

SIX-GAME MATCH, GAME 1

The one with the sumo and sweets

(W) GO SEIGEN 9-DAN (B) SAKATA EIO 8-DAN
PLAYED ON 27 AND 28 MAY 1953
AT SHIMIZU INN, TOKYO
HANDICAP (B)-W-B, NO KOMI. 10 HOURS EACH.

Until the proliferation of modern titles allowed Cho Chikun to overtake him, Sakata held the record for most titles won. Another record he seems to have had and never relinquished was for most nicknames. Quite why he attracted so many is unclear – headline writers seeking novelty as he won title after title is one possibility. Most of the nicknames have faded away, and only two seem well known today: Shinogi Sakata, from his ability to rescue (*shinogu*) weak groups, and Kamisori Sakata from his “razor”-sharp tactics – Sakata has probably committed more atrocities on the second line than any player in history.

But a hardly known nickname fits him best in this contest. It was *namakura yotsu*. It needs a little bit of explanation because it’s from sumo wrestling. Basically there are two types of sumo bout: those where the wrestlers grapple and try for a throw the opponent or lift him out of the ring, and those where the wrestlers try to slap and push the opponent out or over the edge.

In the case of grappling, the four legs firmly planted on the ground are a dominant part of the image – hence *yotsu* (four). The other important part of the stance is choosing whether to clutch the opponent’s belt with the right hand (*migi yotsu*) or the left (*hidari yotsu*). The other hand grips on the body outside somewhere. Sumo fans take note of which side a wrestler characteristically uses, and of course the wrestlers themselves use various tactics to get their favourite grip or to deny the opponent his, while also interjecting the element of surprise by using the other grip.

There is, however, the *namakura yotsu* or lazy yotsu style in which a wrestler always grapples the same way, with either *migi yotsu* or *hidari yotsu*. Whether this has a good or a bad meaning really depends on how successful the wrestler is.

The reason why this image is useful here is that every single game of the six-game match began “lazily” with a standard “grapple” for the first four moves. Black 1 in the top right, White 2 in the top left, Black 3 in the bottom right and White 4 in the lower left – a common-or-garden parallel fuseki reached the same way every time.

As we shall see, Go did not do as well as expected in this match, yet he started the subsequent ten-game match in exactly the same way – and lost. The different outcome of the longer match began only when Go renounced the standard grappling style and went for a bit of slap and tickle instead.

Go was aware of the difficulty of being the top player. He commented at the time that everyone else was studying his games, often in groups, whereas he had less chance to study his opponents, whose games might not even merit publication. He had no gauge to tell him how fast others may be gaining on him, nor did he have anyone above him he could aspire to match. Although it took this match to show it, the blunt truth was that he was not being inventive enough with his fuseki.

The reason he needed to be inventive was that this (like the ten-game match to come) was a handicap match, at B-W-B, the handicap appropriate for one rank difference. Until one side moved ahead by four games in the match and so changed the handicap – the uchikomi or beating down rule - Sakata would get Black twice out of every three games and White just once. There would be no komi in any of the games.

Throughout the two matches there was a fascinating parallel, for Japanese readers, in the athletics world. Jim Peters was the world marathon record holder. He was being pursued by the Finn Veikko Karvonen, who was admired for battling back from both injury and disappointment. The Japanese Yamada Keizo was pursuing both, and in 1953 he won the Boston Marathon. This go match was Sakata's chance to emulate Yamada and beat the foreigner! To succeed, where Kitani, Iwamoto, Hashimoto and Fujisawa had failed.

In those days the marathon was viewed with a kind of awe. It was almost the opposite of today when thousands of amateurs run marathons, some with their pet ducks or dressed in a frogman's outfit. Then, perhaps because of poorer nutrition, runners took a long time to recover, and it was commonly believed that a runner had only a very small number of marathons in his body.

The parallel with the thoroughly enervating ten-game go matches was obvious. With hindsight, we can say that Sakata proved determined and spry enough to outrun Go the 10,000 metres, this six-game match, but in the marathon equivalent he was to hit the famous "wall" – and he just wasn't ready for it. But then he was hardly ready for the six-game match, given that he had lost every one of his five game against Go since the war had ended.

