

All England Koi Show 2025

Yuko Shirako

Prologue

When Bernie Woollands visited Japan in January 2025, I told him, “I’ll be in Europe this September — I’d love to see a koi show in England if possible.” A few months later, an invitation arrived from him to attend the All England Koi Show. Ordinarily, it would be most appropriate for one of the Zen Nippon Airinkai (ZNA) directors to make such a courtesy visit. However, this September would not be good for their aligning schedules.

Although I am not a certified koi judge, I have spent twenty-seven years serving for the ZNA headquarters, participating in twenty-five ZNA International Koi Shows and as many AJNPA All Japan Combined Nishikigoi Shows (Shinkokai’s Tokyo Koi Show) — not to mention countless training seminars. Over the years, I have also supported ZNA judges at koi shows and workshops in the Netherlands, Germany, South Africa, the USA, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Through these experiences, I have cultivated a sense of appreciation for Nishikigoi. My main purpose for visiting England was to learn about how a koi show is managed there. However, being able to take part in the judging team turned out to be an invaluable experience — and beyond that, I simply loved every moment of the show. To everyone involved in the All England Koi Show, I extend my heartfelt gratitude.



Bernie at show site



Join the South East Koi Club

Kent County Showground and Event Halls

Decades ago, I once drove through the southeastern countryside of England — around Surrey and Kent — visiting Hever Castle, Darwin House, and Knole and other gardens under the care of the National Trust. A Spitfire and a Hurricane flying over the Biggin Hill Airfield thrilled me beyond words. Postwar Japan had very few historic aircraft left, so seeing British planes still flying in good condition was astonishing. From lawn mowers to fighter jets, the British have a remarkable gift for keeping machines alive. The Kent Event Centre, where the koi show takes place, is built on Detling Hill, once home to the RAF Detling Airfield. Perhaps that is why Kent feels oddly familiar and nostalgic to me.



Detling Airfield Monument at the show ground

The All England Koi Show is held inside the John Hendry Pavilion, a 1,752-square-meter indoor hall. Half of the hall is filled with vats for show fish, while the other half is lined with dealer booths, where visitors can even purchase koi to start their own collections. In the adjacent hall, vendors sell koi accessories, bonsai, food, and drinks — adding a warm, festive atmosphere that reminded me of the “matsuri” (festivals) we have gradually lost at Japanese shows.

The pavilion itself is designed with event logistics in mind — even heavy vehicles can drive inside for setup. Water, of course, is the lifeblood of any koi show; it’s drawn from outdoor taps, stored in massive tanks, and then distributed to each display vat.



show vats area



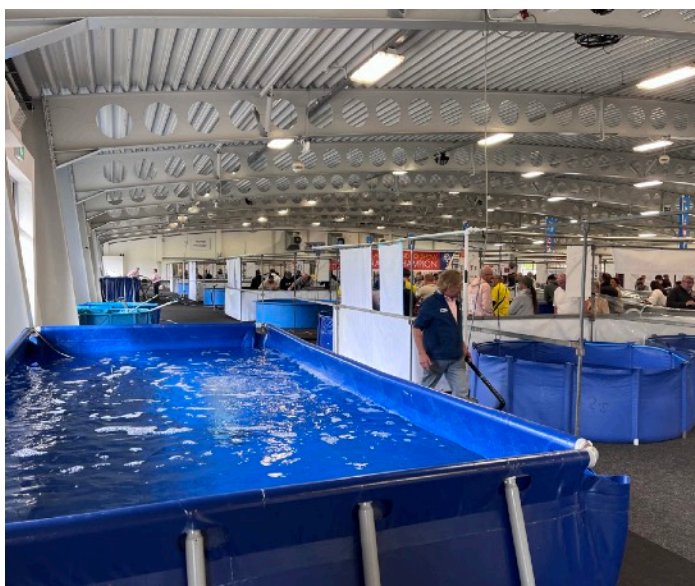
koi dealers area



transporting entry koi



one of the dealer displays



one of the water supply tanks



Maddie and her friend

English Benching

Although Europe had endured a severe heatwave in the last summer, the last week of September in southeast England was pleasantly cool — perfect weather for a koi show.

The show overview was as follows:

Show Class :

Kohaku, Sanke, Showa (incl Kage Showa), Utsurimono, Bekko, Asagi/Shusi, Koromo (incl. Goshiki, Sanke & Showa Koromo/Goshiki hybrids.), Kwarimono, Hikari Mujimono, Hikari Moyomono, Hikari Utsurimono, Tancho (Go-Sanke only), Kinginrin (Go-Sanke only)

Sizes :

Size 1 (15cm - 25cm), Size 2 (>25cm - 35cm), Size 3 (>35cm - 45cm),
Size 4 (>45cm - 55cm), Size 5 (>55cm - 65cm), Size 6 (>65cm - 75cm),
Size 7 (>75cms)

Entry Koi :320 fish

Show Vats : 40 vats

At British koi shows, fish measurement for a correct “benching” is an essential ritual. According to Christine Woolger, leader of the Benching Team, this process ensures fairness, since measurement methods and even classifications can vary between exhibitors. Japan once followed a similar process. Until the early 2000s, all entries were registered on-site, with up to three thousand koi individually measured on the day of the show. But after the 2003 Koi Herpes Virus outbreak, strict biosecurity measures were introduced: now, only each koi’s designated handler may touch his fish. As a result, organizers no longer perform measurement themselves. Judges are allowed to order handlers to measure their fish on the spot, but in practice, they must rely on the exhibitor’s honesty. To complicate matters, ZNA and AJNPA (Shinkokai) categorize koi show varieties differently — which may cause confusion.

