

Understanding Judging Standards in Koi Shows by Dick "coach" Benbow

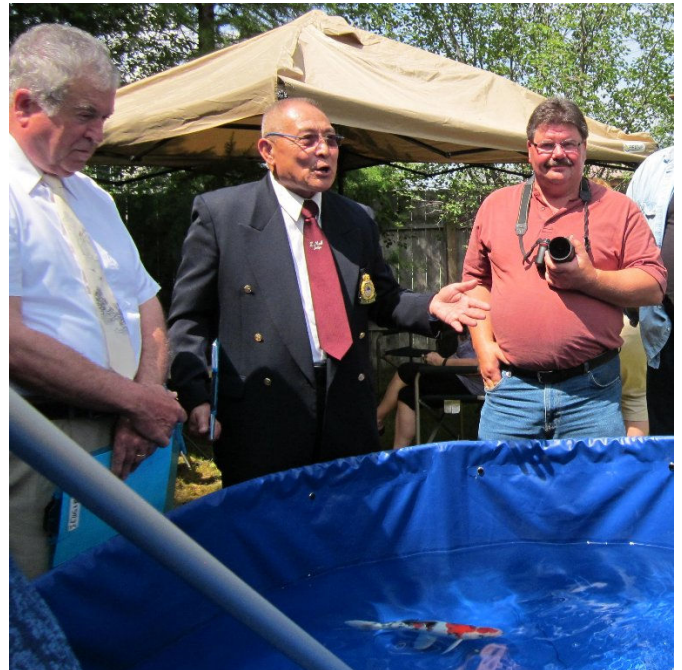


One of the hardest things to understand when you are getting excited about showing, is having a clear understanding of what a judge is looking for. The problem is somewhat complicated by the organizations that provide judges. They do differ in criteria. But having a better idea of what is desired gets you closer to understanding the judges' selections. Organizations that we see represented at shows include ZNA, AKJA (formerly AKCA) and Shinkokai (Japanese breeders association).

Generally, we as koi crazies are smitten by the coloration and pattern of our koi. We have different sensitivities to different styles. Myself, I find that having a maruten circle on the head and a nice stepped pattern afterwards is my preference in sanke, kohaku and showa (these three are known as "Gosanke"). These are the three top varieties that the grand champion is usually selected from. But for most judges pattern can be as little as 10% of the total score.

So what gets the biggest chunk, you may ask? And I would answer the Koi's body. It can take up to 50% of the scoring! So what do they look for? That the Koi has both feelers, the head is straight and not crooked, and the fins are all shaped correctly and in place. The spinal line is straight and the fish swims properly. Koi in the first 2 or 3 size classes may not have developed the body as they would have in the larger sizes. Especially as the sex of the individual defines their development. Females have a marked advantage to bulk up better with eggs, than do the males. But the eggs must be carried uniformly on both sides in order to get a better score. Fish that have been injured in transport that may have, say bumped their nose so as to be bruised, are not discounted for points and accepted as if that never happened. Fish with disease or just healed from serious injury, may be turned away by the benching staff.

So what else is looked at besides body? And that would be pattern briefly mentioned earlier. Each color variety has different standards and



Head judge Larry Gill and assistant judge Dick Benbow explaining the finer points of some small koi

would take reams of paper to detail. It is something that you'll have to pick up with your study, so you can be looking for the same thing in your koi while selecting, if your focus is on competing in shows. A balanced pattern can mean different things because of different variations. A classic three step kohaku with white nose, and correct spacing between the last step and the tail (known as odome OH-DOE-may) may be balanced the same as a fish that has lipstick on it's lips (kuchibeni COO-CHA-beni) and red that may run to the tail without the space of white at the odome. These are things you pick up in your reading or by following the judges around Sunday morning as they take time to answer questions and explain their selections. So including pattern here are some of the other criteria.

Other considerations include: Color, and its clean finished character. Quality, to understand the sheen of the skin, and features like fukerin, a

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special feature to each scale that forms a telltale net pattern throughout the body. Carriage or the grace of movement worthy of a champion.

Judges pay their dues with advanced learning and you can do the same. Go to as many shows as you can and see for yourself what the standard of quality is. If you never see the best you won't know what to be able to select against. Going to the All Japan show will serve to accomplish that goal like no other way possible. If your budget only allows for a domestic trip to an American breeder at harvest time, you are still advancing your knowledge. Like most things in life, the harder you work at something, the better you get!

I know that not all folks who show are in it for the competition. Sharing their favorites with others is a wonderful way to grow the hobby. Allowing your fish under your care to be all that it can be, is a tribute to your ability to raise and nurture your finny family. Getting your Koi ready for the show with water quality and proper feeding, careful capturing and transport, and then a proper QT before return to the main pond can be a worthwhile accomplishment in itself.

You might say that getting your PHD in Koi is "pretty hard darnnit", but like eating a whole pie, it's done a piece at a time, bite by bite. So like a famous French cook used to say "Bon Appetite!" The more you know, the more you can enjoy the show....

Dick Benbow, aka coach, has been with koi dose to 35 years. He is a Pacific Northwest Koi Club Association (PNKCA) Bronze Koi recipient and founding father for both Puget Sound Koi Club and Washington Koi and Water Garden Society. Dick is active on many of the koi chat lines. He is married, has two children and two grandchildren. His favorite koi subjects are filtration and understanding tosai development.
