

A History of Go in Montreal

by Steven J.C. Mays

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Before the advent of *Go Review* and its successor *Go World* and those marvellous books from Ishi Press, the playing of go in the West was nearly non-existent in comparison with today. This is well known by today's average player, who, in his heart, must feel blessed that he came to learn the game at a time when every major city in North America and Europe has a club, and when books, games, and magazines are easily available. This success that go has come to enjoy is naturally owed, in part, to its intrinsic qualities, but a large measure of it is also due to the unrelenting efforts of pioneers, those men and women who persisted in playing and teaching a game when books were still years in the future and sets had to be homemade. In this respect, the history of go in Montreal is no different from anywhere else in the West.

Montreal's pioneers are Harry Schwartz and Abe Ravinsky. This article is dedicated to them and those like them, whose efforts have made go what it is today—the world's greatest game.

In a recent interview for this article, Harry Schwartz recalled first reading about the game of go in the late 30s or early 40s—memory is a little dim—at the Oriental Library of McGill University. The rules were contained in a book on Oriental games written by a missionary whose name has been long forgotten. Harry taught the game to his younger brother Sol, who in turn taught it to his high school friends Abe Ravinsky and Harry Gonshor. (Although Gonshor, now 5-dan, learnt the rules in Montreal, he began studying the game seriously only in the second half of the 50s, when he was living in New York City.) Since go sets were unknown in those days, the three friends improvised. Boards were easy enough, but for stones they substituted either unfinished buttons, obtained from a clothing manufacturer, or painted washers.

By the late 40s, however, the three friends began drifting apart, each following the call of his career; and Abe, the only one who remained in the city, ceased playing go altogether. Then a few years later, in 1952, Abe came into contact with a loose group of players at the University of McGill, where he was then working. Numbering eight or ten people altogether, this small group included Jim Hayes and Nick Burgogne, both graduate students, and Basil Rattray, a young professor of mathematics.

This small circle of go enthusiasts also contained some Japanese players, including a Mr. Asano, all of whom were working at the Sheraton Mount-Royal, a major downtown hotel located only a few short blocks from the McGill campus. The connection between the McGill group and the Japanese had been made through a recent immigrant to Canada, Kurt Sternberg (also known as Steinberg), who now lives in Toronto and still plays go. He was constantly in and out of town, and both Abe and Harry viewed him as an intriguing character, all the more so given what they knew about his recent life: he had fled Nazi Germany through Russia and ended up in Shanghai,

where he had learnt how to play. Harry, in particular, remembers Kurt vividly for his upbraiding comments whenever someone played a timid move. “Leap! Leap!” he would say, “Go is an exciting game.”

When Abe left McGill in 1955, his contacts with the players he had met there began to dwindle, and he soon stopped playing entirely. For the next decade go activity was non-existent.

Then in the mid-60s, perhaps in 1964, the situation changed radically. Abe and his old school friend Sol, who was back in Montreal for a brief visit, got together and played a couple of games. The effect on Abe was overpowering. His interest in the game, dormant for ten years, was dramatically reawakened, and he was now determined as never before to play go on a regular basis. To this end, he quickly re-established contact with Mr. Asano and diligently began to seek out other players. Abe was well placed to accomplish the latter objective, for he was now working at the Montreal Jewish General Hospital, which often had visiting Japanese specialists on the staff at its research institute because of the hospital's connection with the University of Sapporo in Japan. It was through this connection that Abe met Dr. Tom Sakai 5-kyu, a medical researcher working in cooperation with the world-renowned stress expert Dr. Hans Selye.

Abe's renewal of his association with Mr. Asano and his meeting with Tom Sakai were undeniably the most fortunate events to occur on the road to the establishment of a go club in Montreal. Through Mr. Asano, Abe met a Mr. Okada 1-kyu, then the minister of a Buddhist church (a former synagogue) on rue St-Urbain, just north of avenue Fairmount. Okada used to let people use an upstairs room of the church to play go once a week. Abe and Harry attended these sessions regularly, as did Tom Sakai, who frequently brought Japanese friends along with him. Such were the modest beginnings of the Montreal Go Club.