Go had come up the day before from his home in Hakone. Sakata, based in Tokyo, was able to commute from home on the morning of the game. The venue was an inn near the Benkeibashi, a bridge spanning a moat on the west side of the Palace. The bridge is still there but the area has been ruined by an elevated expressway. Then, the players were able to slip on wooden clogs and go out into the back garden of the inn and commune with Nature. They also had a nice view of the garden as they played right next to the window in an upstairs room.

Black 9 could have been a pincer as in Diagram 1, said Sakata, suggesting he had thought hard about it.

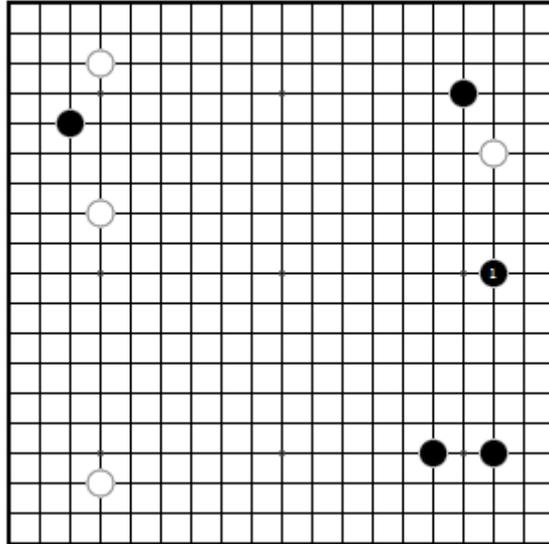


Diagram 1

Both players were slender and slight – the epitome of marathon runners, in fact. Otherwise they were quite different in aspect. Whereas Go was quiet and somewhat aristocratic looking, Sakata exuded a fierceness that well matched his razor-sharp style, for which he was already known.

But Go showed the first sign of aggression with White 12. This was not quite a new move. It was apparently a Go Seigen creation, but, amazingly, he had trialled it in a three-stone game in 1951 in a game which doubled up as a celebration of the 88th birthday of Kojima Kazuo and the purging of war criminal Aoki Kazuo (his activities in Tojo's war cabinet included sending go missions to China).

Go had first tested this joseki at a high level against Fujisawa Kuranosuke in Games 2 and 4 of their second 9-dans match (see *9-dan Showdown*) only the previous year, and while a couple of other pros had taken it up, it was still a rarity.

Sakata's response was obviously also still a rarity, and at the time Yamada Fukumenshi reported it as a new move. Black 13 was also possible at Black 1 in Diagram 2, Sakata said, again no doubt giving an insight into what he had been thinking about at the board.

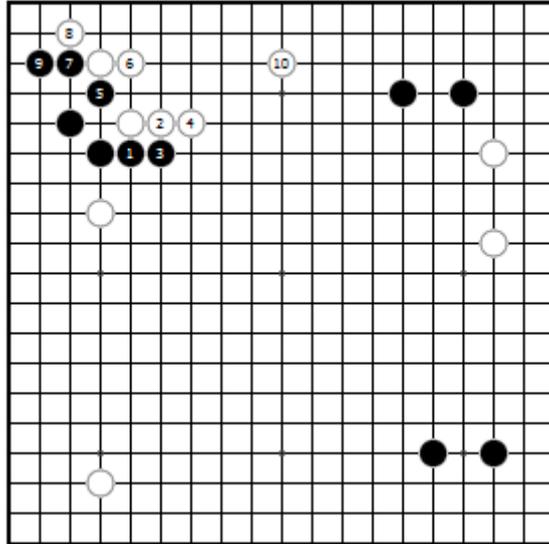


Diagram 2

But the Black 13 of the game had first been played by Kitani just two months previously against Miyashita Shuyo. There, however, Miyashita blocked at A [F16] instead of White 18. Sakata may not have known that, of course, but pros seem as prone to following fashion as any Essex girl.

As a rule, Sakata often felt that he had done well in the fuseki, only to find in the middle game that he had deceived himself. He was lucky that he was better in the middle game than in the fuseki, he said. Long-time rival Takagawa wondered whether he was too cautious in the fuseki. It has to be remembered that komi go was becoming common around this time, but there were still many no komi games, and so players had to have an almost schizophrenic attitude to the opening anyway.

Go had stuffed some sweets into his mouth and instead of swallowing them he was still working them as if they were chewing gum. It naturally gave him an insouciant air, even a touch patronising to his 33-year-old opponent. Go was 38.

