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Eric Lui: *The Littlest 3-Dan*

by Jon Berson

Poised over a Go board, Eric Lui seems like any other nine-year old. He is full of energy, scissoring his legs beneath his chair, fingering his stones, occasionally twisting the fabric of his yellow hooded sweatshirt. His lips move slightly as he assesses his opponent's position. Like most kids, he doesn't spend a lot of time brooding or strategizing or agonizing. His eyes dart behind his glasses and he moves quickly, almost impulsively. Although shy around strangers, Eric is animated around those he knows. When he falls behind in the game, he playfully accuses his opponent of cheating. His opponent retaliates with a joke and Eric's face breaks into a wide, toothy grin.

A kid playing Go: it's a common sight in Korea or Japan. But here in America, where chess and checkers are the staples of the elementary-school set, a Go-playing child is unusual. More unusual still is a nine-year-old who regularly beats challengers seven times his age.

Eric Lui, after all, is not just any kid playing Go. At nine, he is perhaps the most promising U.S. player of his generation. Two years ago, he won the national under-12 competition and represented the United States at the world championship in

South Korea. His current ranking is 3-Dan, but he has routinely beaten higher-ranked players, and his improvement has been so rapid that the rating system can barely keep up with him.

Eric's abilities are "unheard of in this country," according to lawyer Keith Arnold, a former Eastern Regional Vice President of the American Go Association. Eric took a scant three years to achieve what Keith, no slouch at the game, achieved in eighteen. "It's not that I'm a stupid person," Keith explains, "but his improvement has been much faster. I think that's attributable to his age. Eric hasn't devoted more time to the game than I have. But when he sits down to play, his mind is less cluttered."

Eric's mind may be less cluttered, but his life doesn't reflect it. Hardly a one-dimensional *wunderkind*, Eric takes violin lessons, plays soccer and baseball, participates in ten swimming meets a year, and breezes through his third grade Gifted and Talented program. He speaks Chinese and takes classes at a Chinese-language school to hone his language skills.

What time he does devote to Go, however, is well-focused. For two years he has taken a weekly 90-minute lesson by Internet from 7-Dan Go master Yi-lun Yang in Los Angeles. His father, I-Han Lui, himself an accomplished player and former East Coast champion, estimates that Eric plays one game every other day, many of them through the Internet Go Server (IGS).

"Eric started very early," I-Han recounts. "He didn't have regular lessons. At three, he came to the Go class I taught at Chinese school. I wasn't really sure if he understood the lessons. When he was almost five, I found out that he really does understand—about 'life and death,' things like that. He started to play with the computer, using the Many Faces of Go program, and that helped to speed him up. In a couple weeks, he beat the Many Faces of Go. We didn't have formal lessons. I just pointed out where he made mistakes when we played. He picked up the game quickly."

Why has Eric become so good, so fast? I-Han pauses, as though the question is both too simple and too difficult to answer. Eric, playing a game nearby and listening in on the conversation, blurts out, "Because!"

I-Han smiles. He says that he has never had a student as good as Eric. Yet I-Han is not a man given to hype. He manages to steer a straight course between a father's pride and a Go player's professional evaluation. "In Go, Eric is not yet good enough," he says, then relates the story of an eight-year-old in China who, with a relatively small handicap, splits games with his 9-Dan coach.

I-Han believes that by the time Eric is ten, it will be clear whether he is made of professional material. However, there is no incentive in the United States for Eric to become a professional. He would have to travel to China or Japan or Korea to continue his training. I-Han is not yet booking any airline tickets. And, as he is quick to point out, "Eric can be happy as an amateur."

Keith Arnold, both a friend and mentor to Eric, expresses few reservations about the nine-year-old's talent. "He can beat almost anyone weaker than 6-Dan. His strengths are his reading ability and his general sense of the opening strategy. His weaknesses are simply those of age and immaturity." Keith

notes that Eric is strongest when he is fresh, in a tournament's morning round. "His opponents hope to play him later in the day. They hope that he'll be tired, that he'll be bored."

Eric and Keith often square off at the Howard County Go Club (HOCOGO), which meets at a house in the suburbs of Baltimore. There, in an enclosed porch and in the basement, players hunch over boards, sometimes sparring until 3 a.m. It is a lively atmosphere. Players discuss their games while the children of the house scamper around, excited by the company. Eric pays only scant attention to these other children. He begins to play almost immediately. When the game is over, he plunks down in front of a computer where he and his father evaluate potential on-line opponents.