For his part, Tom Sakai, who returned to Japan in the mid-70s, was helpful in other ways. It was he who told Abe that back issues of *Go Review* could be obtained from the Japanese consulate. Abe remembers his trip to the consulate fondly; this was immediately apparent when he got up from his chair to show me how he walked out of the consulate: with a smile on his face, recalling the excitement of the moment, his gestures conveyed the image of someone carrying two heavy pails of water, so numerous were the copies of the magazine in each hand. To this day, two substantial collections of these original back issues have been preserved in Montreal. It was also Mr. Sakai who told Abe that decent go sets could be found at a Japanese food store called Miyamoto Provisions, then located on rue St-Hubert, near rue Bellechasse.

With the revival of go playing in the mid-60s, a major turning point was finally reached: the Montreal Go club was now permanently established. From that moment on, go activity here was to have a continuous history, one marked, on the whole, by many achievements and few setbacks.

The early years of that history, however, were mixed in nature. On the negative side, the club had a hard time in finding a stable location. After the Buddhist church mentioned above, the club moved to a community centre on Côte St-Antoine, near boulevard Décarie (1966); then to the basement of the United Japanese Church near the intersection of avenue Champagne and rue Jarry (1966-67); thereafter to a chess club in the Palais du Commerce at the corner of rue Berri

and boulevard de Maisonneuve (1967-68); and then to another chess club on rue St-Hubert, near rue Bélanger (1968-69). It is not difficult to imagine how this constant movement greatly hampered the club's growth in those early years.

On the positive side, a new generation of young and energetic players, drawn from the linguistic majority of the Province of Quebec, was emerging as a new force in Montreal's go community. The nucleus of this new blood consisted of Louis Leroux (now 5-dan) and the brothers André and Denis Labelle (now 3-dan and 1-dan respectively)—all of them close friends, all in the early years of their university studies, and all active go players to this day.

André and Denis Labelle learnt the rules of the game from their brother Jacques, after he returned with a go set from a mathematics conference in Ohio. A few months later, in 1966, Denis came across the address of the Montreal Go Club in the chess column of one of the city's dailies. At this point in the interview, as Denis was recalling past events, a nostalgic smile suddenly appeared: the memory of his very first game at the club, which was against Dr. Sakai, flashed in his mind. Being a young man and a student of mathematics, hence confident in himself and his analytical abilities, he still remembers how he privately resented the size of the handicap that Sakai felt he deserved. Of course, he lost the game, and his lingering smile was a gentle reflection on the brashness of youth.

While Denis was playing at the club, Louis, who learnt the game from him, was playing go at the Université de Montréal with C.K. Shen, a student of mathematics and a 1-dan amateur from Taiwan, and Khalid Benabdallah, a young lecturer at the same university, who is still an active member of the club and is now ranked as 4-dan.

The efforts made at promoting go during the second half of the 60s were mostly haphazard. On a few occasions, the chess columnist for the *Montreal Star*, Moe Moss, one of Abe's acquaintances, inserted go-related material in his weekly column, including problems and the address of the club. During Expo 67, the world's fair celebrating Canada's centennial, Harry Schwartz remembers giving a demonstration of the game one afternoon at the Japanese pavilion with the help of some friends. He also remembers another time when promotion of the game took an unusual twist. A local broadcaster, interviewing Harry for television, wanted to know if there was any connection between go and go-go dancers!