Go's post-game opinion was that White 22 was correct, rather White 1 in Diagram 3, and several players agreed with him, including the Honinbo, Takagawa Kaku. Black becomes thick and it is certainly not bad for him.

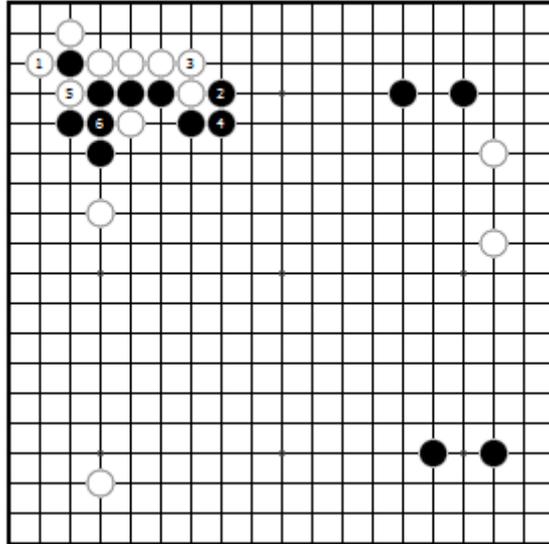


Diagram 3

White 24 surprised Sakata. He expected either A [L17] or B [M17]. In either case he then intended to play as in Diagram 4.

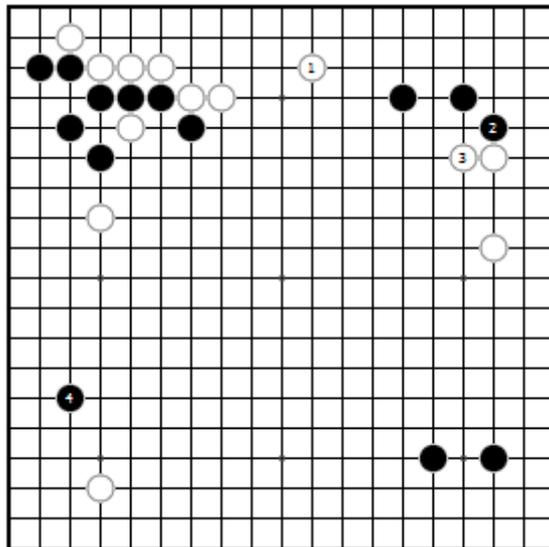


Diagram 4

Being allowed to play at Black 25 gave him a comfortable fuseki, he thought.

White 26 is not one of Go's famous contact plays. In fact, Takagawa criticised it. Since two big points remain, on the right side and on the lower side, there is no urgency in this quarter of the board.

Sakata said he was pleased to get Black 33. He is deliberately avoiding the joseki of Diagram 5 as that is just obeying White's orders.

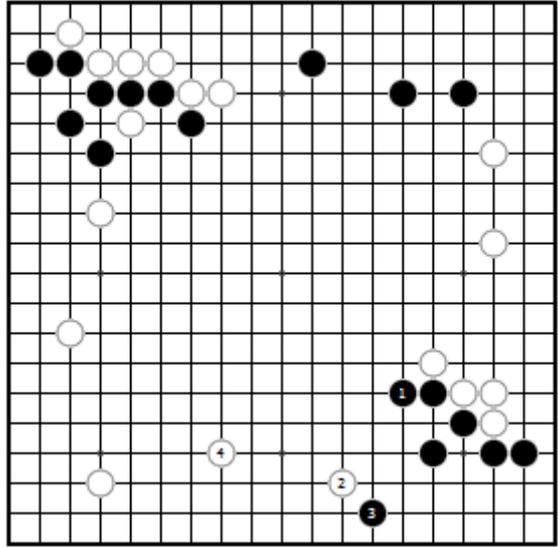


Diagram 5

White 34 at White 1 in Diagram 6 is bad because of Black's rather unusual moves at Black 2 and 9.

