

# The Traveling Go Board

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## Interview with Rob van Zeijst

*Rob van Zeijst writes the popular weekly go column "The Magic of Go" for The Daily Yomiuri. The Dutch-born van Zeijst is a 7-dan in the European Go Federation, four-time European go champion, an instructor for the Japan Go Association, and founded the go club at Ben's Café in Takadanobaba, Tokyo, Japan. Peter Nassar, a Philadelphia-based biologist who visited Japan this summer for a 5-week go pilgrimage, interviewed van Zeijst for the E-Journal on June 30 at the Indoya Restaurant, Takadanobaba in Tokyo, Japan.*

Peter Nassar: Where in the Netherlands are you from, and who taught you how to play go?

Rob Van Zeijst: I'm from Apeldoorn. My father taught me go.

PN: Your father was a go player?

RVZ: Not much of (one)...I beat him in our very first game! (Laughs)

PN: How old were you at the time?

RVZ: I was 8. I had been playing chess with him before that. But he beat me every time. I don't think he was a good teacher in that respect, but as a go player, he was a good teacher.

PN: Was there a club in Apeldoorn?

RVZ: A club formed there when I was 12. I was the first person to sign up. I'm still a member. So I've been a member there for 31 years now, and some of the original members are still there.

PN: To get to the level at which you play, one obviously has to put in a lot of effort. But do you think you have a natural ability for the game?

RVZ: Of course, it does take a lot of work. But I feel I have an inclination for the game. And I have fighting spirit, or what the Japanese called kiai, and that has also helped a lot.

PN: (When you started playing), had many go books been published yet?

RVZ: Yeah, there were about 20-30 books - the entire Ishi Press series. When I really started studying go, I was 12. I became a shodan at 15. But to get better, I needed to read more books, all of which were written in English. So I had to learn English first, which at that point was a foreign language for me. Having those go books to read actually helped improved my English.

PN: When did you first come to Japan?

RVZ: I arrived in Japan in March 1982, to participate in the Amateur World Championship. It was a week-long tournament. I was representing the Netherlands. I was the Dutch and European Champion at the time; but at the Amateur World Championship in Japan, I didn't score very well. I only came in 12th. I think my result was due to the fact that I was little distracted, being in Tokyo for the first time. I would walk all around the city and stay out far too late at night! (Laughs) After the tournament, we were invited to go to the Kansai Ki-in in Osaka, so I stayed there for 2 days or so. Soon after I arrived at the Kansai Ki-in, a Japanese gentleman came up to me and said, "Do you remember me?" And I said, "No," and he said, "You're the guy who beat me in the European Championship in a quick game!" I didn't remember our match, but we played again, and then I noticed how good he really was. He had a great understanding of fuseki. His fuseki understanding was at about a 9-dan level. His name was Tetsu, he used to be a University professor. So, he invited me to stay at his house. I stayed at his place for about a month. We would play go every day. We had completely different styles, and he would try and teach me a lot about fuseki.

PN: So what was initially going to be a short stay in Japan...

RVZ: Yes, when I left Holland, I told my parents I was going to be in Japan for just 3 weeks. However, I didn't end up returning to the Netherlands for another two and a half years.

When I returned to Tokyo from Osaka, I was invited by another go player who said, "You can stay in my summer house...as long as you want!" So I took him up on his offer. But it was about two hours outside of Tokyo, and I was living there all by myself. It was kind of boring. There was a town, but it was a rural area. There was no go club in that town.

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PN: What did you do after that?

RVZ: A professional Go player, Izumitani Masanori - he was a 6-dan professional at the time - he invited me over to his house, and I stayed there for 3-4 days. But, it turned out that he had an ulterior motive. One evening, he invited me to a pub to drink, sing karaoke, etc. And at this pub was Sakata Eio, 9-dan.

PN: The Sakata Eio? How old was Sakata at that time?

RVZ: Oh, in his early 60's, I think. But I wasn't introduced to him formally at all. But the next day, there came a call to Izumitani's house that Sakata wanted to meet me. So I went to the Nihon Ki-in, met with Sakata, and he offered me a position at his go club.

PN: Sakata ran his own club?

RVZ: Yeah it was a combination of a go, karaoke, and a hostess club.

PN: Hostess club?

