

Musical Soccer Balls Top The Molten Corp. League

By Nobuo Sugino

Despite the boycott by the Soviet Union, East Germany and other East European sports giants, the Los Angeles Olympic Games were a great success in which athletes from a record 140 countries and regions competed. Outstanding performances by athletes from Romania, the only East European participant in the Games, and China, making its first Olympic appearance, helped disperse the impression that the games were like an aircraft flying on only one engine. The sports festival, held once every four years, was telecast all over the world via satellite.

Prior to its opening, the Los Angeles Olympic Games were strongly criticized for their "commercialism." The Games were financed by allowing business corporations to publicize their products in exchange for contributions of money and merchandise. However, the criticism within the United States subsided as the American medal count rose, led by the four golds in track and field won by Carl Lewis.

Fifty-four Japanese companies cashed in on Eagle Sam's popularity as official Olympic sponsors and equipment suppliers. Most supplied cameras, film, sports shoes, and other equipment. Only three supplied items actually used in competition. One of these was Molten Corp., headquartered in Hiroshima City, the official supplier of balls for Olympic soccer and basketball events.

A head start

Molten's president Fumiya Tamiaki explains why his company won this coveted honor: "In the first place, our balls enjoy a reputation for outstanding quality, and in the second, we have a good track record of supplying balls for other international sports events. Also, we learned early on that Dentsu, an advertising agency, would get exclusive



Molten Corp. president Fumiya Tamiaki

rights to designate Japanese sponsors, and thus got a head start on selling ourselves to Dentsu."

It was at 7:30 a.m. one day in January that Tamiaki was informed that the Los Angeles Olympic Games Organizing Committee had decided on Molten balls. As soon as he received the news, Tamiaki made the 15-hour flight to Los Angeles. Three days later he was back in Hiroshima, showing no signs of the exhausting trip and 17-hour time lag. Clearly, the 46-year old president of Molten is a man of energy and action. This and his ability to anticipate business opportunities have been the motive power behind Molten's growth.

"Molten" signifies that the company melts rubber to form the products it ships to the market. But it also has the more

aggressive meaning of breaking away from the old and evolving into something new. This aptly describes Tamiaki's management posture.

Molten was established in 1958 by the late Kiyoshi Nobori, its first president, and his younger brother Hideo Masuda, second president and now chairman of the board. Previously Nobori worked for Myojo Rubber Industry Co., also located in Hiroshima and, under the Mikasa brand name, the official supplier of volleyballs for the Los Angeles Games. Since its founding, Molten has steadily built up its capabilities through its ingenuity in improving ball materials and manufacturing processes.

The company's sales in the fiscal year October 1982–September 1983 amounted to ¥11,017 million (\$46 million) and pre-tax profits ¥424 million (\$1.7 million). Molten overtook Myojo in sales several years ago and is now number one earner in the Japanese game ball industry.

The biggest factors sustaining the company's growth are reliability and quality. Molten was the first Japanese ball maker to win official regulation designation from the international federations for soccer, volleyball, basketball, and handball. On the strength of this recognition, the company has dedicated itself to manufacturing what it maintains are balls "for enjoying games."

One much talked about product of this highly successful formula is a musical soccer ball. When kicked, the ball plays "Lorelei," "Camptown Races" and other songs. Fitted inside the ball is a compact cylinder incorporating a sensor for detecting the impact, integrated circuits for memorizing the melodies of eight songs, and a miniature speaker. Each melody lasts for 20 to 30 seconds and changes with each kick. This enables even blind players to follow the ball. No other maker would think of such an idea.



Molten balls were used for Olympic soccer and basketball events.

The music-playing ball, however, was not developed exclusively for the handicapped. The true aim was to get more people to enjoy playing soccer.

Lifting is fun

Soccer is played by an 11-member team, but one can still practise on one's own. One of the basic techniques of soccer is "lifting," that is, keeping the ball continually in the air by bouncing it on the toe, instep or knee. In Brazil where soccer is a national game, it is a common sight to see a small boy "lifting" by himself. It is because Brazilians become thoroughly familiar with the soccer ball in their youth that the country has a big soccer-playing population.

"If you were lifting by yourself, it would be much more fun if music came each time you bounced the ball, wouldn't it?" says Tamiaki with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. The gay colors the music-playing soccer ball comes in show it was not designed exclusively for the blind. The pentagonal patches are in bright vermilion against a yellow background. Molten was the first to develop balls with visual appeal.

A soccer ball is made of an inner rubber tube covered with natural or synthetic leather. The outer covering is made of 12 pentagonal and 20 hexagonal pieces. Molten's hexagonal pieces are either white or yellow, but the pentagonal ones are painted in a variety of hues. Some are even fluorescent so the ball can be seen easily during night games on illuminated grounds.

In Los Angeles, the French won the

soccer gold medal, the Brazilians the silver, and the Yugoslavs the bronze. The balls used in the competition were all Molten's Tango balls, which it manufactures in a tie-up with Adidas of West Germany. They had a unique pattern of modified triangles complemented by the remaining space forming a circle.

