

bargain hunt

Mike Snaden visited Japan this year in order to purchase some high-class Momotaro koi. Agreeing a price with the breeder and handing over the money is the way you normally purchase koi, but when it's an auction the koi buying gets hot and is a whole new experience



Mr Nakagawa making final preparations prior to the auction

All photos supplied by author



The auction is well under way. Bidding is over within about a minute for each koi. The speed of it all is breathtaking.

April the 22nd was time for me, and customer Stuart Toms, to leave Bristol, bound for Osaka in Japan, via Amsterdam. This trip was arranged at somewhat short notice, and was for the sole purpose of obtaining jumbo tosai from Momotaro's final and best auction prior to the mud pond season.

'the lot'

These were no ordinary tosai, but the absolute best 32 offspring from a spawning of an eight-year-old, 88cm parent Sanke. Unfortunately, after spawning last year this Sanke died, and was one of three female parents that were lost last spring after breeding. Breeding is risky at the



best of times, but when using such big and valuable parent koi such as these, the risks become several times higher, as the koi will carry much more weight. The theory is that the extra fat build up of such large koi will often put pressure on the heart which can cause blood vessel/heart damage to occur during breeding.

Although losing koi in this manner causes a huge financial loss, it is essential in an endless quest to produce the future's biggest and best koi. Little did we know that on this trip we were to witness an 87cm Kohaku die, just hours after breeding – a sad and sobering experience indeed. Of

course, under such circumstances as these, the koi will always be replaced with one at least as good as the one lost.

back to the storyline...

We arrived at Osaka at 8.40am on the 23rd April and then got onto a JR line to Shin-Osaka, and then the Shinkansen train to Okayama. My Japanese language skills took the acid test at Shin-Osaka, when I had to ask a teacher which train we had to take to Okayama. The school children looked on amused and intrigued at what I had to ask, and reply. Needless to say, Stuart was impressed, and passed comment that he thought that the children

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Mr Maeda bagging up koi after the auction... even the boss does the boring jobs!

The main attraction, 32 Jumbo female tosaï Sanke of the highest class.



An odd way to buy koi! Many of these koi have demerits, but if you are extremely careful, bargains can be had for just 5000 yen. Here, myself, and Mr Takabana (a dealer from Nagoya prefecture) are studying the koi to make a decision on whether to take, or pass.

looked ready to make jokes about my possible lack of lingo! Phew, I didn't give them the chance!

We arrived at Okayama, and met Daisuke Maeda at about 11.30am, and went onwards to the Koi Farm. It was a good feeling to be back again, as any excuse for me to visit Japan will do – I love it there!

Stuart was quickly astounded. He expected to be impressed but he had no idea of the sheer scale of Momotaro Koi Farm, or the size and quality of the koi that resided there. He also had no idea that the 1,500 ton indoor pond would be as immense as it was. Stuart was pretty much stuck for words!

reporting back

The rest of Wednesday was spent touring the farm, and admiring the many thousands of beautiful koi. On Thursday we went up to look at one of Momotaro's mountain mud ponds. This pond contains koi that are being grown on to be sold in the autumn, as sold koi will always have the priority of the safety of the man made lined mud ponds down on the farm.

Thursday surprised me. I showed Mr Maeda some video footage of customer's Momotaro koi that I had sold last year as tosaï. This included film of two Momotaro ►



I took this picture last year just days prior to breeding from this koi. This beautiful Sanke died hours after breeding, and is not an uncommon occurrence



A feast fit for anyone! Wonderful food!

Japan's most noted dealer, Mr Nagashima, patted me on the back and said in Japanese, "Congratulations, you just bought the number one tategoi"

Kohaku that were offspring from a famous Kohaku called 'Sakurahime'. In the prevailing discussion with Daisuke and his Father, I explained that I had purchased these koi as tosai from him in November 2001 to which he replied with a grin, "I'm not sure I remember, perhaps you stole them from me?"

I continued adding that I had sold them in March and May 2002, and that they now measured some 52

and 54cm. I further explained that the owner of these koi was intending to grow a koi from tosai to over 80cm, with a view to attempting to win the BKKS National Koi Show within the next four or five years, and that I believed that this feat was possible.

an offer I couldn't refuse

Daisuke had seen these koi in March of this year when he came to stay with me in England, at which

time he said that he felt that two of them would grow beyond 85cm even in this country. Mr Maeda was so impressed by this that he said that he would sell me some high class female tosai Kohaku that were about to be put out into the mud pond. To say I was taken aback by such an offer, was an understatement! These koi were from a new parent that is a sister to the 92cm Kohaku which nearly won the All Japan Show this year. Mr Maeda said that this parent produced the best quality koi from any of their Kohaku breedings of last year and further told us that he had refused to sell any of them to Japanese and other dealers that had tried to buy them. Exciting stuff!

auction day

Friday, the day of the auction. It was to be a long day ahead. Many Japanese dealers were attending the auction, but unfortunately, because of the SARS virus, the only two other non-Japanese dealers were from Hong Kong. There were about 25 dealers and breeders present in total, most of which were there to bid for koi on behalf of customers.

