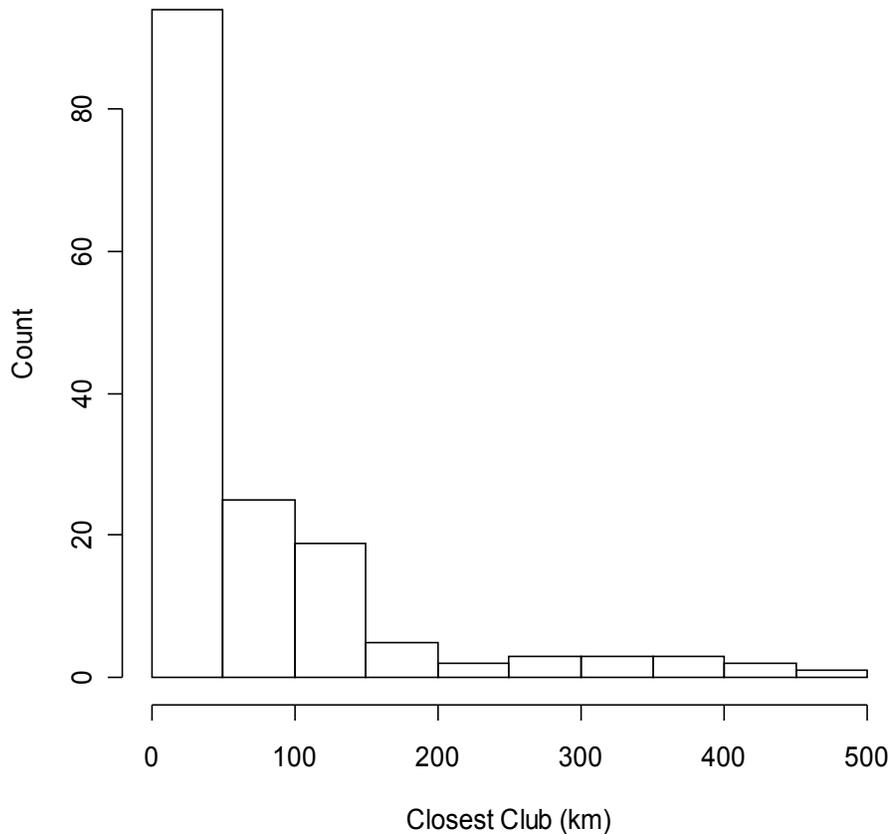


Figure 2: Distance separating nearest registered AGA chapters (ex. HI and AK)

During my conversations, I had the opportunity to ask whether there was much contact with other nearby go clubs. As might be expected, chapters based in major cities had significant contact with other local clubs, but some members from more remote clubs often traveled to more distant cities for major events such as tournaments. It is interesting to note, however, how few clubs are truly “in the middle of nowhere”. Figure 2 shows a histogram of the distance separating the closest AGA chapters (excluding Alaska and Hawaii), as calculated from the geographic position of the ZIP codes of chapter reps. The vast majority of chapters are within 3-4 hour driving distance of another chapter. While too far for weekly visits, such distances are certainly possible for yearly tournaments and the AGA might play a useful role in supporting contacts between more distant chapters as a way of invigorating go in less densely populated areas.

The items of greatest interest during my discussions with chapter reps were their comments, suggestions and gripes about the operations of the AGA. I promised anonymity to the reps, although several of the chapter reps also have organizational roles within the AGA and commented that their

positions were well known. Items were grouped into common themes and are summarized below. A few of my personal comments, suggestions and clarifications are given in italics.