The end of the 60s saw the beginning of a new era for the club, a “golden age,” as Louis puts it, of stability and growth. It began, to be precise, in 1969, when, due entirely to Louis's efforts, the club's nomadic existence finally came to an end. For the following seven years, until 1976, the club's location was to be securely anchored at the Université de Montréal, Quebec's largest university. The ensuing stability, perhaps the greatest asset that a club may possess, resulted in an impressive growth in the club: from an initial roster of 15 to 20 players, the membership swelled to an unprecedented level of 85 by the time the club's stay at its new mooring came to an end.

During this period of stability, the administrators of this flourishing club—the Labelle brothers, Abe, and Harry—were now able to focus their energies on spreading the game. Since there was nothing available in French for beginners—or even for advanced players, for that matter—Denis

put together a six-page introduction to the game, which appeared in a local chess publication. Teaching go, in effect, became the overriding concern at this time. In this respect, Louis, in particular, was very active, and not just at the Université de Montréal. In 1972, for example, he organized a go club at the CEGEP de Rosemont (CEGEP is a French acronym for junior college). The new club attracted a total of 30 players during its first year of operation; unfortunately, the space provided for its activities was withdrawn the following year.

Two major events highlighted this golden age. The first one occurred in September 1972, when Okubo Ichigen 9-dan and Nagahara Yoshiaki, then 4-dan, accompanied by their tour manager, Stuart Dowsey, 3-dan amateur, came to Montreal on their North American tour. This was the first time that professional players had visited the city. The event received wide coverage in the local papers, both French and English, and the public sessions, held at the universities of Montreal and McGill, were very well attended, with an estimated audience of 100 at each session. Louis, who played host to these dignitaries, had the enviable honour of playing a one-on-one game (a six-stone handicap, which he lost) against Okubo himself. Although unknown to Louis at the time, this game became a double honour for him, for it was subsequently reported in *Go Review* (Vol. 13, No. 3: March 1973, page 19) with a commentary by Haruyama Isamu, then 6-dan, who was co-author with Nagahara of the Ishi Press book *Basic Techniques of Go*.

The second major event occurred three years later, in 1975. Owing to his organizing efforts, which brought him into frequent contact with Montreal's French-language newspapers, Louis was asked by *La Presse*, the city's largest daily, to write a series of articles on go. This was an ambitious project; all together, the series ran on 13 consecutive Sundays, beginning June 14th, and every aspect of the game was covered. It was an impressive effort and one that was well rewarded: club membership jumped from 50 to 85 within the space of a few months!

Unfortunately, the prospect of reaping long-term benefits from the success of this series was short-lived, in the following year, 1976, the club was obliged to leave its allocated space at the university. Luckily, the transition period was brief, and by 1977 a new location had been found at the CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal, 255 est, rue Ontario. This was the beginning, in Louis's words, of the club's second golden age, a period that lasted until the end of 1982.

By the time the club was relocated, a new generation of organizers was emerging, including Donald Fortin (who, incidentally, was responsible for obtaining the club's new location), Francois Cartier, Tibor Bogнар, Jean-Luc Reiher, Marc Blais, Suzanne Malo, Claude Tremblay, and Claude Malette.

Some of these people, spurred on by the organizing talents of Donald Fortin and by the munificence of the Quebec Provincial Government, which had recently instituted funding programs for leisure-related activities, founded the Association québécoise des joueurs de go (AQJG or Quebec Association of Go Players) in April 1978 as an incorporated, nonprofit organization dedicated to the promotion of go in the province. In order to be as effective and efficient as possible, the first administrative act of this new body was to join the Fédération québécoise des jeux récréatifs (FQJR), an umbrella organization now comprising ten leisure-related associations, all of which benefit from a wide range of services, from printing to legal advice, at reduced costs.