Although Keith notes that "some of the older players resist believing that a nine-year-old is stronger than they are," Eric is well-liked at the club. "He's fun to have around," says club member Mike Jacobson. Mike muses about the time he beat Eric. "He was six years old. He gave me a six-stone handicap and I won. That's my claim to fame."

While still a rarity at Go clubs, children are increasingly flocking to the game (see page 13). They are appearing at the annual Go Congress and are improving their games by Internet. Keith Arnold and I-Han Lui largely agree about what parents should do if they discover that their child has Go abilities: keep the game fun and arrange for good instruction

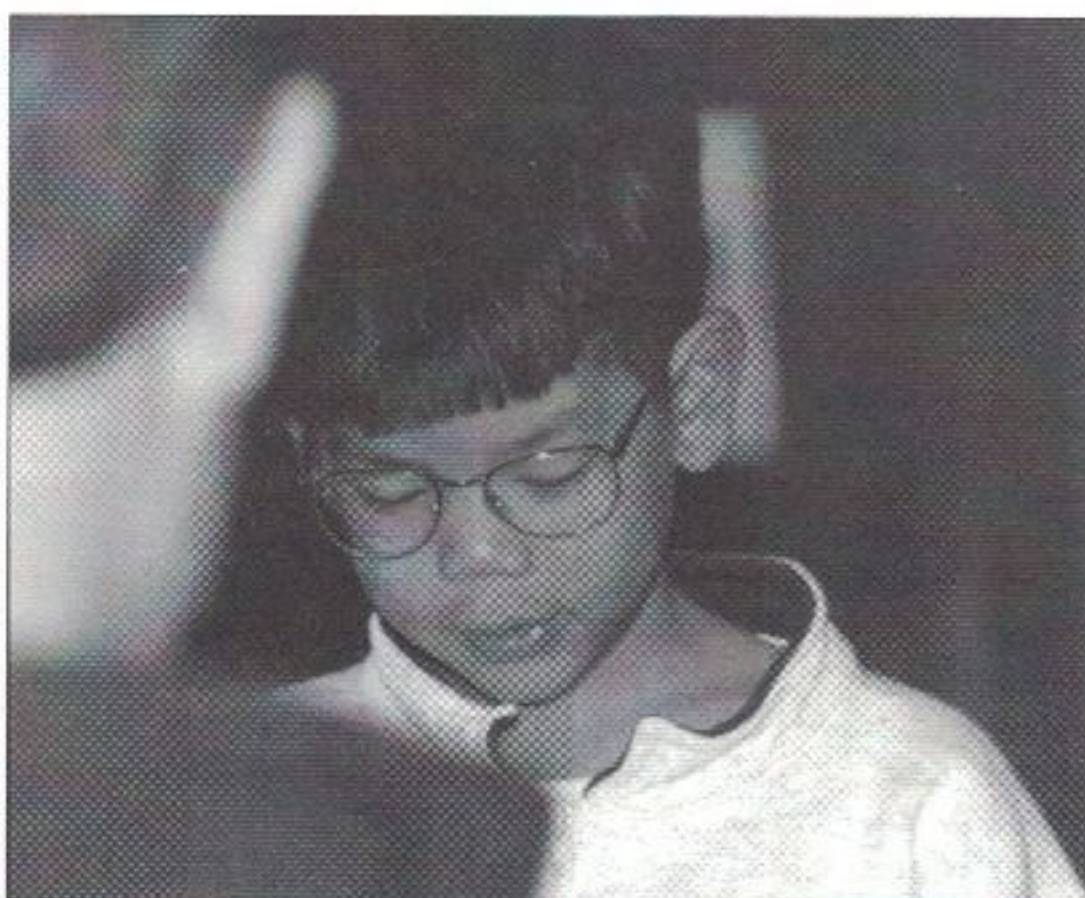
early on. "You have to keep up the fire," I-Han says.

Eric was fortunate to have a skilled player for a father. He also encountered the game at such an early age that, as Keith points out, "old-man prejudices" didn't come into play. In other words, Eric hasn't associated Go with the pastimes of his parents and left it behind for trendier pursuits like Nintendo.

Success—the prizes, the trip to South Korea—has also helped to keep up Eric's fire. He may be

shy, but he is not lacking in self-esteem. When asked to name his favorite Go player in the world, he points to himself and says, "This guy!"

Jon Berson is the author of "Foamers", a novel published by Scribner in 1997.



Photos: Keith Arnold