Soccer balls are not the only colorful ones produced by Molten. For basketball, they are tricolor in blue, white and red, while for volleyball they are pink or cream yellow. Several have popular cartoon characters printed on them, such as Snoopy.

The colored balls are not simply for children. Colored soccer and basketball balls have already been authorized for use in international games and competitions. Molten's balls are exported to 80 countries. In fact, exports account for 25% of its ball sales. Molten has licensed production to companies in Republic of Korea, China and Pakistan and has representative offices in West Germany and the United States.

In addition to balls, Molten manufactures industrial supplies and automobile parts. Before World War II, Hiroshima was a prosperous naval base city with a flourishing armaments industry. Wartime technology was the base on which Mazda Motor Corp., Japan's automobile manufacturer, built its business. Mazda has earned a reputation as the world's only maker to commercialize the rotary engine for automobiles. It has a capital tie-up with Ford Motor Co. of America, and supplies Ford compact cars to the Asia-Pacific region. In order to improve fuel efficiency, the automobile industry is now

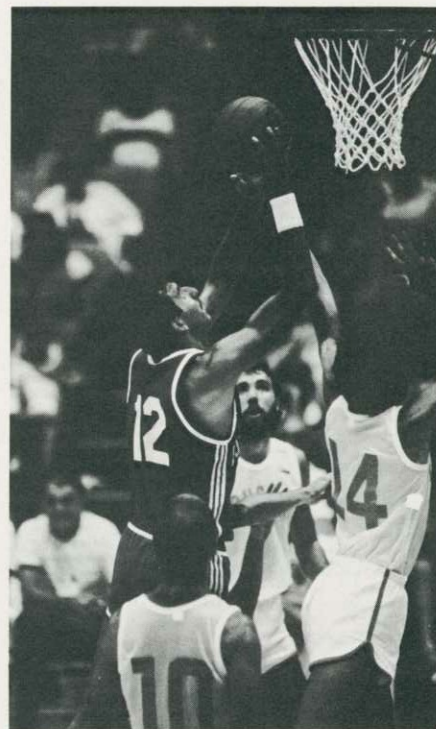
replacing metal parts with plastic ones. In line with this move, Molten has begun manufacturing various plastic and synthetic rubber parts.

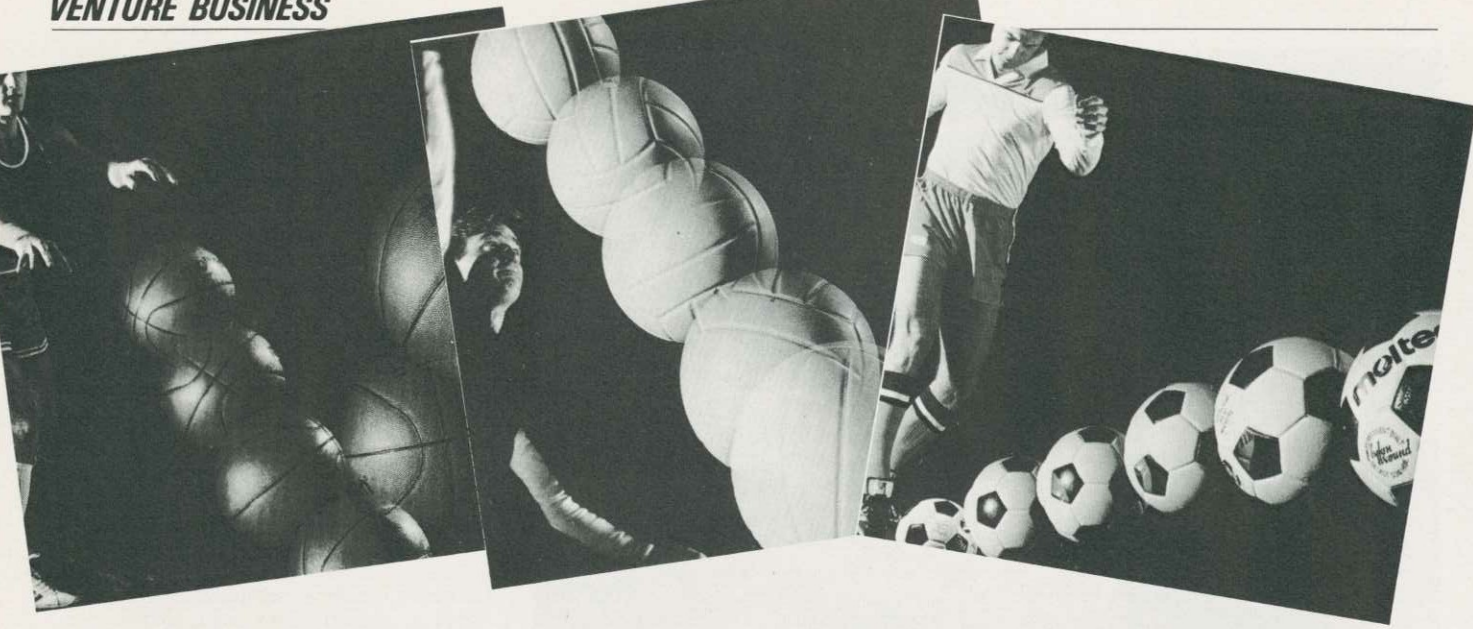
Molten has also widened the range of its products to include such industrial supplies as packing for nuclear power plants and pads for railway tracks. Balls, automobile parts, and industrial supplies constitute the three major pillars of Molten's business. It is only three years since the company started full-scale manufacture of industrial supplies, and the division is still operating in the red. "It is necessary for the development of our company to branch out into new fields and give our employees something to dream about for the future," says Tamiaki, "Though it is in the red now, our industrial supply division is a sound investment venture which gives our employees an opportunity to challenge the unknown."