RVZ: Yeah, hostesses in Japan are like waitresses who flirt a bit with the customers, but that's all they do. A lot of the clients at Sakata's club were rich executives. At that time, go was a game played by executives, doctors, etc., upper-middle class folk. Unlike Shogi, which is played more by the lower classes...

PN: There was a class distinction back then between go and Shogi?

RVZ: Oh there's still a big class difference between the two games.

PN: I wasn't aware of that. I wonder if it's a remnant from Edo-era times...

RVZ: So, of course I took the job, and I started working at Sakata's club in June of 1982. He thought that having me there, a European champion, was good promotion for his club. And he really liked my fighting style. I always played the sharpest moves. And he thought I had real talent. But the most important thing he told me, however, was this: "You don't always have to search for brilliant moves when you play go. Just don't make mistakes."

PN: What was your goal then? Were you aiming to become a professional?

RVZ: No. I disliked living in Japan, actually, back then. At that time, if one made a mistake in something regarding etiquette, no one would tell you. They would just smile and you wouldn't

learn about it until later, because no one wanted to insult you. Nowadays, it's a bit more open.

PN: Were you learning Japanese?

RVZ: No. I had an interest in go only.

PN: How were you communicating with anyone?

RVZ: Well, you can talk about go on the go board, but finally I started taking formal lessons in September. And about that time, I also started dating a girl I had met. And Sakata disapproved of this very much.

PN: Really? Why? Did he feel it was distracting you from your playing?

RVZ: Yes. And, well, it was distracting, but I didn't think that was any of his business. But later on, he made it his business. When I eventually moved in with her, Sakata let me go. He felt my having a girl-friend was a sign that I didn't really want to become a top professional. But, in the end, he didn't have the power to make me an insei. Even though he was the chairman of the Nihon Ki-in at the time, he couldn't make me an insei. There was a power struggle at the Nihon Ki-in at the time between Oeda Yusuke 9-dan, the teacher of Michael Redmond among others, and Sakata. And Oeda had a lot of in-house deishi (students). Sakata and Oeda were always at odds. So, I left in December of 1982.

PN: That was quite a year.

RVZ: Yeah, at first, I thought I would go back to Holland to continue my study in physics.

PN: But what did you do instead?

RVZ: I had few prospects at the time. I tried to get a job as an English teacher, but I had to compete with all these Americans! (Laughs). So I taught a bit of English, and a bit of go, but it took me about a year before I found a decent job doing translation work. I would translate technical manuals from English to Dutch. But it was during this time when I was job-hunting, that I became an insei.

PN: How did that happen?

RVZ: This was in September of 1983. Oeda, it turned out, seemed to have taken pity on me. He said, "I'll make you an insei..." and he did. That's politics for you. I think he basically wanted to show up Sakata.

PN: Where was the school at the time? Because now I understand it's outside of Tokyo...

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RVZ: There was a school in Shinagawa, close to Takanawa station in Tokyo. We'd meet there every weekend: Saturday from 2-6 pm, and all day on Sunday. The problem, though, was that I wasn't a deishi of anyone. So I had to go through this by myself.

PN: Oeda wasn't supporting you?

RVZ: No, he just made me an insei but that was it.

PN: How long were you an insei?

RVZ: From September 1983 to July 1984.

PN: What was the experience like?

RVZ: Well, you compete constantly. I started out as #42, and at the end I was #16. I started out as the last one in the B2 class. I was about to be promoted to the A group before I left. I had a problem with asthma, and it was getting worse during my time as an insei. The stress from being an insei was really affecting me. It's very competitive, you have to perform. You're either moving up or you're moving down, so there's a tremendous amount of pressure to win. On Friday and Saturday nights, I was having bad asthma attacks and I couldn't sleep. And the medication I was being given was terrible, it was making me nearly suicidal.

PN: That forced you to stop?

RVZ: Well, in August, the insei league breaks for one month, so I had time to return back home to Holland and rest for a bit. That was my first time back home in over two years. The asthma stopped. So, I thought, maybe I shouldn't return to Japan. On my way back home, though, we stopped through Switzerland, and the European Championship was going on there at the moment. There was a strong Korean player, and he was beating everyone, including another Dutch champion, Ronald Schlemper. I stopped by the tournament, not having slept for the past 24 hours, and this Korean gentleman and I played, just for fun. And I just killed him! I'm sure it was a result of my insei training: it is very rigorous, it improves one's reading, and it helps one acquire a good theoretical understanding of go. And I think that's why I think I was able to beat this guy. He was a professional 3-dan in strength.

