

The Go Ranking System of Bruno Rürger

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Let me begin by acknowledging that my investigation on the various ranking systems adopted by Go players has been stimulated by Prof. Klaus Heine from Wilhelmshaven. Discussion with him is going on and hopefully further parts will soon appear, after the following historical contribution.

It is well known that Bruno Rürger cared for many aspects of Go, to begin with publishing more than a dozen Go books and editing the *Deutsche Go Zeitung* from 1920 to 1945. During this long time, he was the main – and often the only – reference for all the European Go players. For them, among other activities, he organised several summer holidays, from which directly derive nothing less than the yearly European Go Congresses of nowadays.

Rather early in his Go activity, Rürger encountered the problem of how to rank the Go players. The starting point for his attempt came from letters that he received from Japan by Max Lange, the renowned chess author; in particular, Lange provided some information on the Japanese system of separately ranking the Go masters and the variously strong players. Thus, the first table of ‘equivalent’ grades between Japan and Europe can be found in the fundamental short article, *Ein Vergleich der Spielstärke japanischer und deutscher Gospieler*, (A Comparison of the playing-strength of Japanese and German Go players) which Bruno Rürger published in *DGoZ* 1922 No 4, pp. 1-3.

A first comment is needed on the nations involved; actually, the word German used by Rürger may be misleading. Go players were seen by Rürger first of all as subscribers to the *Deutsche Go Zeitung*. From the very beginning this meant both German and Austrian players, together with exceptional cases from other countries; in a sense, we might use the term European (maybe better Mitteleuropean) from the beginning. However, most readers of the journal were, if not German, at least German-speaking – other groups of active players hardly existed in Europe, whereas subscriptions from the USA arrived later on.

In any case, the basis for the new ‘European’ ranking system clearly appears as an empirical adjustment of the Japanese grades, introduced for practical reasons, with no mention of any theoretical derivation.

Let us examine in some detail how the system has been introduced. There are in Japan nine ranks for masters, separated by one half stone, so that a master of the lowest rank accepts four handicap stones from the top master. Below we find a large group of strong players, who must accept various handicaps from the masters. The lower limit of their strength is easy to set because any strong player must accept less than nine handicap stones from the master of the lowest rank. Thus Rürger can establish for Japan a list of nine ranks for masters and sixteen for strong players, each separated by one half stone. These ranks he ‘translates’ for local players as classes 1 to 25. Here his transformation from Japanese ranks is finished, because no lower ranks apparently existed for weaker Japanese players.

However, he rightly observes that in Europe the ranks must continue to lower levels because players are much weaker than in Japan. He thus defines new groups of players and gives them corresponding ranks. In particular, he adds another group of sixteen ranks followed by a final group of nine.

In conclusion, Rürger proposes the system shown in the first part of the Table. First we have ‘masters’ from 9 down to 1 (namely until four stones handicap) – ‘translated’ for Europe as classes 1 down to 9. ‘Strong players’ follow, divided into sixteen grades (16 highest), namely until eight stones handicap, which he names classes 10 down to 25. Then come ‘mid-strong players’ from 16 to 1 (again until eight stones handicap); these Rürger calls classes 26 to 41. Finally, come ‘weaker players’ from 9 grade down to 1 but here with one stone handicap difference between grades, thus from one to nine handicap stones. These Rürger calls classes 42 to 50.

In 1922, the assignment of the German players to the different classes is as follows: Dueball 23, Holz 24, B.Rürger 26, Sprague 27, A.Rürger 29, Peters 30, Lindeman 31, John 34, Braune 42, Noack 45 – that is all! There existed other Go players at the time and even the subscribers to the Journal were significantly more but they had not encountered an opportunity to play together, thus establishing their relative strengths.

Group	Name	Grade Diff	Grades
1922			
I	Master	1/2 stone	1–9
II	Strong player	1/2 stone	10–25
III	Mid-strong player	1/2 stone	26–41
IV	Weaker player	1 stone	42–50
1944			
I	Master	1/3 stone	1–9
II	Strong player	1/2 stone	10–23
III	Mid-strong player	1/2 stone	24–37
IV	Weak player	1 stone	38–51
V	Beginner	1 stone	52–60

The 'European' Go ranking system
proposed and modified by Bruno Rürger.

In the course of time, lists of ranked players were published in *DGoZ* almost every two years, with updated values and new entries. Rürger increasingly wishes that all his subscribers are ranked, but this is not an easy task. Eventually, in 1942, after having used for twenty years the same ranking system, he decides to list all his subscribers, assigning to the 50th and last rank all those unable to provide a reason for a better assignment.

During WW2, many old players cannot be found any longer and their destiny is not known, but at the same time, beginners enter the list of subscribers more than ever before. In the last months of the war, Rürger explicitly regrets that he suffers from a shortage of paper, books and so on, when he verifies that the interest in Go is increasing.

It thus occurs that in one of the last issues of the journal (*DGoZ* 1944, pp. 29-30) Bruno Rürger is induced to insert a change in his ranking system, which had been working for more than twenty years without any modification. However, even this only change is not a remarkable one for the ranks already established. It mainly consists in the addition to the existing system of new lower ranks from 51 to 60. These are now needed to distinguish the large mass of new enthusiasts of the game – several of them ladies and girls – evidently of lower strength.

In passing from the old to the new system (see the two parts of the Table) little change is applied to the ranks of the players previously

listed. In particular, the nine strongest grades are now separated by one third of a handicap stone – but this hardly affects the lists, because no European had ever entered this group. Two groups follow, 10-23 and 24-37, both with grades separated by half a stone. Then 38-51 (which is somewhat more extended than the previous 41-50 but not remarkably) and the ‘new’ 52-60 additional lowest group. Rürger clearly states that such division in groups is arbitrary and that for his final choice he had taken symmetry into account – particularly evident in the same number of nine ranks for both the strongest and the weakest players.