Christine and her team spent an entire day measuring more than three hundred koi. Each time, nets and vats were carefully disinfected; fish were handled gently, measured precisely, photographed, and digitally recorded. It is, without question, one of the most demanding parts of the entire event — yet the foundation on which fairness rests.



Christine and her benching team



wearing matching pink polo shirts



Measuring koi is really hard work



water quality staff



Jason in charge of admin
ALL ENGLAND KOI SHOW



water supply

Koi Judging

The Judges are as follows.

Team 1: Allan Tait, Mark Kleijkers, Gary Hazely and trainee Aaron Eden

Team 2: Carol McCall, Dirk de Witte, Gary Pritchard and trainee Laurence Harvey

Team 3: Tony Sheffield, Niko Bellens, Yuko Shirako and trainee David Edge

Senior Judge: Alan Tait

Team Leaders: Caro; McCall, Tony Sheffield

Having met Allan Tait, Carol McCall, and Tony Sheffield at the Holland Koi Show before, I was pleased to see familiar faces. Thanks to that, I felt no nervousness joining the team. I explained to Alan and Tony that I did not hold official judging qualifications and had already seen most of the koi during benching. They kindly allowed me to participate as an observer — without influencing votes or final decisions.

In the Grand Champion selection, the largest koi classes featured an extraordinary level of competition among the Gosanke varieties. Determining the finest among them was no easy task. Ultimately, a magnificent Showa was chosen for its exceptional balance of body conformation and quality, while the Non-Gosanke Grand Champion went unanimously to a stunning Ogon. During team judging, Tony guided us through each step with remarkable clarity. He pointed out that indoor lighting and vat placement could alter how a koi's colors look — and that we must account for such environmental differences. The water quality and the position of each vat, too, must be considered. The judging process itself differed little from what I had seen in Japan or elsewhere. Judges observed body shape and skin quality carefully, asking frequent questions to their trainees. Japanese judges (both hobbyists and dealers), in comparison, tend to be more reserved in their instruction, whereas the British and European approach felt refreshingly interactive.



Judge briefing



Judging



Judging



Koi club members



Grand Champion Showa



Lynda's catering is amazing!



a good looking Shiro Utsuri
ALL ENGLAND KOI SHOW



the best cake I had during this travel

Finishing Koi

If someone asked me what sets Japanese koi shows apart from those abroad, my answer would be simple: Finishing. In Japan, koi are traditionally raised in outdoor mud ponds from June to October. This is not only to promote growth, but also to produce a healthy, lustrous skin. This is the reason that ZNA holds its national show in November — the time when koi shine brightest. I don't think that the Japanese method is the best in other countries. Nowadays, good finishing methods for koi in the concrete ponds have been established.

“Finishing” means bringing out the very best in a koi's Hi (red) and sumi (black) pigments while improving the clarity and luster of its skin — not unlike people rejuvenating their complexion at a spa. Color-enhancing feed can tint even the white ground, Japanese koi keepers stop using such food about two months before a show, allowing the skin to return to a pure white. Experienced judges can make swift, confident decisions precisely because they can recognize a koi's finishing quality at a glance. When two fish are nearly equal in body, pattern, and quality, the final distinction often comes down to this subtle artistry.

Chuffed with Many British Things

During my stay, Bernie was an incredibly generous host. He took me to Runnymede's Magna Carta Memorial, Windsor Castle, and Eton College, and I even had my first taste of Eton Mess — a delightfully British experience.

Before arriving in England, I had spent two weeks in Lapland, Finland, chasing the Northern Lights. In Japan's lower latitudes, auroras are impossible to see, so witnessing them felt like a dream realized. I chose Lapland for a sentimental reason: it was the setting of Gavin Lyall's “The Most Dangerous Game”, which I had read back in 1976. Ever since, I had wanted to visit Ivalo Airport and Lake Inari — places that lived vividly in my imagination for decades. Incredibly, the English edition of the novel is no longer in print, and only used copies were available online. After my returning home, Bernie emailed me: “I've ordered the book for you on Amazon.” I can't wait to receive it — thank you, Bernie, from the bottom of my heart.

Beyond Languages

Alas, as the years go by, words slip away little by little. Since the Covid period, I've spoken less — in English and, perhaps, even in Japanese. I often listen to BBC and Euronews regularly, so I understood what people in Britain were saying in England. Yet when it came to speaking, the right words often eluded me. I sometimes felt I might be troubling my kind hosts at the show with my hesitations. It reminded me that, like koi judging itself, speaking another language requires continuity — steady, ongoing practice.



Yes, we love koi



St. George relief at Windsor Castle



Eton College



a boy fishing on the River Thames

Every year, on the last weekend of January, the All Japan Combined Nishikigoi Show by AJNPA (Shinkokai, Dealers' Association) is held in Tokyo .During the event, ZNA also conducts a practical koi seminar, which are open even to non-members. If you ever find yourself in Japan at that time, please come and join us — I'll be there, happy to lend a hand in any way I can.

To all the koi lovers I met in England — thank you for reminding me how universal our passion truly is. The sound of running water, the shimmer of koi in the water, and the conversations shared across cultures — those memories, like koi themselves, will only grow more beautiful with time.