

BY MIKE SNADEN

YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR!

Why is an expensive Koi expensive, and who needs bloodlines anyway?

Nowadays, I often hear people, especially dealers, state that bloodlines are of little importance when buying Koi, and that a Koi should be evaluated purely on its own merits. Such a train of thought is one I find extremely strange. Granted, there are no 'pure' bloodlines as we used to know them, but let's face it, even many years ago, bloodlines was something of a strange topic. Even in the old days, bloodlines were something made up by breeders pairing certain Koi, and then exploiting the qualities of certain offspring, and using them to breed the next generation of parent Koi. In reality, there is very little difference in how things are done now, as to how they were done in the 'old days' - this is clearly reflected in the way that one breeder's Koi look very different from another breeder's.

UNDERSTANDING BLOODLINES

I believe bloodlines are key to choosing the right Koi from any given breeder. Sure, if you are looking for a Koi to take to the Koi show in the short term, then you can just buy the fish on 'face value', but if you're buying a Koi with the intention of growing it to Jumbo, you simply have to have a good understanding of its lineage. Lineage is like a form of history. If you don't have any idea of the history, then you have no idea of the future either. Unfortunately, it's not simply a matter of saying, "This Koi is of breeder 'x' bloodline", but a matter of understanding the mix of bloodlines that the particular breeder has used. What I mean by this is, you can't simply say that a Koi has perhaps Dainichi male parents - you have to understand which lineage within Dainichi these male parents came from, as nowadays, their Kohaku for example, are very different from those of the old days. In fact, in the past few years, their lineage has changed greatly with their 'Gin x' and 'Junior x' bloodlines.

Understanding the bloodlines of a Koi you are looking to buy gives you great insight into its future. If you have a good grasp of bloodlines, you will be able to identify characteristics within the Koi in question. For example, you may be looking at two Koi in a bowl. One Koi might have inherited the Beni type from its mother, yet its sibling might have the Beni type of its male parent. The same can be said of body types, skin, and Kiwa. This can perhaps make things a little confusing, but once you get the hang of it all, it can help you greatly in choosing a Koi that you can enjoy for many years to come.

BEST OF ITS KIND

When looking for a Koi you intend to grow to Jumbo, the most important reason for understanding the bloodlines of a Koi you are proposing to buy is that the Koi you are looking at needs to be a good representation of how the best 'Tategoi' of that lineage should look. On a number of occasions, I have heard people say I favour soft Beni. This isn't actually true. However, I do have a preference for softer Beni types, as they have a tendency to last much longer when the Koi grows through to Jumbo. But, in reality, what I like is a Beni type that is 'soft' in relation to the lineage of Koi I buy. So, if I buy a Koi with Beni that is genetically very red, then I will be looking for a Koi that has a less developed example of that kind of Beni, and likewise, when buying a Koi that should grow up to have a softer more orangey Beni, I try to find an example of this type that will finish later in life, and hold its beauty.



6730 This Koi has very attractive Beni, which is good for a Koi show. However, of the four Koi, this is the lesser as a long-term project. These four Koi are all of the same bloodline, but the redder Beni of this one is somewhat harder to keep in good condition.



6692 This Kohaku has a less desirable pattern than 6730, but the colour quality is a little more suited to long-term growing, and as such will be easier to keep and more long lasting.

If you were to buy a Koi with redder Beni from a lineage where its "ideal" should be much softer, then inevitably the Koi won't keep its Beni condition very long, and will soon deteriorate, rather than improving with age.

When you buy high-end Koi with a view to growing them to Jumbo, the criteria you and the breeder are looking for are a far cry from what you would look for if you were buying a Koi to take to a show in the short-term. If you want a "show Koi" then what you are looking for is a pleasant body shape, good strong thick colour, with good Kiwa, and tight Sashi, along with a good pattern. But, these criteria can work completely the wrong way if you're looking for something that might perhaps be a future Grand Champion. In the latter case, the Koi won't necessarily have a 'good body shape', of more importance is its bone structure, and head shape. In these factors, you are looking for indications of how the Koi is likely to grow, and what kind of body shape and weight distribution it is likely to have when it gets big. In terms of colour,

you will be looking for a colour that perhaps won't fare well at a Koi show in the short term, but one that will improve slowly over the years, and peak in its beauty only when the Koi has grown to Jumbo. Buying a show Koi will inevitably lead to the Koi losing its colour condition early in life, and being worthless long before it has grown to Jumbo.

A LONG-TERM PATTERN

As far as pattern is concerned, you or the breeder will be looking for something that will look attractive and imposing when the Koi is Jumbo, as opposed to choosing a small Koi with a pattern that has to fit certain criteria that deem it suitable for showing in the short-term. In terms of Kiwa, although good sharp Kiwa is desirable for both short-term and long-term, experience will allow you to understand subtle differences in Kiwa that give you an indication of whether it will hold together only in the short-term, or keep long-term and improve in years to come. This may sound confusing, but as an example: the Sensuke bloodline historically has straight cut (Kamisori) Kiwa, though many breeders now have Sensuke lineage that predominantly produce Maruzome (Scalloped) Kiwa. Sometimes this Kiwa can look a little over-flowery, which can be an indication that the Koi may lose its pattern in the future, whereas another Koi might have a mix of Maruzome, and the occasional straight cut across a few scales (Kamisori), which is an inherent sign of very solid pattern/colour stability.