The raw materials needed for automobile parts and industrial supplies are, of course, extremely diverse. Reflecting this fact, the company changed its name, "Molten Rubber Industry Co.," to Molten Corp. in October 1983. It was felt that "Rubber Industry" gave the company an old-fashioned image.

Tamiaki was born in 1938. On graduating from university, he joined Mazda (then called Toyo Kogyo Co.). After receiving training in sales techniques, the freshman employee went out to sell Mazda cars. He would select a prospective purchaser and visit his home time and again to explain the good points of Mazda cars and persuade him to buy.

Mazda engineers had a reputation for having a big say in the company's work,





and it was often said that Mazda emphasized quality to the detriment of profitability. Buyers of Mazda cars hardly ever had any complaints regarding quality, and a salesman could, with utmost confidence, extol the vehicles' virtues and advantages. What a salesman needed most was staying power—going back again and again to the same house, no matter how often he was turned down. Newcomer to the game though he was, young Tamiaki racked up an excellent sales record, placing him 73rd among the top among 4,000 Mazda salesmen, including hundreds of veterans.

From 1970 to 1975, he was stationed in Los Angeles as a staff member of Mazda Motor Corp. (U.S.A.), an American sales subsidiary. He tried to integrate into the

local American community. And he chose to live in a middle-class residential district where there were only American families.

Mutsuko, his wife, was the only daughter of Molten's founder Kiyoshi Nobori, a fact that transformed Tamiaki's life. When Molten's second president Masuda, now board chairman, fell ill, Tamiaki's reputation as a go-getter won him the post of third president.

Unlike in American corporations, where the chairman has absolute control and delegates power to manage the company to the president, in Japanese companies the president runs the corporation and has full power over management. Nobody has the authority to check upon a Japanese corporate president. If the president makes a mistake the company could go bankrupt. In family companies where presidents are appointed from among family members, it is customary to have the heir-apparent engage in routine company work while giving him special training in how to run the firm. Tamiaki's case, however, was different. He was appointed president as soon as he joined Molten. He was deeply moved by the great confidence and trust placed in him despite his youth.

Free hand

Tamiaki has never forgotten the gratitude he felt at that time. He gives his managers in engineering, accounting, sales and other divisions a free hand to display their ability and talents. He does not scold them for small mistakes and allows them to try out what they think is best. At meetings with labor union representatives, he frankly tells them about his own mistakes. In this way, he has been able to imbue all his employees with a willingness to take up new challenges boldly.

Mon-soku-shin is a teaching of Shinran, the founder of Jodo Shinshu,

one of the largest Buddhist sects in Japan. It means that one who believes the teachings of Buddha without question will be able to live the way of Buddha. Tamiaki has made this his motto, translating it into the management policy of "Give what the specialists say a try." Another of his managerial maxims is "Do right, do best, break through." This means, adhere to the basic principles of management, give of one's best, and change one's thinking.

For instance, some employees began to observe that children in an audio-visual age will not accept things unless they are colorful or produce sound. Noting that of all the teaching aids used in schools, physical training equipment alone was still monochrome, they suggested making them colorful. Tamiaki listened to these recommendations with an open mind. The upshot was the colorful balls which led to the company's current growth and prosperity.

In order to motivate employees, Tamiaki pays close attention to working conditions. Although Molten is a small enterprise in a regional city with an annual turnover of only slightly more than ¥10 billion (\$42 million), it was far ahead of other small companies in adopting the five-day work week. Moreover, it maintains a wage level equal to that of Mazda, a giant enterprise with an annual turnover of ¥1,400 billion (\$5.8 billion).

Molten is a group of challengers led by an energetic, globe-trotting president. As its name indicates, the company has evolved from the old into the new and boasts high technology in raw materials and manufacturing processes, as well as a vast capability to develop excellent new products. Molten's turnover has almost trebled in the eight years since Tamiaki took over as president, and continuing high growth seems the watchword for its future.



Molten Corp. headquarters in Hiroshima