It was unofficially scheduled as the European sports trade's equivalent to the 'Gunfight at the OK Corral'. Two trade fairs ostensibly catering for the same base audience in a 'damped down' sports market. But which one represented the Doc Holliday and the Earp family – and which the Clantons and the McLaurys? And to extend the metaphor, what about Sheriff John Behan lurking in Salt Lake City?



ispo Summer

Messe München / Alex Schelbert

Showdown

The outdoor pursuits sector of the European sports industry has always been something of a maverick, seemingly seeking to shock rather than conform – to act rather than to consider. In the 1980s it sought shelter in Cologne under the benefice of SPOGA. Four years or so went by and Messe München made an offer that could not be ignored. Eleven years ago and the biter was bitten, and there was some cautious toe-dipping from smaller brand-holders who found that the waters of Lake Constance were pleasant even if the exhibition buildings had some negative aspects and acess difficulties.

The good burghers of Friedrichshafen subsequently decided that the city needed an exhibition centre to compete with those built on the old airport in Munich, and they funded a project that was not only ready in good time for the next OutDoor, but came in on budget and on time. And so it was that the 2004 OutDoor trade show in Friedrichshafen might have been the eleventh in the series, but it was only the first to present a serious threat to the dominance of Munich's ispo Summer event.

So who won the shootout? Well, no-one really. Some companies exhibit at both venues because of the breadth of their product ranges – sports in general at ispo and outdoor activities in particular at OutDoor. A great many visitors were forced to visit both venues to obtain a full overview, a source of some discontent for many of them and one factor that both Messe authorities would do well to consider.

Taking the statistics in isolation, Munich attracted 25,000 visitors and 1,211 exhibitors – a ratio of 20.64:1. Friedrichshafen logged 14,130 visitors to 577 exhibitors – a ratio of 24.48:1. Given the inevitable 'doubling up' and we think that the honours might have been even, although it must be recognised that the Munich fair gave access to a much broader 'church' than its rival.

Reports

In its final report Messe München noted that 2004 was the first to take place within the expanded European Union and that this was reflected in the greater diversity of home countries represented in both the exhibitor and visitor listing. Perhaps this was not so evident at OutDoor because the market sector is very much in the embryonic stage in Central Europe. At both venues those exhibiting companies which are based in the former Eastern Bloc found themselves with plenty to do and, one hopes, realised that their time and expenditure was justified.

Said Manfred Wutzlhofer, C.E.O of



Crowded aisles at the OR Summer Market.
Outdoor Retailer

Messe München GmbH, "The general mood at ispo and expectations for future business were surprisingly upbeat, given the difficult economic situation and dampened consumer spending which had led to cautious planning by the trade. Of course, developments vary strongly in individual segments. Present difficulties in the racket segment are offset by trend sports in the Nordic fitness segment, where there are high expectations of significant growth rates. This was very noticeable during the fair, sending vital impulses to the branch."

No mention of Nordic Walking (an activity with a foot in both camps) from his opposite number, Rolf Mohne, who said: "We're really pleased that, together with our partner, the European Outdoor Group (EOG) and the entire exhibiting industry, we've reached the targets set for growth in visitor figures and utilised space. We've increased the internationality of the fair and improved the infrastructure as planned. These things are vital and we know it. We're well on the road and will continue in the direction set."

As innocent bystanders perhaps we are also qualified to have a final say before the sheriff comes into sight. Both shows undoubtedly have an important part to play in the development of the sports and activities market in Europe and much of Asia – the latter because of its manufacturing capacity on which so much of the former depends. For ease of international access it must be said that Munich wins hands down. It also has more hotel space and a more cosmopolitan outlook.

Friedrichshafen is working hard to correct the imbalance in accommodation and, in the meanwhile, coordinates its local transport system to provide an improved service for visitors who can finish up as much as 60 kilometres away from the exhibition site. There are those who suggest that a stay on the Swiss shore of Lake Constance and an early morning ferry are most beneficial. The most obvious benefit lies in the concentration on one market sector and simplified deployment of resources that this must achieve.

Home of the Sheriff

Salt Lake City, Utah, is home to the bi-annual Outdoor Retailer Market (OR). The summer event more or less coincides with the two European events, although it is more closely allied to OutDoor in its single sector concentration. Perhaps, in the USA, 'outdoor' is more of a lifestyle factor that influences urban living as much as it does the rural element and for that reason one does not find endless fashion shows nor introspective conversations at OR. Every exhibitor is there to sell and woe betides anyone who gets in the way – unless you're a journalist of course.

The most recent event hosted 876 exhibitors and 18,276 visitors – a 20.86:1 ratio and very similar to the Europeans. Unlike the others, OR is under one roof – due for expansion by 2006 – and the Salt Palace venue is bang in the middle of the city, a proximity factor not lost on either exhibitors or visitors.

On the basis of getting more 'bang for your buck' OR's organisers tend to make organic statements at the both ends of the show, and the Summer Market 2004 was no exception. Show director Peter Devin made an 'opening of show' statement in August to the effect that OR planned to produce the Outdoor Retailer Winter and Summer Trade Expos in Salt Lake City through 2009, contingent upon signing of the final contract with SLC. OR made its decision after reviewing results from a comprehensive outdoor market study, receiving the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) Board's recommendation, and the presentation of tentative plans from Salt Lake City officials to expand the Salt Palace's main hall space by 40% plus and to provide increased benefits to OR exhibitors and attendees.

OIA provided a recommendation to stay in Salt Lake City for the next five years but included a stipulation that it was"… contingent on the State of Utah's continued partnership with OIA to promote a recreation economy and to protect its recreation gems, and on the timely and complete expansion of the Salt Palace."

Overall reaction throughout the Salt Palace on Day One of Summer Market indicated the industry was supportive of OR's decision to stay in Salt Lake City. And with construction beginning the week after the show closed, the project should have a minimal effect on future shows with an estimated completion date in the spring of 2006 prior to Summer Market 2006.

Devin's close of show statement was more laconic: "The momentum and optimism was absolutely evident throughout the show. Buyers, exhibitors, media and the leaders of the industry have all indicated that this Summer Market was their most successful show in years."



Nordic walking at the 2004 OutDoor trade show.
OutDoor