Sashi... why is it important? Sashi is an interesting point. A Koi needs to have Sashi in order to determine any kind of quality. If there



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6671 Of the four, this represents the next step up as a long-term prospect. The Beni is higher quality than the previous two, and the body type is slightly stronger/better as well, with its weight distribution being slightly further back. This Koi's Beni might not look vastly different to the past two, however this difference will become significant when you try to grow the Koi to Jumbo, and will be much more forgiving of compromised water/raising conditions. The previous two will need much more care in order to keep them in good condition.

6751 And lastly, this Kohaku is of extremely high quality, and is the best of the four in quality terms. This Beni is incredibly high-class, being very soft and very thick. Such Beni will be very easy to keep, and will last longer than the other three Koi. Also, the body type is the best of the four, and the Koi also has a very thick strong backbone with good height, so she should attain a very good body shape when Jumbo. All four of these Koi have pretty much ideal Sashi and Kiwa, so in this regard it's a level playing field. These differences may seem very subtle, but when you are trying to grow to Jumbo, they become very significant, and as such will result in very different prices being quoted by the breeder.



BODY A.



BODY A.

BODY A. This young Kohaku has the kind of body and back line that I favour, as the way that the Koi gains weight is very predictable. Where the back line rises on a nice curve, and maintains height through the dorsal area before falling towards the tail, give you a good idea of the kind of body line the Koi will have when big.

BODY B. This Koi has a little more height, albeit with slightly more height gain further forward on the shoulder. But, she carries good height through towards the rear of the dorsal area, and the weight distribution clearly reflects this in the normal down-view of the Koi.



BODY B.



BODY B.

is no Sashi, then the colour only exists in an exposed area of each scale, which is also reflected in the Koi having a lack of 'elasticity' to its Beni, which can be observed by the Koi exposing white around the edges of the scales when it bends. However, Sashi that is too deep will fail to tighten up when the Koi gets old/big resulting in the Koi having messy unrefined Sashi. An ideal with Tosai or Nisai, is for the Koi to have what appears to be one scale's depth of Sashi, and for its deeper edge to appear to fade away to nothing, rather than being strong in colour with an obvious edge to where it stops. If someone, even a breeder, tells you that two scales depth of Sashi will tighten, it will mean one of two things: 1) He just wants a quick sale or 2) He will take a knife to it and make it shallower later.

SKIN QUALITY

Skin can be a little hard to judge if you are in the infancy of your hobby. Quite often, when I bowl a Koi to show a client, they will express their appreciation and delight of a certain Koi's skin quality. But, it is often the case that the Koi's Beni is a little redder, which gives the client the perception that the skin is whiter... It's a deceptive "contrast thing" that you shouldn't be fooled by! Good skin should look very thick, solid, and reflective in its appearance. Skin that looks a little grey/blue, or translucent is not such a safe bet. A slightly creamy appearance is also desired. The Sashi of the Koi also helps to give you an indication of the skin quality and this is by way of it feathering away to nothing as I mentioned before. The way Sashi looks is created by the white scale and surface skin at the front of the pattern effectively hiding the red from showing through. Since the thickness of the scale/skin becomes thinner towards the tip of the scale, and thicker towards the root, this is what makes the colour of the Sashi more prominent near the surface, and much paler where the red scale becomes more embedded under a white one. So, Sashi is also a handy re-assurer of good skin quality.

Body shape should really have been the first component of this article, but I'm 40 years old, and not getting any younger! Anyway, a Koi that is good for a show is generally one that has an attractive shape. This may often not be the kind of shape that becomes Jumbo, nor the kind of shape that is good when big. When looking for a Koi to grow Jumbo, you should look for the proportions of the body, and head. The body should be long, and lean with a sense of power, and reasonably good height to the backbone. The height of the backbone, as well as the profile of this height will largely determine the weight distribution of the body. What I mean by this is, if a Koi has a backbone profile that is very steep rising from the head, and then levelling out early, then the Koi will tend to have its body weight further forward than a Koi whose backbone rises in a more subtle manner, with its highest point being further back, around the front of the dorsal area. Aside from this, one desirable trait is to look for some thickness to the backbone, as a Koi with a decent body, whose backbone looks prominent as if it is almost hollowed out slightly either side of its backbone, is an indication that the Koi is capable of putting on a lot more weight. One big issue with Koi with a bad backbone profile is when they put on weight; it can often distort the



BODY C.



BODY C.

