

Understanding Professional Go Ranks Across Japan, Korea, China, and Europe

For many European Go players, professional dan ranks (1p–9p) can be confusing. At first glance, it seems natural to assume that a higher rank always means a stronger player. In reality, professional ranks in Go do not function as a pure strength rating system.

Instead, they represent a combination of achievement, career progression, and recognition within different national Go institutions. This article explains how professional ranks work in Japan, Korea, China, and Europe, and why they should not be interpreted as direct indicators of playing strength.

Becoming a Professional Player

Across all systems, the most important step is not moving from 1p to 9p, but becoming a professional in the first place.

In Asia and Europe, only a very small number of players reach professional status. A newly qualified professional is awarded 1-dan professional (1p), already representing an elite level far above even the strongest amateur players.

From this point onward, rank progression depends on each system's internal rules, which differ significantly between regions.

Regional Systems

Japan

In Japan, under organizations such as the Nihon Ki-in, professional rank has historically been closely linked to long-term career achievements, including:

- tournament victories
- title matches
- league performance
- overall career milestones

As a result, Japanese professional ranks often reflect a player's career history rather than their current competitive strength.

Korea

In Korea, professional ranks are traditionally more closely tied to competitive performance in tournaments.

The Korean system is known for its high intensity and strong emphasis on results, especially among active top players. This has historically made Korean ranks more reflective of current playing strength compared to other systems.

China

The Chinese system combines achievement-based promotion with performance in major competitions.

Professional advancement depends on:

- tournament results
- national ranking performance
- title achievements
- accumulated promotion points

Because of the size and competitiveness of the Chinese professional scene, rank alone often does not fully reflect a player's current strength.

Europe

The European professional system was established in 2014. Under this system, players qualify through the European Professional Qualification Tournament, where the winner (and in the early editions also the runner-up) receives professional status.

At present, Europe has produced a small but growing group of professional players. The full list is available here:

<https://eurogofed.org/pros/>

After qualification, players receive an initial rating adjustment (around 2700 if their rating was lower), serving as a baseline for professional play.

Since 2017, Europe has implemented a structured promotion system based on **Professional Points (PP)**. This system was updated in 2025 to improve the pace and balance of rank progression.

PP is accumulated through tournament performance and other achievements:

Rank thresholds:

- 2p – 40 PP

- 3p – 90 PP (+50 PP)
- 4p – 150 PP (+60 PP)
- 5p – 220 PP (+70 PP)
- 6p – 300 PP (+80 PP)
- 7p – 400 PP (+100 PP)
- 8p – 525 PP (+125 PP)
- 9p – 675 PP (+150 PP)

Points can be earned through:

- placements in major European tournaments
(Grand Prix Final, European Professional Championship, European Championship)
- defeating another professional player (+2 PP)
- defeating a player rated above 2700 (+1 PP)
- success in selected international professional events (+5 PP)

The system is designed to encourage frequent participation in high-level tournaments and reward consistent performance over time.

Because it is accumulative, European professional rank reflects career achievements rather than immediate playing strength. Actual strength is better represented by the official rating list.

Professional Rank vs Playing Strength

A common misconception is that professional rank directly measures playing strength.

In reality, professional ranks in all systems function primarily as recognition systems. They reflect achievement, consistency, and contribution to the professional Go environment.

As a result, rank progression may lag behind actual improvement in playing strength, especially among rapidly improving young professionals.

Professional rank is therefore closer to an academic title than a rating system: it indicates status and career progression, not real-time competitive ability.

Why Rank and Strength Can Differ

Modern Go history provides clear examples of this mismatch.

When Ke Jie won his first major international title at the 2nd Bailing Cup, he was still a 4-dan professional.

Similarly:

- Tuo Jiaxi won the LG Cup as a 3p
- Fan Tingyu won the Ing Cup as a 2p
- Tang Weixing won the Samsung Cup as a 3p

These players were already competing at world-championship level while still holding relatively low professional ranks.

This reflects a structural feature of professional Go systems: rank is often updated after results, meaning it can lag behind actual playing strength.

In addition, it is important to note that in all major Go countries there are many high-ranked professionals, including 8-dan and 9-dan players, who earned their ranks through long careers and accumulated achievements. While these ranks reflect significant professional accomplishment, they do not necessarily indicate current top-level competitive strength. In some cases, younger professionals with lower official ranks may already be stronger in head-to-head play, reflecting the difference between career-based ranking systems and real-time performance.

Conclusion

Although Japan, Korea, China, and Europe all use the same 1p–9p system, the meaning of professional rank differs significantly between regions.

- Japan emphasizes career achievements
- Korea emphasizes competitive performance
- China combines results and structured promotion points
- Europe uses a transparent accumulative system based on tournament performance

Across all systems, one conclusion remains consistent:

Professional rank is not a direct measurement of playing strength. It is a structured recognition of achievement and career progression within the professional Go world.

To understand a player's real strength, one must look beyond rank and focus on current ratings, recent results, and performance in top-level competition.