



## Go Figure!

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By Barbara Burrall, MD

**In both vocation and avocation, pathologist Dr. Steven Burrall studies patterns.**

GO IS AN ANCIENT BOARD GAME which has fascinated and frustrated students for approximately 4,000 years. The most common name used internationally is the Japanese version, Go, but the game is also known as Wei Chi (Chinese) or Baduk (Korean). It is said to take "five minutes to learn; a lifetime to master."

Players place black and white stones on a board at the intersections of 19 by 19 perpendicular lines to form territorial structures or "groups." There are seemingly endless possibilities for play, with spatial relationships as important as linear ones. Even the best computer programs play at only a weak amateur level. Rigorous professional and amateur ranks are determined by tournament play.

Engineers and computer scientists frequent the Northern California and national amateur tournaments. But my husband, Steven Burrall, a pathologist at South Sacramento Kaiser Permanente, is probably the only physician who regularly attends.

He learned the basic rules at age seven, from a neighborhood boy and played a little in college. However, it wasn't until internship that he found a player who knew the game well enough to teach him more of the basic strategies.

I did not encourage this interest. The Go teacher was frequently my ward resident (I was also an intern), and too often he left me with more than my share of work. I would finally get home to find him there, playing Go with Steve.

Steve found a stronger teacher in the Davis/ Sacramento area, when I was a dermatology resident and he had left medicine temporarily to pursue a master's degree in oenology (wine making). He even began to study Japanese, for more access to professional writings on Go.

His most rapid improvement came during four years in San Francisco in the mid-1980s. San Francisco and Berkeley had active Go clubs, tournament opportunities and many strong players.

If Steve wasn't reading slides, he was reading out sequences of moves on a Go board at one of these clubs.

Back in Sacramento in the late 1980s, Steve put his boards and stones away for nearly 10 years. Starting a career while raising babies and training as a triathlete was just too demanding. When the smallest child was old enough so that the stones no longer posed a choking hazard, and joint problems had severely limited his triathletic aspirations, Steve brought out the Go sets again. This time, his emphasis was on teaching, with our children as his pupils.

He and all four children (ages 7-14) now commonly participate in local, Bay area and national Go events. Steve especially enjoys directing Go activities for children, at camps, workshops and tournaments.

Go has given Steve many enriching experiences. One was a goodwill tour to Shanghai in 1998, led by Mayor Willie Brown of San Francisco. As part of the official ceremonies, Mayor Brown and the mayor of Shanghai played a few opening moves of a Go game. Steve was one of a few Northern California Go players invited to join the tour and describes the week of elaborate dining and entertainment, Go tournaments and ceremonies with red carpet treatment, as "surrealistic."

Another high point was reaching the rank of 5-dan last summer (6-dan is the highest official rank an amateur can attain). Ahead is the excitement of accompanying his 10-year-old son, Matthew, a finalist in the Redmond Cup (U.S. junior youth championship) to Pennsylvania this summer. The true rewards of the game are in its tradition of sportsmanship and respect for opponents, its intellectual stimulation, its long and fascinating history, and the interesting players from all over the world, particularly Asia, who come together in tournaments. The game has brought Steve and our family precious relationships with many of these players.

With so many rewards, why do so few physicians play Go? Certainly the traditions and intellectual challenges would appeal to them.

The answer may lie in the phrase, "lifetime to master." Physicians already have a career with this requirement.

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