PN: But, in the end, you returned to Japan.

RVZ: Well, I had a return ticket! (Laughs) I thought I would just stay for another six months and collect my things. But when I returned to Japan, I stopped being an insei, and the asthma disappeared almost immediately. And at the same time, my translation work really started to pick up.

I had bought a fax, a computer, and a printer, which at that time certified one as a professional! (Laughs) And the companies just loved me. So I was really busy with that, and I thought, "Well okay, let's stay a little longer, and save a little money." Then as I became more fluent in Japanese, I started translating Japanese to English about ten years ago.

PN: When did you start at the Go club at Ben's Café?

RVZ: Around the year 2000. I got an offer to take over the newspaper column "The Magic of Go," for "The Daily Yomiuri" which at that time was being written by Richard Bozulich. He had been doing this for over a year, and he was having trouble coming up with new ideas all the time, so he offered it to me. Then I figured, because I was getting paid for this, I should try and start my own readership, as well as give something back to the go community. So I thought I could do that by teaching people how to play go. I knew this American, originally from New York City, named Ben, who played go at this café he'd established here in Tokyo...

PN: So there really is a "Ben" behind Ben's Café?

RVZ: Sure, only now it's run by his ex-wife! (Laughs) Ben was a go player, and at the time he kept a board in the club. I'd teach there occasionally with my private students. As I was getting ready to start writing my go column, I asked Ben if we could start a club here at his café and he said, "Yes, why not try on Sundays?" He bought a couple of boards and stones for the place. So, in the same week that I started my go column, I also started a weekly club at Ben's Café.

PN: There are lots of go salons here in Tokyo, but in the United States, I think the toughest part of starting a club is finding a place to play and to store the equipment. A lot of cafés won't buy, let alone store, the equipment for you.

RVZ: Yeah, well Ben played go himself, so perhaps that made a big difference. And he had this image in his mind of how he wanted his café to be - a place for intellectuals to hang out and congregate. He installed Internet access, started poetry readings, etc., I thought go would fit in perfectly with that image. We began running the club on Sunday mornings and it turned out it was good for business. We'd bring in a lot of customers. Sunday mornings was usually a dead time: no one in this area comes to a coffee shop at 11 a.m. But I would bring in about 10 people each time to play go, and seeing people inside a coffee house brings more people in. It creates synergy. So that's how we began.

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PN: How did you first meet "Kaz" (Kazunari Furyama, one of the other regular go instructors at Ben's Café and an E-Journal contributor)?

RVZ: We were inseis at the same time, but I was a few years ahead of him. I was 21 when I was an insei. We met again a few years later. He came into the café a couple of times to play and so we got reacquainted that way. Then after teaching at the café for a year, I started getting busier with my other work, so I stopped running the go club for about 4 or 5 months. Ben begged me to come back, because people stopped coming in on Sunday mornings. But I couldn't do it on a regular basis, and I had to decline because otherwise there wouldn't be any continuity. In the end, I asked Kaz to help out. And I got another teacher, my brother-in-law in fact, Remko Popma, to also assist.

PN: How did you learn how to teach go?

RVZ: I learned on the job! (Laughs) I try to teach by asking a lot of questions instead of just standing up there telling people what to do. For example, I encourage beginners to discover ko by themselves. When we get to a simple life-and-death situation, I ask them to see if they can solve it. Some get the concepts right away, and others are flabbergasted. But if you give them one clue, a hint in the right direction, they get it, and then they move up to the next level.

PN: Have you found that your teaching style has changed over the years?

RVZ: Yes. What doesn't work is when I take the approach: "I am the teacher and you must listen to me"...that doesn't work. If you do something together, you're in it together. You have to give guidance, of course, and you have to have some sort of plan of what you're going to talk about when you go in. Also, oftentimes I start by giving the students a choice of what we can talk about. I've found that giving them a choice, rather than forcing them to do one thing, works really well, both for students, as well as for my own kids! (Laughs) At Ben's Café, I'm teaching to a wide range of people: from complete beginners to 4-dans. So I usually split them into 2 groups. In the first hour, I teach, and in the second hour, I'll play one or two people, and then look over other people's games.

PN: Are the players regulars, or is it a new crowd each week?

RVZ: A little of both. We have regulars, but there is a constant crowd of new people each week, including many foreigners who see our site on the Internet.