The auction commenced at about 10am, with small koi being auctioned in lots of two or three koi. The koi were generally of about 20cm, and were selling for anything from 20,000 yen to 90,000 yen per lot. The majority of these koi were from late spawning of last year, having been produced as late as August.

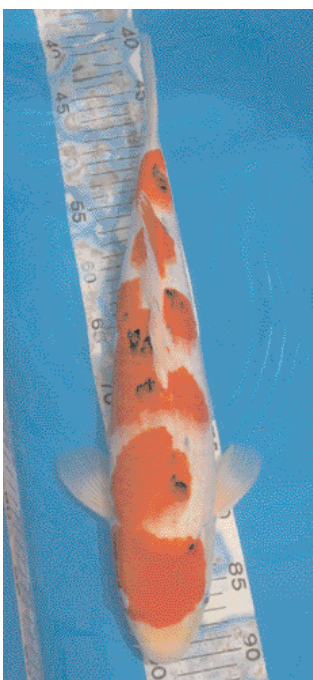
At about 11.00am, the main event started – the sale of the jumbo tosai Sanke. I already had a shortlist of koi that I was intending to buy, having seen the koi both on the internet and in 'Rinko' magazine. All of the 32 koi were caught and placed into a two-metre show vat. Strangely, one Sanke that I had no previous interest in caught my eye! I was instantly in awe of it, she had all of the credentials I wished for, and I couldn't take my eye off her! I told Stuart that I just had to buy this koi, I had an overwhelming feeling of excitement and determination.



Another Sanke bought for a UK customer, 46cm



A Sanke bought from the auction for a UK customer, 47cm



Stuart bought this tosai female Sanke of 44cm... his fear of going home empty handed was washed away



The Sanke I bought to grow on, 53cm, and less than a year old. This was the very best of all of the koi

my dream koi

The auction started and the koi of my dreams was the third to go through. Although I had set a limit in my mind for this koi, when the bidding exceeded this, I kept my hand thrust high in the air. Adrenalin was pumping, and I felt like I was going to pass out, as I held my hand high and turned away with my eyes tight shut! I won the koi within seconds of this, and was in disbelief. Japan's most noted dealer, Mr Nagashima, patted me on the back and said in Japanese, "Congratulations, you just bought the number one tategoi!" A feeling that echoed in my mind.

The rest of the auction progressed swiftly, with the average price of the koi being about 500,000 yen (£2700). I succeeded in buying two koi for a customer in England, koi's number 13 and 24. Unfortunately, Stuart's desired koi exceeded his limit, and the others either didn't appeal to him, or were just out of reach. As it turned out, my koi was the second most expensive, with the most expensive one selling for 1,300,000 yen. The main part of the auction, the 32 jumbo tosai, raised an estimated 15,000,000 yen in total.

the lucky dip

Once the main event was over, a barbeque was held outside the auction house, and the food was wonderful. Then the final event took place. This was a form of lucky dip. Five bowls were placed on the floor, and teams of five people were gathered around each bowl. Each of the five people in each team was to choose a chopstick, which had a number on the bottom end that determined a 'picking order'. This was a strange event, and the koi were all small, and a very mixed bunch indeed.

Into each bowl, about 15 koi were randomly placed. Next, the price was set for the koi in the bowl, of just 5,000 yen each. Each of the five people then took their turn in choosing koi. When everyone 'passed', they could then venture to any of the other bowls to choose any koi they liked. When nobody wanted any more koi, everyone returned to their respective bowls, and the whole procedure was repeated at 2500 yen. Any unwanted koi were thrown away. I saw this event as a 'thank you' to all that attended the auction. The quality of the koi was good, but patterns were very much

a mixed bunch! I bought a total of five koi at 5,000 yen each. They were all of about 18cm. Four were Sanke, and one was a Kohaku. This concluded the day's events, and was a somewhat unusual experience.

the big feast

On Friday evening, we went back to Mr Maeda's house for the usual feast, and copious quantities of alcoholic beverages. Great fun was had by all, and as is usually the case after alcohol... my Japanese improved immensely! As sometimes happens, Mr Hoshino (Momotaro employee) over indulged on the beer and became overwhelmed with joy at being lucky enough to work for Momotaro Koi Farm!

Saturday was our final day in Japan, as we were to return to England the following morning. Luckily, Stuart found a female Sanke to be left to grow for the year. This was from the same parent as the auction jumbo tosai, but was one that could not be accurately sexed at the time that the koi were chosen for the auction... so he was happy! 鯉