

## John Barrs and the Birth of the BGA

Bob Hitchens



Let there be no confusion on the subject: John Barrs was the father of Go in Britain. There no doubt were players before him who understood some of the rules and may have had one or two sets, but John is the first serious British Go player known to us.

He said he learnt to play as a schoolboy from a book written by an Italian. That was *The Game of Wei-Chi* by Count Daniele Pecorini and Tong Shu, published 1929 (see Franco Pratesi's article in *British Go Journal* No. 129, winter 2002). From that moment he put most of his energies into promoting the game in this country.

I suspect the schoolboy Barrs would have been recognisable to those of us who knew the adult Barrs. He retained a schoolboy humour (not unlike that of the late Brian Johnson of *Test Match Special*); he had the xenophobic attitude in common in this country in his time, which completely and genuinely evaporated when in the presence of his many foreign friends. He was single-minded, abrasive and

possessive, and his acquaintances fell into three camps: his many friends, a considerable number who could tolerate him, and some individuals who could not and were generally lost to Go. But all the time he had was devoted to publicising Go and finding more players.

Ambitions of this sort are bound to start slowly, but he got a club going in London ("The Wei-Chi Club") in 1930 and that survived until 1936. I can offer nothing more on his pre-war efforts. An alternative interest did rear its head: he was an official in the U.K. Weightlifting Team at the 1948 Olympics. He had his team blazer to prove it, but I don't recall him otherwise mentioning this subject. It was already history before the B.G.A was born. He also had time to qualify as an optometrist and he practised over his family's chemist shop in Kensington.

In the fifties John ran an informal Go circle in London. He also played chess at the West London Chess Club. He was in contact with the American Go Association, and on a visit by Edward Lasker he took him to the chess club as a Trojan horse to try and infect chess players with the Go bug. He had some success; in particular he converted Neil Stein who rose to be the strongest British player before Jon Diamond. Other chess clubs in London were visited, but in the end the chess players reacted and John and company was ejected. C.H.O'D. Alexander, chess correspondent for the *Times* at the time of John's death, was one of those involved. I contacted him to try to get a mention of John's passing: the reaction was hostile.

His contacts with American Go circles gave him access to the Nihon Ki-in and to European players. The first European Go Congress was held in 1957 and John was not there. All participants were German, other than two Austrians, a Dutchman and an American. Possibly the latter sent a report to the American Go Journal and John found out about the European Go Congresses from that. He did not attend before 1958 or 1959. He enjoyed himself, not least for his quick thinking in what he would see as a national adversity. In the middle of the congress, the European Go Federation had its annual meeting. John was not to be admitted. "On what grounds? I am the president of the British Go Association." Knowing the personalities involved, there will have been further arguments, but John got in and the B.G.A. was born.

John was so proud of this story, and it is so in character, that I have no doubt at all that it is true. I do have a reference, from something John later wrote, that the BGA was founded in "1953." I am sure this is John developing a history to cover his tracks.

A significant "first" for British Go occurred in 1961 when Kensaku Segoe visited Britain. A match was arranged at John's flat for B.B.C. television, but lack of space in the flat meant that the camera had to be placed on scaffolding outside to film through the windows!

I spent a year in the R.A.F. in the Aden Protectorate (i.e. South Yemen) in 1960-61. In a fifty-man camp, miles from anywhere, amusing ourselves was a challenge. One chap heard about a book on "the most difficult game in the world" and sent off for it. When it arrived, he couldn't cope with it and gave it to me. It was "Go and Go

Moku" by Edward Lasker. On my return to the U.K., I taught a chess-playing friend, David Diamond. We obtained the Arthur Smith book and played each other for two years. Then David found a Go set in Hamley's which contained a booklet referring to the B.G.A. Contact was made.

At this time the B.G.A consisted of John Barrs and a book in which he noted the funds. These consisted of subscriptions (I think these were 2 shillings a year) and expenses (mainly postage). He also kept a list of British Go players. I think there were 40 names on this list. Living in London, of course, we were welcomed into the Go circle. It worked like this: on Fridays at lunchtime you phoned John's shop and he told you where we were meeting that evening: John's shop, John's flat in Wembley, Neil's flat in Hammersmith or the Nippon Club.

That first night it was the Nippon Club. John gave David nine stones and I found myself facing Mr. Akiyama, who also gave me nine. Mr. Akiyama was a great friend to London Go as he spent (I think) three extended periods working there. He was 3 dan (4 dan on a later visit). David and I did alright and were assessed as grade 40 and 39 respectively. These were not kyu grades, but the old European grading system created by the Germans around 1920, and current in Europe until the mid 1960s.

Within a couple of weeks two important things happened. First we were told of a promising schoolboy Barrs had met. It was a while before he was able to come to the club; he was Jon Diamond, then 5 kyu. Then it was decided that critical mass had been attained and it was time to get premises. The London Go Club was

founded at the Cumberland Arms in Soho; John Barrs chairman, Neil Stein Secretary and Bob Hitchens treasurer (the only job that involved work). I don't recall any voting.

John was President of the E.G.F in the early 1960s (1963-1964), and he and Stein usually persuaded some other players to join them at the European Go Congress (my first was Scheveningen, Holland, in 1964), but then an invitation came from the Nihon Ki-in to send a team of two players and a leader (a commissar for the benefit of communist countries) to the first International Go Tournament in Tokyo. Barrs (1 dan) and Stein (1 kyu) were the players and Ted Clarke the "official". In practice, the British players were at least two stones weaker than the other Europeans, and had no chance against the Orientals. But John won one. Legend has it that he "ripped off" Vuksanovic of Yugoslavia in byoyomi, and that emotions had risen. Maybe, but I have seen the record of the game and Vuksanovic self-destructed at the end of the game, possibly through falling asleep for he was far ahead. John was innocent, but I recall that he was very relieved that the Yugoslav did not appear at the second tournament in 1964. We sent the same players (Jon Diamond was not available), this time with me as "leader". No games were won.

The B.G.A. (John) decided that the way to get some funds and establish Britain on the Go map was to run a European Go Congress and this was organised for 1966. Banking had to be formalised, and Neil and I became secretary and treasurer for that reason. We booked a hall of residence of University College, London, about a year in advance. In spring 1966, the

college reneged on the deal. We demanded compensation and got £200 (1966 pounds – the first real money the B.G.A. had had). We managed to book a college in Eltham (Avery Hill) and, while John and Neil played, I ran the tournament single handed. The worst part was afterwards trying to reconcile the players' game records for publishing by the E.G.F.

Around this time and article on Go by Dr. Good of Oxford appeared in the New Scientist and attracted much attention. In particular a group of students from Oxford University joined the B.G.A (Francis Roads, Derek Hunter, Andrew Daly and others) and very properly insisted on a proper constitution and active committee. Derek became secretary with John and me continuing as before. Neil, having lacked much opportunity to gain promotion to 1 dan over several years, dropped out of active Go. Jon Diamond was simultaneously building up Go skills at Cambridge. Annual British Go Congresses and the Championship were introduced and new clubs were mushrooming around the country. The B.G.A was importing Go books for the benefit of members and the Journal was started. It must have been very gratifying for John who had found that letting go of a little control was not so painful!

And then in 1970 we lost him, most unexpectedly at the age (I think) of 56. Committee members were shocked, but Francis Roads took over the chair and over the ensuing years the Association's funds grew, enabling further initiatives to be undertaken. The 1970's B.G.A. already had a reasonable resemblance to today's.

Quite a legacy for John Barrs!