Chapter support

- Several clubs have received Ing sets and other assistance in starting the chapters. This was well received and has left residual goodwill towards the AGA.
- Some clubs valued the publicity that their listing on the AGA website brought. For many, this was the primary method of recruiting new members. *On a personal note, I will comment that if this is common it is essential that email addresses be kept up to date. Perhaps there should be an automatic message sent out quarterly to the chapter reps to ensure that addresses are correct.*
- One club particularly mentioned the offer of webspace for chapters. Apparently the club's Google page rank increased after being transferred to the usgo.org domain, which if we can confirm it would be a good selling point for chapters. *A comment from a less tech-savvy chapter rep was that a website would be great, but they didn't have the skills to take advantage of the free webspace. Perhaps the AGA could provide a standard template that would meet most club needs: directions to the club meeting site, announcements and a photograph section.*
- The overwhelming negative comment about the AGA was the difficulty in getting support for teaching activities. Several clubs wanted high-quality material to distribute for publicity and outreach events, something which is best done at the national level to take advantage of economies of scale. Publicity material that used to be available (e.g. The Way To Go booklet) is now unobtainable, and one club wondered if they weren't receiving AGA support because they had gotten too big.
- As mentioned above, many smaller clubs would like to have decent publicity material such as signs that they could use to advertise their meetings at the local level. Having the AGA collect sample material and templates on the chapter resources web page would be extremely helpful.
- One chapter rep suggested that the AGA could help local clubs with publicity by creating business cards with national AGA contact info (web site, etc) on one side and information about the local club on the other. Presumably the AGA would be in a position to have card printed in bulk. *Personal note: This seems like a good idea. The costs and organization are minimal. Office supply stores offer blank business card templates that can be fed through a home laser printer. It would therefore be possible for local go clubs to produce their own cards if the AGA provided the electronic designs.*

The AGA at the organizational level

- There were rumblings from a few reps that the AGA is getting to be an inbred organization and needs new people in leadership positions. One rep complained that the AGA is not willing to spend money except for a few cases of dispensing external money, usually with strings and conditions attached. Another complained that the organization seemed to spend more time talking about processes and forms than actually starting up the programs that would help the spread of go.

- There were a few mildly negative comments about the day-to-day organization of the chapter system. Specifically, one rep commented that he didn't get a reminder about renewing chapter membership, another rep lamented how difficult it was to update club contact information and a third relayed his difficulties in getting problems with getting his E-Journal subscription straightened out.
- The AGA does not readily accept help coming from outside the national structure. One chapter complained that they had organized an event on their involving foreign pros, but couldn't get support from the national organization.

AGA Membership

- The printed (hardcopy) AGA membership form was a little confusing about the current AGA membership structure for one chapter rep
- A proposal for a new benefit of AGA membership: discounts on teaching games or lessons from pros. *Personal comment: I like this idea, but if it isn't possible how about working out a deal with a place like www.audiogolessons.com, which offers prerecorded lessons from Guo Juan and other pros for 1 Euro. Perhaps AGA members could buy a lesson for \$1 instead.*
- A mentoring program for new AGA members might be helpful for member retention
- The E-Journal was particularly mentioned as a very nice benefit of membership

Financial Issues

- The AGA needs corporate sponsorship
- One chapter rep suggested AGA-branded merchandise at the www.cafepress.com storefront as a source of revenue for the AGA. This is a website that could create T-shirts, caps, game record pads, mouse pads, etc. with custom go designs. *Personal note: I really like this idea. KGS and the Wings go club already have stores of their own through Cafepress. All that is required is custom artwork and there are no sunk capital or inventory costs. Further, the merchandise does not generally compete with the go vendors. While this won't be a large source of revenue, it is one that can be set up with less effort than seeking sponsorship and less risk than setting up an independent business*
- *Personal suggestion: Sell a digital archive of back issues of the Journal, along the lines of Kiseido and its Go World Archive. Perhaps you could make this a joint venture with the British Go Association and add the British Go Journal as well. There will be upfront costs related to scanning the original material, but once it is in digital form it can be repackaged in a variety of ways for nothing.*
- It's time for a winter go congress somewhere warm. *I wasn't sure where to put this, but since the US Congress makes a good profit, it seemed to have an impact on the financial side.*

Teaching and Outreach

- The AGA should be actively recruiting membership through existing gaming societies and

organizations, for example the US Chess Federation. The AGA should look into getting access to the UCSF mailing list.

- One math teacher who set up a club at his school suggested creating an online community of teachers who want to teach go in the schools. This was particular to the teaching profession, since both the challenges and opportunities are unique in this setting. *Personal note: This was mostly a request for facilitation, providing an online forum where interested parties could interact and perhaps a list of teachers across the country who could be contacted for ideas and assistance.*
- Another club rep really wanted to hear about outreach success stories from other clubs. He was quite willing to begin publicity activities, but didn't really know how to begin. *Personal note: This person appeared to really want a support network. The AGA could start this in short order by creating an online forum system on its website.*

Offers of assistance

- One rep commented that they have been working on a graphical front end for the AccelRat ratings program. The system is under development, but interested club reps may wish to check out <http://jseki.sourceforge.net>