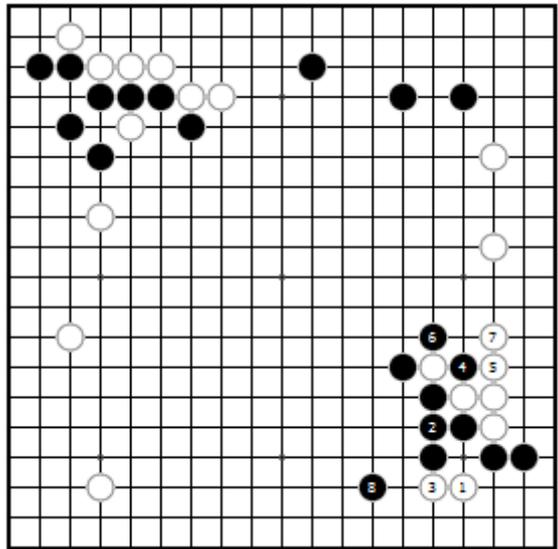


Diagram 6

Sakata was pleased with the result up to Black 39 because it left him with aji on the right side.

White 40 cannot be at White 1 in Diagram 7 because Black 1 is too obviously good.

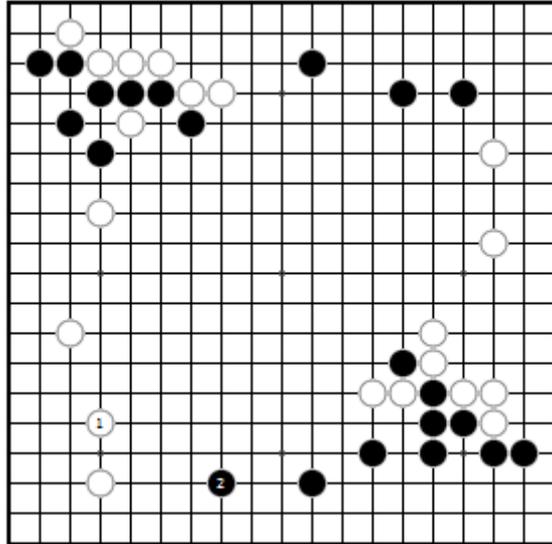


Diagram 7

Sakata felt Black 45 was heavy but he played it anyway because the alternatives were worse. For example, Black 1 in Diagram may well be a standard technique for erasing lightly, but here he rejected it because it gave White both profit and thickness on the left, and in the context of this game Black would be investing too many stones in this area.

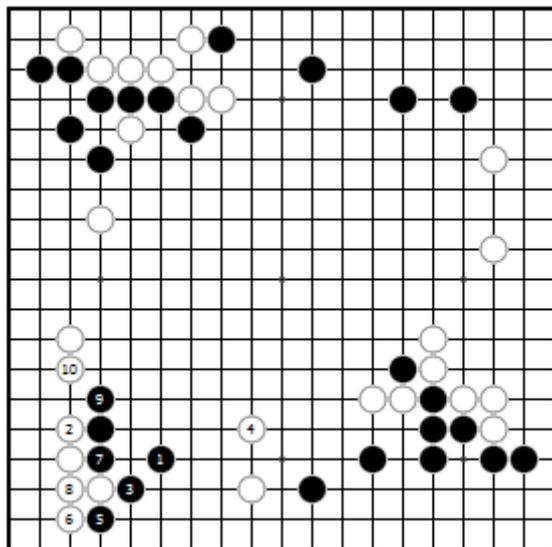


Diagram 8

Another possible line is Black 1 in Diagram 9, but Sakata rejected that because the ladder favours White.

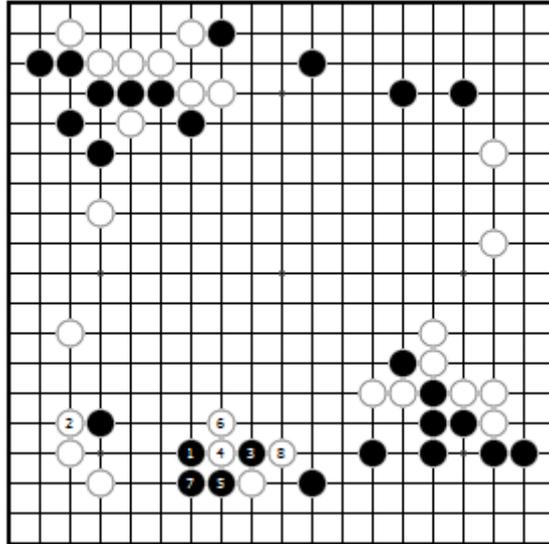


Diagram 9

Before this match began Sakata had been widely seen as the one player who might beat Go Seigen. He was, however, one of those players, like Honinbo Jowa, who can be said to have blossomed late. Of course he was already 8-dan, but he was thirty-three and was not yet featuring in title matches, even though his astonishing record of titles won makes that hard to believe. In fact, in his last game before this match, he had lost a playoff to Kitani Minoru to decide the challenger for the Honinbo title. There was even a question mark over his ability to land the big fish. On the other hand, he had made the playoff by scoring 6-1 in the league and he had just defeated the Honinbo, Takagawa Kaku, 3½-½ in a special five-game no komi match.