PN: Yours was the only site aside from the Nihon Ki-in that I could find that had anything written in English. Do you still take on private students?

RVZ: Yes.

PN: How do you teach them?

RVZ: It depends on their level. First I play 2 or 3 games to see what their playing behavior is like. You can learn a lot about someone's psychology that way. Then, I try to find the bottleneck in their thinking process.

PN: Bottleneck?

RVZ: You feed someone new information, and then you watch to see how they apply it. Usually there's no problem. But occasionally they have trouble applying some go principle, or there's a specific weakness in their game. I need to find that, and help them correct it, so they can advance to the next level.

Furthermore, I think it's important for people to have a good understanding of fuseki. How do you get better at understanding fuseki? One method is by studying the openings of many professional games. But my feeling is that go is such a complicated game, that you can't possibly remember everything by rote memorization. That only works for people like Ishida Yoshio, 9P, who can remember every game they've ever seen! So providing some sort of structure to the way you learn is very important.

I start by introducing one fuseki at a time. For example, first I introduce the sanrensei, which is also useful for handicap go. And we go through the strategy behind that for a few sessions. Then, so I can see how that person is progressing, I encourage him to use that fuseki in the next couple of games that they play. After playing 5-10 games using that specific fuseki, he shows me his results, and we can go over and work out any problems. Then we go to the next fuseki: Shusaku, low Chinese, high Chinese, mini-Chinese, etc.

Another thing I encourage people to do is to try and find more than one good possibility for the next move. I'm not just satisfied with one good possibility...unless it's reading out a specific life and death situation, of course, or a complicated fight where there's only one answer...but if you're talking about fuseki or middle game, usually a person has self-imposed limitations because they just have one move in mind. They're fixated on this one thing. So I want to get that out of their minds. Even if it's not good, at least think of a couple of different options. And that will open up your mind, and make you stronger.

PN: Was there a point at which you felt you

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couldn't improve in your game?

RVZ: Yeah, when I became European Champion in 1981, I felt it was going to be hard to get much stronger.

PN: This was before the amateur World Champion that brought you to Japan?

RVZ: Yes, when I was 19. Back then, to become stronger than everyone else in your environment was difficult, because it was hard to find strong players. But now, it's much easier, because the environment is so much broader and accessible.

PN: How did you deal with the pressure of going to these tournaments?

RVZ: I don't really like the structure of Japanese tournaments in the insei league. You lose on time, there's no byo-yomi. One hour each side and that's it. So that's really very tough.

PN: Did you get used to it?

RVZ: Yes, but I still don't like it. I like playing really fast games, but for fun. But I don't like playing fast games that are very serious. There's not enough time to read. And I'm pretty fast, actually...I used to be the Lightning Champion player in Europe.

PN: To me, the pressure in lightning matches is even higher.

RVZ: Yeah, but the main thing is to remember to have fun. I'm also teaching that to my students. I like grand fusekis, so I teach them grand fusekis. The fun of building of huge moyos and making your opponent come in and then attack them!

PN: So are you a fan of Takemiya Masaki, 9P?

RVZ: Not so much, actually. His style is like that, but I really like the Chinese fuseki, which Takemiya doesn't play very much.

PN: Oh, one of Kato Masao's books translated into English was on the Chinese fuseki.

RVZ: Yes, I like Kato very much. It's a lot of fun to play through his games. He had guts. He went for the big kill. And he could also read very well. He was a very good all-around player.

PN: Any Korean / Chinese players you like?

RVZ: Lee SeDol, 9P. He has so much kiai. I think kiai is one of the most important things, but don't overdo it! Out of a place where there's nothing, Lee can just set up a fight.

PN: Do you play on the Internet at all?

RVZ: No. I'm married, I have kids...if I start playing on the Internet, there'd be no stopping! (Laughs)

PN: Any last words for our readers?

RVZ: I think every go player owes it to the game to bring in, to teach, to recruit 2 or 3 new people the game of go. And hopefully one of them will pick it up, and that way one can double the playing population in 6-7 years. I think everyone should become proficient at teaching beginners. To learn how to teach the rules in 10-15 minutes. Play "Capture the Stone" for example. That's usually enough to give people an idea of what go is and give people an interest. And it's important, once you teach them, to set up a follow-up date. If you don't do that, people don't feel the urgency, and it's gone!