BODY C. This Koi has the same kind of back line and height as 'A'. This Koi is also very good in respect of the way that the head joins the body very discretely with no step whatsoever. Such a trait will look very good as the Koi grows to Jumbo, as her head contour should be very smooth, without any of the dips or ridges that can often appear on older Koi. Of course, there are no guarantees of this, but such a trait makes for a safer long-term prospect. It has to be said though, that not many Koi have this subtle blend of head/back line.



BODY D.



BODY E.

BODY E. This Koi has a good body, but has the ridge or hump behind the head that I personally don't like. Some people say that Koi with the hump get big, but as you can clearly see from the photo, this 'hump' is caused by the rear of the head profile being a little shallow, causing a sudden step where the body starts. The body type of this Koi is still good though, and she maintains good height through to the rear of the dorsal.

S616 This Koi has a nice body, but in addition to this, she has a very prominent backbone, as can be seen by the shadow created either side of it. This is a trait that is more typical of Sensuke lineage, and also serves as an indication that such a Koi can be made to carry more weight very easily when Jumbo.



BODY D.

BODY D. This Koi is somewhat inferior to the others. She has a steep head line, which in turn joins the body in such a way that the shoulder is too steep too early and hence, falls away early. When this Koi grows, her weight distribution will be a little further forward around the chest area. You can see that her back line is already falling away around the front of the dorsal area, and as such, she will lack strength at the back end when she grows bigger.



S616


spine of the Koi, making it too deep in the body, and too flat down its backline. Your only hope to stop such Koi becoming permanently misshapen is to breed to rid the Koi of eggs, but sadly, it often doesn't solve the issue. It is also desirable to buy a Koi with a nice smooth curve to the belly line, which blends very subtly into a deep tail tube that is both long, and strong. Beware the Koi whose tail tube looks thick because of being short. The telltale sign of this is the rearward tip of the dorsal fin being too close to the base of the tail.

AND THE HEAD...

As for the head of the Koi, it should be long and broad, with the eyes well set apart, and plenty of length in front of the eyes. I have often heard people in the UK express desire for the Koi that quite literally has a ridge behind the head, where the first few scales start, saying that such Koi get big. This really has no relevance to Jumbo size potential at all, and in many cases is indicative that the profile of the head itself is shallow, causing the "step" behind the head. I personally much prefer a head that has more height to it, so that it subtly carries its profile through onto the scaled area, and up onto the shoulder.

So, assuming that you understand all of the technicalities explained above, how do these factors affect the price of the Koi? In the cases of a breeder's absolute best Koi (assuming it's a good one), each of the Koi's qualities can be almost multiplied against each other in the way it can affect the price. Confused? Let's take a basic simple "base level" two-year-old Kohaku as an example here. Assuming it has some kind of pattern, it may be worth perhaps 10,000 yen/\$140/£63. If the Koi has a good body, capable of getting big, the breeder may ask for 50,000 yen/\$522/£318. Give the Koi good skin and colour quality that is good for the future rather than short-term, and perhaps the price is doubled to 100,000 yen/\$1,044/£637, and if it also has good Sashi and Kiwa then the price is perhaps tripled to 300,000/\$3,135/£1,911 yen. However, if it has all of these factors, and also a fantastic pattern, he may well command 5 to 10 times the "base" price, so it's now 1.5 million yen/\$15,680/£9,557 ~ 3 million yen/\$31,336/£19,124. As you can see, a Koi doesn't have attributes added together to come to a price, they are literally multiplied together if it ticks all the 'right boxes', ie; 1 x 5 x 2 x 3 x 5 or 10 = 150 or 300 times more expensive than his general grade Koi.

Be warned, if you looked for Koi using the above criteria, including most importantly the bloodline characteristics, then you could well be narrowing your search down to the one Koi that you simply can never afford. Happy Koi hunting! 🍀

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SASHI TOSAI 32CM

SASHI TOSAI 32CM As Tosai, this Koi had Sashi that was a safe bet, as it was about one scale deep, and faded away to nothing at its front edge.



SASHI

SASHI This colour and skin is of very high quality, but the Sashi is a little too prominent, and as such, it is a gamble as to whether or not it will tighten in the future.

SASHI SANSAI 66CM The same Koi as Sansai at 66cm, and you can see very little change in Kiwa and Sashi aside from the fact that the white scales at the front of the pattern have thickened, and hence tightening the Sashi nicely. This Koi is very refined in this department.



SASHI SANSAI 66CM



YOUNGER SASHI

YOUNGER SASHI As a young Koi, this Sanke had Sashi that was both too deep and too uneven. Such Sashi can never become good in the future.



OLDER SASHI

OLDER SASHI As an older Koi, you can see that this Sanke still has too much Sashi, which is also too uneven and unrefined.



JUMBO

JUMBO So, you want a Koi like this one do you? This Koi is already big, and stands to get bigger, and better in the next two or three years. She has quality, refinement, structure, and pattern. If you want for a Koi that can be as good one, you have to be extremely careful if buying them young. You must pay extreme attention to detail. But, be warned, such detail will cost you a lot of money, often as much as a good Jumbo Koi! But bear in mind, any compromise you make with young Koi, will become 10-fold more obvious when the Koi grows.