

He created a new market



Swedish entrepreneur Gåvert Wååg has developed a new market in China for sports with strong traditions in the Nordic countries.

Text Peter Thelin, Elekta, Peter.Thelin@elekta.com

In 1998, Gåvert Wååg, a marketing manager at Silva, a Swedish producer of compasses and other instruments, and a former two-time world championship winner in orienteering, Jörgen Mårtensson, were sponsored by Ericsson and Volvo to set up orienteering races at Chinese universities, as a way to find students that it might later be possible to hire.

Orienteering was at that time a nearly unknown sport in China. There was only one orienteering race map in the country. So Wååg and Mårtensson went to universities and made campus orienteering maps. When they made a public presentation introducing the sport at a lecture hall with a capacity of 400 people, there were around 1,500 people waiting outside!

The story was the same everywhere they went. Wååg was so inspired so he went back to Sweden and resigned from his job, at the age of 47, to found Nordic Ways together with Mårtensson.

Orienteering is now a fast growing sport in China. Nordic Ways has made 250 orienteering race maps countrywide, and national races are held every year. China has even applied to hold the world championships.

Wååg spent three years travelling around all provinces in China in preparation, while getting to know people at local governments. He also adjusted his basic business idea during his travels. He found out that healthy sports lifestyle was something totally new to most Chinese, and that people could not afford to pay entry fees at the same levels as in Europe.

“The first thing was to get good contacts with and the cooperation of local governments and officials and get



sponsorships from them to finance the events. We learnt a lot about endurance, patience and to be humble," he says.

From the outset, Wååg had the good fortune to find key staff that were an asset to his endeavour, and most of them are still with the company. Three years ago, he hired a general manager to run the daily business of maintaining contacts, signing contracts and looking for new events for the company when he is travelling. He estimates that he spends 250 days on the road per year.

Healthy lifestyles and sports have emerged as a trend in China, a country where gyms barely existed just 10 years ago. Today, they can be found almost everywhere. Cycling, mountain biking and hiking have become popular sports. In 1995, China had 10 ski resorts; today there are approximately 275.

Meanwhile, Nordic Ways has signed agreements with Swedish organisers to arrange long-distance races: Vasaloppet (cross-country skiing), Lidingöloppet (cross-country running) and Vätternrundan (cycling) in China.

In 2012, Vasaloppet China will celebrate its 10th anniversary. It will hold a race in Changchun in Jilin Province in China's northeast. Last winter's race attracted 26,000 participants.

"It is important to have more than just a ski competition at the event. The whole event must be something special," says Wååg.

"That means that the main ski event lasts for three days, including gala dinners and performances that include a Chinese woman in the traditional attire of Mora (the Swedish town that hosts the original Vasaloppet) while playing traditional Swedish folk music on the violin. Changchun also has a local competition to elect a "Snow Angel of the Year", and the ski race is also broadcasted live on local TV.

The former Swedish national team manager for cross-country skiing, Per-Erik "Peken" Rönnstrand, has spent four years in China, sponsored by Nordic Ways, as the Chinese national team manager to develop Chinese skiers. Wååg is appreciated for his work and has been awarded a city key as an "honorary citizen of Changchun" by the mayor.

Nordic Ways is arranging 20-25 sport events per year in China and predicts a growing market. The latest trend in China is triathlon (swimming, cycling, running), a short-track compe-

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tion will be arranged in Changchun later this year. A Chinese version of the Swedish "Classic Circuit" – four different classic Swedish sports events (the three mentioned above plus a swimming event), for which participants are recognised for finishing all four races in one year – will also be arranged.

Wååg also introduced the local government to the original Vasaloppet in Sweden, where they attended a more than 90-kilometre relay ski race.

"It is important to build your network and take care of your contacts. They are a prerequisite for your success. Chinese *guanxi* is built by trust over a long time," says Wååg.

He does not regret his decision to become an entrepreneur in China in his "old days". He loves what he is doing and shares some advice to others:

"Don't be too eager, keep your eyes on the ball, see the goal, have patience and be humble. You will have misfortunes, but meet them with a smile, and just continue.

"You should also get to know how Chinese people are thinking and learn the culture. Focus on limited projects, don't dilute yourself. Be prepared that everything can change at the last minute and you will need to start over again. Put your energy into looking forward and solving problems, instead of looking back," he says before adding: "There is always a solution; try to find new ways to solve problems and remove obstacles. But without finding and hiring the right people for your company, it will never work ..."

"Impossible is nothing" is the slogan of a famous sports apparel manufacturer and it fits well on Gävert Wååg, who has created a market which did not exist in China a decade ago. *

26,000

The number of participants in the Vasaloppet race in China.



Gävert Wååg in traditional clothes from Inner Mongolia.

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