

The Spanish government is backing an ambitious plan to promote innovation in the sports industry, hoping above all to encourage small- and medium-sized manufacturers to enter or stay in the market.

Spain puts sports industry on a new platform

Spain is looking for a fresh start for its sports industry. Not on the football field, basketball court, Formula One circuit or tennis court—where it's one of the strongest competitor countries in the world—but in the factory, laboratory and design studio where ideas can turn into new clothing and shoes for athletes at every level to wear, and new equipment for them to use.

Inesport is a recently launched project that will aim to bring together groups with an interest in the sports sector, including companies that make sports apparel and equipment, to encourage them to work "with a common vision and focus" and develop the industry nationally. It will look to set a "strategic research agenda" and encourage knowledge-transfer among different companies to boost Spain's position as a source of innovation in materials, clothing, footwear and in equipment for sports enthusiasts.

There are serious backers for this bid: the European Union fund for regional development, Spain's ministry of science and innovation, the Superior Sports Council (the highest sports authority in the land), and the Valencia Biomechanics Institute to name only four. Inesport also has its own management team headed up by president, Daniel Martínez, who is also the chief executive of a Basque cycle manufacturing firm called Orbea. He and his

Inesport aims to help companies and academic institutions bring new sports ideas to life and to make the sector in Spain an industry leader.

Valencia Biomechanics Institute



Project leaders. Representatives of the Spanish government and sports industry at the inaugural Inesport project meeting in Valencia earlier this year.

Valencia Biomechanics Institute

team have already started work, holding workshops throughout the last week in May and the first week in June in Valencia to explain the project to companies who think they may gain from taking part.

Mr Martínez's position is that, with the right level of encouragement and correct knowledge management, companies across Spain will pool their knowledge and their technology to help increase enormously the level of expertise that exists in the country's "industrial fabric". In other words, brands and consumers looking for new ideas and expert execution in sports clothing will be able to have added confidence in the products Spanish firms bring to the market.

Economic concerns

The delicate state of the economy in Spain has made headlines all around the world, contributing to sharp drops in stock-prices on Wall Street and on markets in every continent this spring. Towards the end of May, the International Monetary Fund said Spain was by far the largest of a number of European economies to have embroiled itself in the 2010 sovereign debt crisis (with the burden of public debt and deficit weighing heavily on every investment decision). In this climate, the government is looking to spend as little money as possible, and Inesport could scarcely have had a more difficult introduction to life. Nevertheless, at the time of writing, support from the ministry of science and innovation is still in place—although it looks to us as though the government only ever saw itself as a facilitator, seeking for all the money to come from the European Union fund and from the private sector. It's true, all the same, that the ministry has a clear theory about increasing research and development activity across the Spanish economy as a means of boosting employment. There are projects focusing on tourism, solar energy, biotechnology, agriculture and logistics, as well as Inesport.

At the start of 2010, at one of the inaugural Inesport meetings, a senior ministry official, María del Carmen Vicente, outlined plans for 2011 to turn research into innovation, and scientific and technological developments into genuine products that will "enhance the wealth and wellbeing" of companies and citizens across Spain. Public-private partnerships will be at the heart of this, but she said Spain would invest 2.2% of its gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011 in research and development. The 2009 GDP figure for Spain is estimated at around $1,500 billion. Ms Vicente also said the government was aiming to have 7.1% of the workforce devote itself to research, for more than 10,000 doctoral students to qualify in 2011, and for almost 38% of companies across the board to be recognised as innovators.

This is the sort of attention governments used to pay only to military and aerospace projects. Details are still emerging of precisely how this will translate into the world of sports clothing and equipment design and manufacture, but some ideas are clear. Inesport is looking at elite and recreational sport. There are six areas that researchers are being encouraged to concentrate on; the ones that are of greatest interest to *WSA* are the manufacture of sports equipment (everything from bicycles to basketball hoops) and the making, distribution or sale of sports clothing. Companies involved in these activities, at any stage of the supply chain, are being encouraged to take part in Inesport, to share their knowledge and ideas and help the whole Spanish industry move forward. A key element of this, the project leaders have said from the outset, will be to encourage the few larger companies that already hold leading positions in the Spanish industry to bring their new ideas to true critical mass by sharing them with smaller players.

Inesport, then, is about sharing technology and transferring knowledge and ideas to turn Spanish companies in the sports sector into industry leaders.