Go later felt that White 48 at White 1 in Diagram 10 might have been better, but Sakata would have been happy to see that as it makes his shape comfortable.

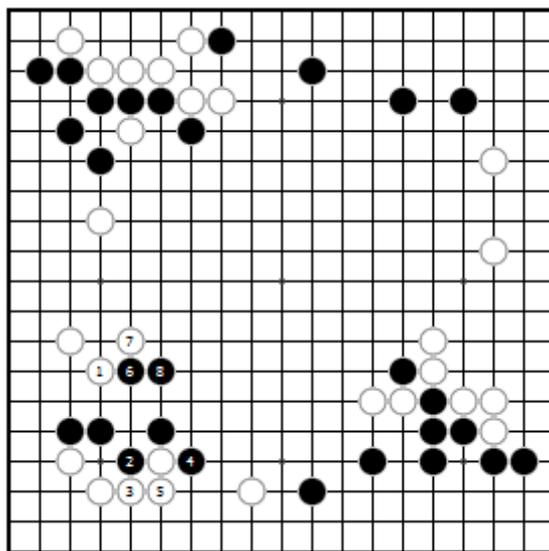


Diagram 10

Black 49 is better than the stiff and awkward Black 1 in Diagram 11.

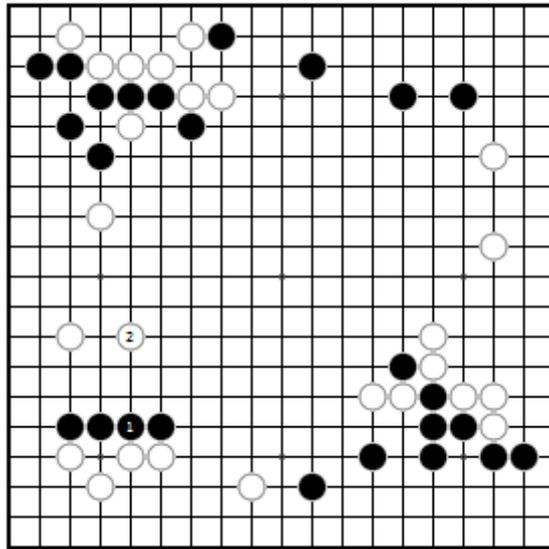


Diagram 11

The invasion at White 50 was considered typical of Go's style. A player's style is judged by the moves he chooses in situations where there is a choice of moves. In this case, the normal choice (according to Sakata) would be to play as in Diagram 12. However, he conceded that this settles the shapes and is not likely to appeal to an adventurous White player, although he also felt that securing actual profit was not to be sneezed at as a practical way of playing. Leaving too many moves possible was, his view, a recipe for confusion in which you end up using too much time. But time trouble was never a problem for Go, and Takagawa confirmed that Go was certainly not fond of settling shapes, leaving as much confusion for the opponent as for himself.

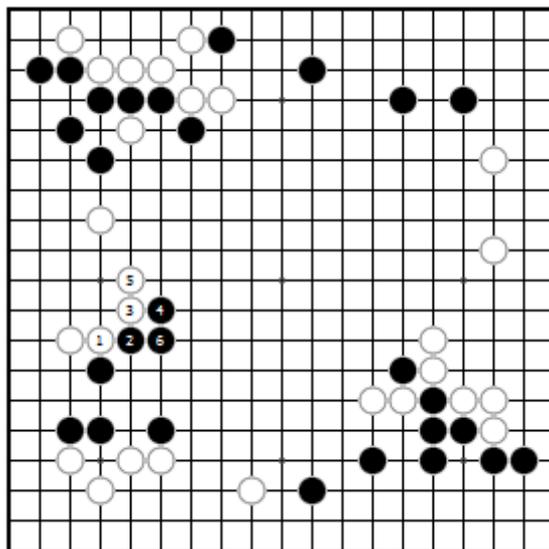


Diagram 12

Sure enough, when it came time to play Black 57, Sakata said he found himself bothered by having too many possible moves to play.