In line with its role of promoting go, the association came to grips with the most important unmet need that could face any leisure activity: the lack of equipment. To be sure, the club did manage, by the late 60s, to build up its stock of stones and go boards so that members no longer had to bring their own sets to the club, but there was as yet no ready supply of sets available for sale. The situation in regard to books was only marginally better. For a number of years, Harry Schwartz used to sell copies of Ishi Press publications that he obtained from John E. Williams in Toronto (another one of those pioneers alluded to at the beginning), but during the second half of the 70s, Harry was visiting the club less and less often. To overcome this deplorable situation, which was due entirely to a lack of funds, the AQJG, in the person of Francois Cartier, issued debentures, bearing 12% interest, to its members, many of whom responded eagerly, in order to raise the necessary capital. Within two years (1978-80), the obligations were redeemed, and a sizeable inventory of books and sets for sale had been built up.

While this project was underway, Montreal players received a delightful surprise in the form of an unexpected visit by Kobayashi Chizu 5-dan in September 1979. The first professional player to visit the city in seven years, she was lured to Quebec from New York City by a group of Montrealers participating in the U.S. Eastern Championship tournament. The highlight of her visit was a simultaneous exhibition she gave at the club: out of 16 games, she won an amazing 14, despite having given generous handicaps. Although Kobayashi was here for only a few days, the effect of her stay was wondrous. Many players confessed, after she left, that they were unable to decide which quality of hers impressed them the more: the talented skill of her play or the exuberant charm of her personality. To this day, the memory of her visit is still cherished by the lucky few who met her.

Although this visit was by far the most memorable one, there were two other visits by professional players during the club's second golden age. The first one took place a year later, in the fall of 1980, when Cho Hun-hyun 9-dan, Korea's strongest player, made a brief stopover in Montreal. A simultaneous was quickly organized with ten or so club members. Like Kobayashi, Cho also gave generous handicaps to his opponents; and again like her, he too won nearly all of his games. The single defeat he suffered was at the hands of René Donais (then 1-kyu, now 4-dan).

The second visit occurred two years later, in September 1982, when Haruyama Isamu, who was now 8-dan, arrived in Montreal for a six-day visit combining sightseeing and teaching. The activities included individual games, workshops (game analysis), and simultaneous exhibitions.

One subject left untouched so far in this narrative is go tournaments. For a long time, this kind of activity was severely limited. Indeed, until nearly the end of the 70s, only one major recurring tournament was held: the Soryoji Cup ('soryoji' means Consul General). The permanent trophy attached to this competition, which was donated to the club by the Japanese consulate in the late 60s, was vied for frequently, sometimes as often as four times a year. In fact, between 1970 and 1980, the cup was won on 20 separate occasions, nine of them by Louis Leroux. In addition to this tournament, the only other recurring event was the inter-city competition, which lasted from 1973 to 1976, between Montreal and its nearest go-playing neighbour, Ottawa, about 200 kilometers away. No trophy was in contention in this friendly rivalry; the most that winners could lay claim to was a deserved but fleeting moment of fame.

In contrast to this rather barren description, tournament activity blossomed during the club's second golden age. In the same month as Kobayashi's visit to Montreal and nine months after the Canadian Go Association held the 1st Canadian Open (December 1978), the AQJG created the Quebec Open (officially, l'Omnium de Go du Québec). This was the first annual, two-day tournament on Quebec's go calendar. Though initially held in September, it was moved the following year to the long weekend of Victoria Day in May, where it has remained ever since.

Five months later, in February 1980, the club held the 1st Montreal Honinbo Tournament, an event traditionally organized by Denis Labelle. Like its famous namesake, the main event of this tournament is preceded by a round-robin of the club's six strongest players, and the winner challenges the title holder from the previous year in a final showdown. Of the eight matches held so far, Louis Leroux has won the last six in a row (the first two were won by Yokota Osamu 5-dan, a Japanese businessman temporarily living in Montreal).

And finally, in 1981, again in February, the 1st Winter Tournament (Tournoi d'Hiver) was created. Organized annually by the AQJG and traditionally held on the last Saturday of the month, this one-day, three-round event is generously sponsored by the Japanese consulate, which also donated the tournament's permanent cup.

