

Meet the Unknown, Think Hard,
and Decide for Yourself

Yoshiharu Habu

Shogi (Japanese Chess) Player

“A genius carries an air of coolness,” is a comment made by Kunio Naito, holder of the ninth dan (the highest shogi rank), on the character of Yoshiharu Habu—a shogi player who made a great achievement in his 33-year career: he became the first to hold an eisei (lifetime honor) in all of the then-seven major shogi titles, and, as a result, was given a People’s Honor Award by the Japanese government in 2018. Yet, Habu never ceases to seek new ventures. What aspirations does he hold today?

Win or Lose, Be Sure to Forget It

An ancient Indian board game called Chaturanga, which is believed to be the forerunner of shogi, was brought to Japan in the Heian period (794-1185/1192 CE) and evolved uniquely to become what shogi is today. During the Edo period (1603-1867 CE), a licensing system called *iemoto seido* (headmaster system), akin to the systems practiced in the tea ceremony, *ikebana* (flower arrangement), and other schools of traditional arts, was adopted by the guild of shogi players. This suggests that shogi included an aspect of mental training (a “way”) for people wishing to become more mature as a person.

Shogi, however, was not immune to modernization. In the latter half of the 20th century, computers enabled widespread data-sharing of the moves and outcomes of shogi games, revealing the game’s real essence to be that of a “brain sport.” Against such a backdrop emerged 15-year-old shogi prodigy, Yoshiharu Habu.

At one point, his annual victory rate exceeded 80%, and he still maintains an average rate higher than 70%. Critics say that Habu’s unrivaled strength lies not only in tactics, but also in his flexibility in accommodating changing times and the tenacity to achieve continued victories.

Asked what the secret of remaining an undefeated player is, Habu says, “I feel that the life of a shogi player is like a marathon. It is vital that you stay in the lead group. As long as you are in that group, you can be the last runner (and still remain an active player).” He adds that for prolonging a shogi career, forgetting the past is essential.

“Win or lose, you must let go of the game quickly, because victories make you pompous and careless, and defeats undermine your aggressiveness. You should let go of those residual images of the games, and

after you review the results, it’s best to forget about the outcome—win or lose. Of course, I have feelings, but I think it’s important to learn how to channel the emotional ups and downs into motivation for improvement.”

Habu’s favorite description of a desirable state of mind is “*reiro*” (clear-minded, serene), but it is not difficult to imagine how challenging it is to stay *reiro* in a world where only victory counts. “I’m still exploring how to control my thoughts,” says Habu, scratching his head.

Competencies You Must Develop for the Future

With 81 squares on the board, and possible moves amounting to 10 to the power of 220, shogi is a very complex game—complex to the degree that no infallible strategy is known to date, even with the help of artificial intelligence (AI).

Speaking about his approach to competing, Habu comments, “Throughout the course of the game, I try predicting each move in detail, but 90% of my strategies prove ineffective. So, I’m not playing with a fully-working prediction most of the time, but with a hunch that this move might work better.” He does so, of course, after intensive data research on past games and after all possible predictive simulations.

“Failure to do data research results in immediate defeat. However, since such research is a prerequisite to playing any game nowadays, there is no chance of getting ahead of your opponent in that regard. Instead, generating something unique out of the data is critical,” explains Habu.

The emergence of AI and shogi apps has allowed the development of new moves or strategies on a weekly basis. Habu thinks, however, that although collective research may result in effective strategies, it also poses the risk that they will slide into uniformity.

“Collective thinking often outpowers that of an individual, but I still check out research results and ideas released by individuals and small groups, in search of something truly novel that might become an effective strategy. Cutting-edge developments are always in the trial-and-error stage, and you just have to try them to find out whether or not they work,” he adds.

Sectors threatened by the growing sophistication of AI are not limited to shogi. Regarding this trend, Habu comments, “It’s frightening that people so easily believe what AI suggests. AI can increase probabilities, but it is not error-free. You must be skeptical about the results AI produces, and verify them personally by thinking them through.”

In response to a question about how one can develop the sensibility, individuality, and capability of thinking hard that Habu has mentioned, he replies, “Put yourself in a new environment. It could be as simple as walking around a town that’s unknown to you. Routines tend to constrain your thinking, so go out and meet the unknown, think hard, and decide for yourself. As you repeat this process, you will naturally develop such capabilities.”



Photo courtesy of Japan Shogi Association

Yoshiharu Habu

Born in Saitama Prefecture, Japan, in 1970. In 1985, he became only the third junior high school student to turn professional shogi player. At age 19, he won his first championship in the Ryuo Tournament (one of the major shogi titles). In 1996, at age 24, he became the holder of all seven major titles for the first time in the history of shogi. Another first: in 2017, he became the holder of an eisei (lifetime honor) in those seven titles, which resulted in his being the first shogi player to receive the government’s People’s Honor Award. His hobby is to play chess, and he is the holder of second place in the World Chess Federation (FIDE) ranking for Japan.