Black 67 was an awful move, said Sakata. He ought to have played as in Diagram 13. The problem with the game move was that Black ended up being squeezed by White 74 and so on.

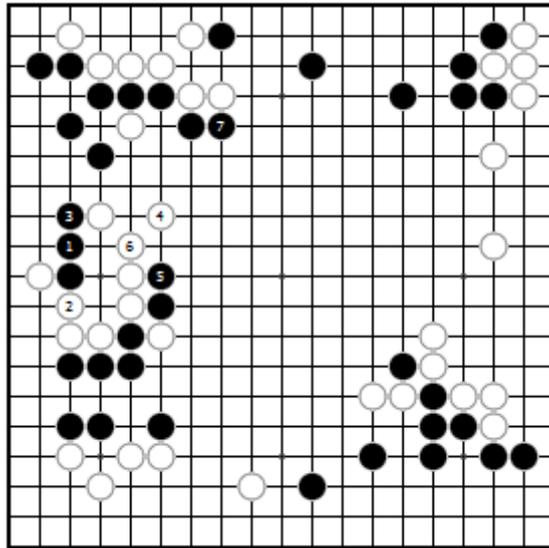


Diagram 13

Sakata rated Black 91 as another awful move. He said he should have followed Diagram 14. There, there are several moves possible for White 6, but if he chooses to play at 7 for immediate stability, Black can then block at A and he thought that Black would then stand better.

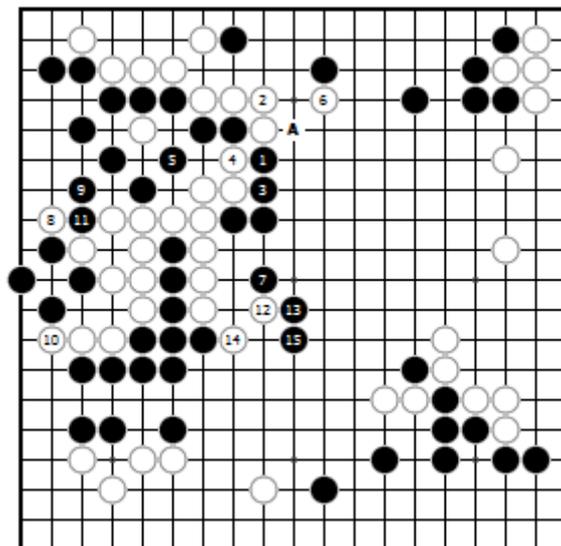


Diagram 14

Sakata also considered Black 1 of Diagram 14 in place of Black 97, but he simply thought the game move was superior. However, he did have second thoughts about that,

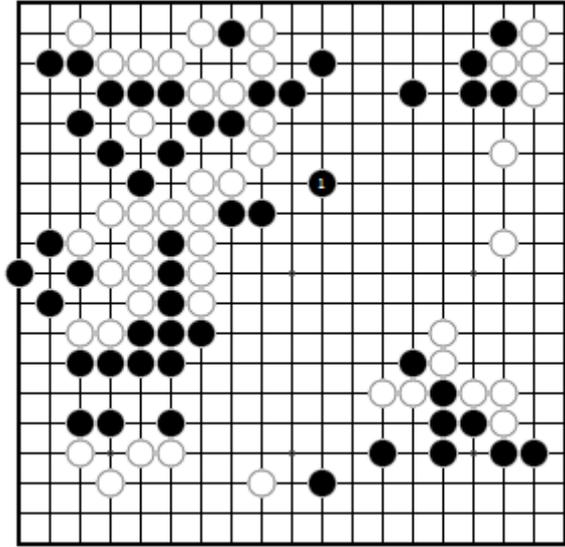


Diagram 15

Sakata toyed with several moves for Black 103 and later decided that the simple Black 1 in Diagram 16 would have been less stressful.