While these annual tournaments were being established, the AQJG was a beehive of activity. In 1979 Donald Fortin, the first president of the association, and Marie-Andrée Nantel made a copyrighted translation into French of the Nihon Ki-in's *First World Amateur Go Championship—The Rules*; this translation was widely distributed in booklet form. In the same year, Tibor Bogнар put together a well-balanced, amply illustrated, eight-page introductory brochure on the game. This brochure, still the most important instructional tool of the association, was used in a major promotional campaign launched by Tibor during the fall and winter months of 1979-80. Assisted by a provincial grant obtained by the AQJG and equipped with the association's large magnetic go board and hundreds of copies of his brochure, Tibor travelled the length of the Saint Lawrence Valley between Montreal and Quebec City, demonstrating go to as many students as he could find. All told, he estimates that he visited about 40 educational establishments, mostly CEGEPs, reaching a total audience of over 1,000 students. While Tibor was on the road, Denis Labelle, a professor of statistics and the first registrar of the AQJG, devised the association's official rating system, called Coteogo (pronounced CUT-tay-go).

The feverish pace of this activity continued into 1980, when the association, in collaboration with the club, produced a half-hour colour video on go under the aegis of the FQJR. Featuring a demonstration of the rules by Louis and interviews with Donald Fortin and Suzanne Malo, who was then president of the club, the video, which is still available for use, was televised shortly after its production on a local, community-service channel. In October of 1980, the association also organized the 3rd Canadian Open in Montreal, with Tibor and Jean-Luc Reiher acting as tournament directors.

After a lapse of two years, activity resumed, though not on the same scale as before, in the fall of 1982, when Jean-Luc Reiher, then president of the AQJG, launched a bi-monthly information bulletin. (Unfortunately, the bulletin folded after its fifth issue: the burden of maintaining its high

quality simply proved to be too much for one person to handle on his own.) In the spring of 1983, Paul Dumais and Jean-Paul Ouellet, president of the association since 1986, produced the official tournament regulations governing the Quebec Open and similar events organized by the AQJG.

The end of this period of great activity came in December 1982, when the club had to leave the CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal. The period that followed, mercifully short, saw the club's official location change three times in 20 months. Fortunately, during these months of wandering, Montreal's go players were still able to meet—three times a week, moreover—at La Petite Ricane, a Bohemian-style café situated at 177 ouest, avenue Bernard. Actually players first began congregating there much earlier, in March 1981, after Le Grand Café, at 1720, rue St-Denis, which had been a meeting place for go players since November 1979, closed its third floor for renovations. Alas, all good things come to an end, and so it was with La Petite Ricane. The last games were played there in late April of 1986.

Finally, in September of 1984, the Montreal Go Club found a new home at 1111 est, boulevard de Maisonneuve through the efforts of Paul Dumais, then president of the AQJG, and the author. The club occupied the second floor of Le Spécialiste des Échecs, a chess store that doubles as a club. When the store moved in June 1986 to its present location at 1365 est, rue Ste-Catherine, so did the go club. One is almost tempted to say, although it may still be premature, that the club entered its third golden age in 1984.

Besides being the beginning of the club's association with Le Spécialiste des Échecs, 1984 was a memorable year for other reasons as well. In March, James Kerwin, the first American to attain professional status, visited the city for a weekend of go-related activities, most of which were centered at the Université de Montréal and La Petite Ricane. Later in the year, Edward Mayerhofer of Montreal was selected to represent Canada at the 1st World Youth Wei-ch'i Championship in Taiwan. And in October, Kawamura Masamichi 7-dan visited Montreal as part of his all-Canadian tour. This was the first visit by an Oriental professional player since 1982.

The following year, 1985, was equally memorable, for both the club and the association. In February, the members of the club's executive created the very popular Shodan Challenge Tournament (Tournoi Défi Shodan), an annual round-robin event designed for 12 or so players whose ranks are around 1-dan. And in October, they extended the club's sessions from one to two evenings a week.

