ISML 2026: Couples Tournament Guide

Exhibition Tournament Introduction

What is this tournament?
The 8th exhibition tournament hosted by ISML for pairs formed by two characters.

What format is used?
Nomination Phase
A total of 32 pairs will participate. The participating pairs are determined through a nomination phase. The rules for the nomination phase are explained below.

Group Stage – Split 1
Participating pairs are divided into 4 groups, with 8 pairs in each group. A round-robin format is played within each group.
The top 2 pairs from each group advance to Division A of the Split 2.
The 3rd–4th placed pairs from each group enter the Division A wild card matches; the winner of each wild card match advances to Division A of the Split 2, while the loser advances to Division B of the Split 2.
The 5th placed pair from each group advances to Division B of the Split 2.
The 6th–7th placed pairs from each group enter the Division B wild card matches; the winner of each wild card match advances to Division B of the Split 2.
The remaining pairs are eliminated.

Group Stage – Split 2
Participating pairs in each division are divided into 2 groups, with 6 pairs in each group. A round-robin format is played within each group.
The top 2 pairs from each Division A group advance to the Quarterfinals of the Elimination Stage.
The 3rd–4th placed pairs from each Division A group advance to Round 2 of the Elimination Stage.
The 5th–6th placed pairs from each Division A group and the top 2 pairs from each Division B group advance to Round 1 of the Elimination Stage.
The remaining pairs are eliminated.

Elimination Stage
Before the Quarterfinals, the Stepladder format is used. The lower-ranked pair from the Group Stage Split 2 competes first, with the winner advancing to challenge the next higher-ranked pair, and so on.
A single-elimination format is then used until the winner of Couples Tournament is determined.

Who are the past winners?
2019: Shinomiya Kaguya & Shirogane Miyuki @ Kaguya-sama wa Kokurasetai
2020: Yuzaki Nasa & Yuzaki Tsukasa @ Tonikaku Kawaii
2021: Chitanda Eru & Oreki Hōtarō @ Hyōka
2022: Takanashi Rikka & Togashi Yūta @ Chūnibyō demo Koi ga Shitai!
2023: Frieren & Himmel @ Sōsō no Frieren
2024: Hirasawa Yui & Nakano Azusa @ K-ON!
2025: Atri & Ikaruga Natsuki @ ATRI -My Dear Moments-
2025: Kasaki Nozomi & Yoroizuka Mizore @ Hibike! Euphonium

Schedule

Nomination Phase
November 28 – December 5

Group Stage – Split 1
Rounds 1–5: January 4, 2027 – January 18 / Emerald Stage Rounds 1–5
Round 6: February 1 – February 5 / Ruby Stage Rounds 1–2
Round 7: February 8 – February 12 / Ruby Stage Rounds 3–4
Wildcard Matches: February 15 / Ruby Stage Round 5

Group Stage – Split 2
March 1 – March 15 / Diamond Stage Rounds 1–5

Elimination Stage
Round 1: April 1 / Elimination Stage Round 1
Round 2: April 9 / Elimination Stage Round 3
Quarterfinals: April 21 / Elimination Stage Round 6
Semifinals: April 29 / Elimination Stage Round 8
Final & Third-Place Match: May 7 / Elimination Stage Round 10

Work Eligibility
For any work to be eligible for this tournament, it must satisfy all of the following requirements:
1. It must be an anime, manga, game, or novel published and distributed in Japanese media, and is neither rated 18+ nor classified as pornographic;
2. A Japanese version must be released in Japan and in at least one region outside Japan.

Character Eligibility
For any character from an eligible work to be eligible for this tournament, they must satisfy all of the following requirements:
1. The character must be human or anthropomorphic;
2. The character must have appeared on or before September 30, 2026;
3. The character must not have previously won the Couples Tournament.

Exhibition Nomination Phase – Couples Tournament
2026-11-28 12:00:00 – 2026-12-05 11:59:59 (UTC)

Nomination Address
https://internationalsaimoe.moe/vote/nomination

Nomination Rules
1. All contestants in this exhibition are pairs formed by two characters. Therefore, each of your nominations must contain two characters. When nominating, please enter Character A and Character B in two adjacent name fields on the ballot.
2. The order of the two characters within a pair does not matter; you may order them as you prefer.
3. You may nominate up to 12 pairs.

4. You must nominate at least 3 eligible pairs.
5. Your ballot must contain at least 2 eligible series.
6. You may not nominate more than 3 pairs from the same series
7. A single character may be used in up to 3 nominated pairs. However, you may not nominate the same pair more than once.
8. You may only submit 1 nomination. Partial submissions cannot be saved to be filled out later.
9. Ballots that do not comply with the above rules may be deemed invalid and entirely discarded.
10. All nominations have equal weight. Please do not rank the characters within your ballot.
11. The Staff reserves the right to deem any character ineligible.
12. To maintain contestant diversity, a maximum of 4 pairs with the highest nomination votes from any single series will be allowed to advance.

For more rules, please refer to the ISML 2026 Charter.