

Forty years of innovation

The first TaiSPO 40 years ago was so small it took place in a hotel, with exhibitor stands lining the lobby and corridors. Four decades later, TaiSPO has transformed itself into an important gathering for the international sporting goods industry — supported by the drive and innovation of Taiwanese manufacturers.



In many ways, the evolution of TaiSPO mirrors the evolution of the international sporting goods industry over the last four decades. Taiwanese manufacturers led many of the changes that have reshaped and energized the industry, from lighter tennis racquets to snowboards and high-tech fitness equipment, among others.

"TaiSPO accompanied the rise of the Taiwanese sports industry, which played a key role in driving innovation in the market," said Tom Cove, president and chief executive of the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), the trade organization for the U.S. sporting goods industry formerly known as the SGMA. "It could even be said that the Taiwanese drove the changes that turned the sporting goods business into a global

industry."

When Taiwan's prime minister opened TaiSPO at Taipei's Grand Hotel on May 12, 1974, the international sporting goods industry operated on a small scale, with factories dotted around Europe, the United States and elsewhere.

However, the leading international brands at the time started diversifying production and entering partnerships with Taiwanese manufacturers. While retaining their own factories, they moved some production to Taiwan to cut costs and take advantage of technology developed in Taiwan.

Armin Dassler, the chief executive of Puma, was among the most diligent visitors to Taiwanese footwear companies.

"Armin was ahead of his times in

many ways. Among the big international companies, Puma was one of the first to work together with Taiwanese partners. In a way, he helped Taiwan take the lead in the globalization of the sports industry," said Peter Thürl, a former editor from Germany who began travelling to TaiSPO in 1977. The Puma chief was later honored for his contributions to the Taiwanese sports industry.

Through TAITRA, Taiwan's government invested in TaiSPO, giving manufacturers the financial backing to organize the fair and draw international buyers.

The move was well-timed. Taiwanese producers were eager to attract foreign customers, and their innovations quickly drew interest from afar. TaiSPO boasted 117 exhibitors for its second year.

From racquets to snowboards

In TaiSPO's early years, Benjamin Liu was a dashing young man who had just become sales and marketing manager for Kunnan Enterprise, the company behind Pro Kennex tennis racquets.

"The Taiwanese sporting goods industry started with the production of badminton and tennis racquets, and Taiwan quickly became the global leader for these products. After the tennis boom we got very busy, with more and more international visitors

coming to Taiwan and to TaiSPO," Liu recalled.

He went on to own Poyang International, a sourcing and buying group, and became one of Taiwan's most prominent members of the international sporting goods community.

Buyers for companies like Wilson, Prince, Dunlop Slazenger and Donnay became regular visitors, and the entire Taiwanese sporting goods business started to boom. Sporting goods exports were about \$90 million in 1975, according to the China News, but they grew rapidly in the next two decades.

A major change occurred in 1988 when TaiSPO spun off cycling into a separate fair, the Taipei International Cycle Show. Taiwan's bicycle industry had become such a force internationally that it alone accounted for thousands of TaiSPO visitors.

Meanwhile, the Taiwanese sporting



High-level visitors visit the first TaiSPO at the Grand Hotel.



Benjamin Liu shows tennis racquets to a foreign buyer at the third edition of TaiSPO. Liu has changed less than the racquets...

goods industry continued to diversify, driving huge technological changes in categories such as golf equipment, skis and snowboards.

Rise of fitness industry

And then came the rise of the fitness equipment industry, which allowed Taiwan to benefit from its technological advances.

Fitness equipment now accounts for nearly 40 percent of Taiwan's sporting goods exports, but the country's influence on the global business goes beyond sales to the important realm of research and development.

Jason Lo, chief executive of Johnson Health Tech, vividly recalls preparing for the fair in 1998, when the company was developing its own brand. He walked around the fair, observing the layout and taking pictures from different angles to determine which location would give Johnson the best exposure.

"It was all very exciting to attend the fair for the first time, and our chosen location became the most popular at the show," Lo recalled.

Johnson's turnover was just \$35 million at the time, but its appearance

at TaiSPO touched off a large-scale international expansion.

"We and other fitness equipment companies in Taiwan displayed the most outstanding products on the same platform," Lo said.

"Visitors from around the world came in and exchanged market information, and we found our best partners among them," he added. "Now, Johnson has grown into a company with sales of about \$500 million, and since that first time in 1998, TaiSPO has strongly contributed to this expansion."

TaiSPO has shown another dimension recently as host of the manufacturers' forum of the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry (WFSGI).

The annual get-together underlines Taiwan's commitment to a productive relationship between sporting goods brands and their suppliers. The forum has made TaiSPO even more indispensable to the industry.

Organizers made another significant change last year when they scheduled TaiSPO to partly overlap with Taipei Cycle.

So for a week in March, Taiwan's capital draws even more visitors from



Metal frames were just beginning to hit the market for tennis racquets, a major early focus for innovation at TaiSPO.

the sporting goods and cycling industry.

And with TaiSPO becoming a "four-in-one" show with SPOMODE, DiWaS and Taipei Cycle, it has become one of

Asia's leading multi-category trade fairs.

It bodes well for TaiSPO as it moves into its fifth decade and beyond. ■ BS