Also in October, the AQJG became deeply involved in the biggest promotional event since Tibor's excursion along the Saint Lawrence River when the FQJR organized La Foire du Jeu, a games fair designed to give member organizations an opportunity of promoting their activities in a public forum. This event was immensely successful. An estimated 15,000 people visited the fair site at the Complexe Guy-Favreau, a recently completed office building in downtown Montreal, during the fair's week-long schedule of events; and the accompanying press coverage of the fair was quite extensive. The association made the most of this golden opportunity to promote go by holding the 8th Canadian Open in conjunction with the fair (tournament directors: Paul Dumais and the author) and by having players on hand to demonstrate the game and hand

out brochures. Benefits derived from this event were twofold: the immediate addition of ten new members to the club's ranks and increased visibility for the game among the public at large.

In the last three years since the fair, both the club and the association have gone on to develop other noteworthy projects. In November, 1986, for example, the AQJG revived its information bulletin under my editorship. Although this new bulletin appears more frequently (it's a monthly) than its bimonthly predecessor of 1982-83, it is a far more modest undertaking. It is hoped that its simpler format will ensure a longer existence.

A few months later, in January 1987, the club, under the presidency of Mario Carrière 3-kyu, created the 1st Montreal Open (l'Omniium de Go de Montréal), the club's very own two-day six-round tournament. And in the fall, the association established a library service for its members under the supervision of Chi-Wai (Bill) Fung, the AQJG's registrar.

In October of the same year, the Montreal Go Club was honoured by the visit of Mr. Ing of Taiwan and his party of one professional and several strong amateurs. This famous patron of go and inventor of what is commonly called the 'Ing Rules' arrived here on October 15th after a visit to Toronto for the 10th Canadian Open (October 10-11) and a two-day visit to Ottawa. At the club a simultaneous exhibition was organized with the visiting professional player, Mr. C.T. Tseng 2-dan—he won against all eight of his opponents—while the other visitors, including Mr. Ing himself, played friendly games with the other members of the club.

In the last year, two new developments have taken place. In January of 1988, a new club was founded. Located at the University of McGill and meeting twice a week, the new club succeeded in attracting 20 or so members, mostly beginners, thanks to the organizing efforts of David Goodger, a first-year physics student and the new editor of the association's monthly bulletin. In August a new one-day tournament was added to Montreal's calendar of go activities.

On the surface, the establishment of this new tournament may not seem especially significant, but it is, for it is actively supported by the Montreal Chinese Community United Center, an umbrella organisation of 40 or so organizations devoted to the welfare and interests of the city's Chinese community. Called the Montreal Chinese Cup Tournament (Tournoi de la Coupe Chinoise de Montréal), this three-round event, modeled on the AQJG's Winter Tournament (i.e., players divided into groups of eight, and winners matched against winners), was brought into being largely through the efforts of Bill Fung. Hopes are high that this annual event will spark a revival of go playing among the residents of Montreal's Chinatown.

Over the years, a certain amount of progress has been made in spreading go to other parts of the province. At the moment, there are pockets of go players scattered across Quebec—Baie-Comeau, Chicoutimi, Quebec City, Trois-Rivières—and a full-fledged club at Hull. The progress is slow, and the ground gained often seems to be measured in inches. As we celebrate this year (1988) the tenth anniversary of the AQJG's foundation and the 24th anniversary of the Montreal Go Club's continuous existence, we hope that our efforts in gaining new ground will meet with greater success than they have in the past.

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people, whose co-operation in compiling this history of go in Montreal was indispensable: Abe Ravinsky, Harry Schwartz, Louis Leroux, Denis Labelle, Tibor Bogнар, and Jean-Luc Reiher. I would also like to thank Jim Lees for proofreading this text and for his invaluable suggestions.

Steven J.C. Mays, Montreal, November 1988