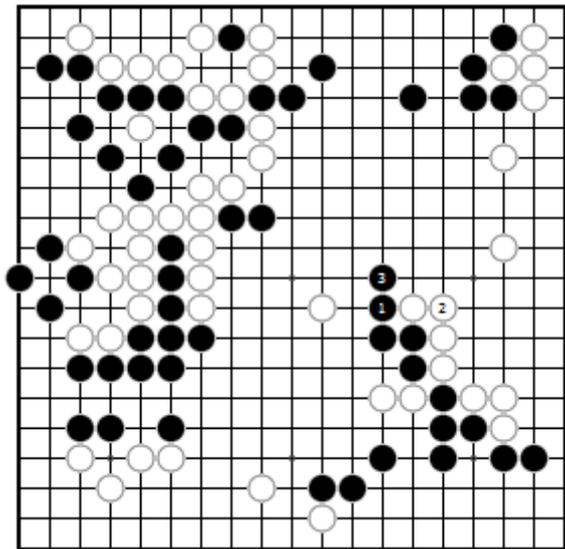


Diagram 16

Black 115 is another style-defining move, this time for Sakata. The less exuberant Takagawa would have played Black 1 in Diagram 17.

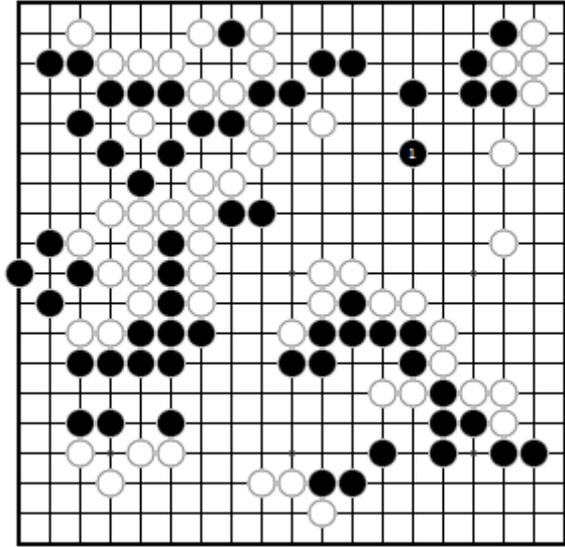


Diagram 17

As much as it appealed to his instinct, Sakata nevertheless later decided that the cut at Black 115 was a mistake, and that Takagawa's move was better. This move is calm and probes for White's response. One threat it poses for White is Diagram 18. Indeed, Black can consider playing this instead of Black 115,

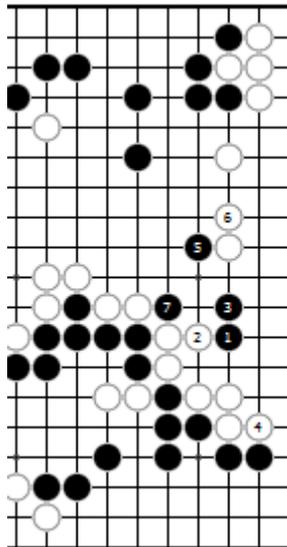


Diagram 18

Black 117 might have been better at Black 1 in Diagram 19.

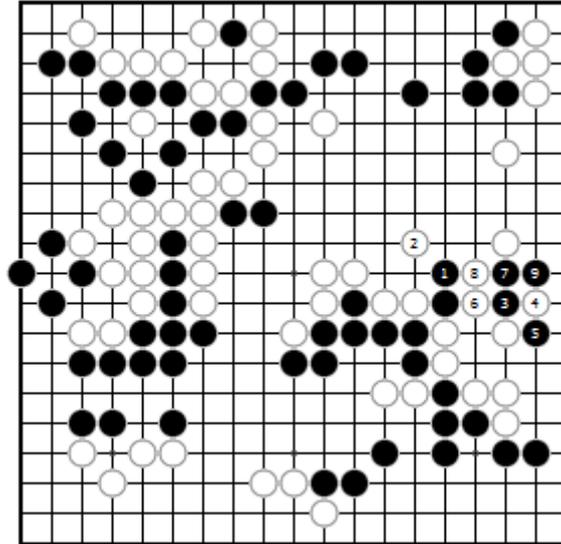


Diagram 19

Once White gets to White 136 first, the game is as good as over.

White 222 took eight minutes, thinking about the final tedomari, but after that both players rattled off the moves in no time. Go then asked, “Six points, is it?” Sakata did not reply directly. Instead he said, “I must be mad. I should have pulled back. Not doing that made it totally bad for me.” This cryptic comment referred to move 67. He ought to have pulled back to 68. The game did indeed become full of difficulties for Black around this stage. But he did not elaborate.

233 moves. White (Go) won by 6 points. Go leads in the match 1-0.

Black used nine hours fifty-eight minutes, White six hours fifteen minutes.