

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS OSAKA

Sawano's advice key to dry landing

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OSAKA—The man who ensures a safe and dry landing for pole vaulters and high jumpers at this week's world championships says input from a professional athlete was key to making a better landing mat.

Futoshi Oasa said Japan pole vaulter Daichi Sawano made all the difference when Nishi Athletic Goods Co. was designing the landing mats to be used at Nagai Stadium in Osaka.

"Because Sawano was with us, the team maintained its enthusiasm for developing the product, [despite] a major change that might have seemed prohibitive," Oasa said.

Sawano, a gold medalist in the 2006 Asian Games in Doha, worked at the firm until the end of March and is now a professional athlete contracted with the firm.

Conventional landing mats were designed to allow rainwater to run off so their cushioning effect was not diminished. But Sawano had long complained of getting splashed when landing, as the rain created puddles on the surface of the mat.

"So we reversed our way of thinking," Oasa said. "We decided to let the mat absorb water first, and then drain it."

Although the team held only dim hopes the new mat would be used for the championships when the project began in spring last year, the mat is being used at high jump and pole vault competitions.

In addition to Oasa, who was product de-



Futoshi Oasa stands in front of a new pole vault landing mat, developed by Nishi Athletic Goods Co., at Nagai Stadium in Osaka.

velopment manager, and his two subordinates, the team included Sawano and his coach Teruyasu Yonekura, who pole vaulted at the Atlanta Olympics and joined the

company after retiring from athletics.

The team asked Bridgestone Kaseihin Tokyo Co. to find a material that would drain effectively, while team members fo-

cused on the structure of the mat.

Whenever a prototype was made, it was crucial that Sawano or Yonekura tested it for shortcomings, Oasa said.

"During the first very primitive trials, [my subordinates and I] tested the mat [ourselves]," Oasa said. "But it was kind of meaningless, because a normal person may jump from two meters, but that has a totally different impact than the six-meter jump [of a pole vaulter]."

Sawano's recommendations regarding safety and comfort during the testing period were reflected in various features of the new mats.

"Sawano was very cooperative with the project, although he was busy training and competing," Oasa said. "I guess he had a lot of frustration with the old mats."

According to Oasa, sporting goods developers should listen carefully to the people who use their products.

"Even when athletes seem to be having a casual conversation, they may give hints on how to improve a product," he said. "Also, at competitions, you often see athletes making irregular movements, and by watching them, you might see how small changes could make things more convenient."

Oasa adds that those who work behind the scenes in sports are just as enthusiastic as the athletes.

"Our job is to make sure athletes have the best possible conditions, so that they can concentrate on their performance," he said.