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UTI Chemicals President Vincent Panaroni, left, and Chairman Richard Steinke with a few of the soles the firm designed for L.A. Gear shoes.

Irvine company catapults into shoe biz

L.A. Gear will put UTI's plastic into new product

By Jan Norman
The Orange County Register

LA. Gear is turning to an Irvine plastics company to put some spring in its 1991 step.

UTI Chemicals has signed an exclusive licensing agreement with L.A. Gear, a Los Angeles athletic-footwear maker, to use UTI's patented polyurethane technology in the soles and inserts of a new high-performance basketball shoe called Catapult.

Catapult will use UTI's polyurethane,

called Z-thane, in the sole and a polymer called N.R.Gee for the shoe's insert. N.R.Gee acts as a shock absorber so a person can run on streets without getting shin splints, UTI Chairman Richard Steinke said.

All this high-tech plastic will not sacrifice the fashion for which L.A. Gear is famous, Steinke added, because Z-thane comes in wild colors for the shoe soles. Catapult will also feature transparent Z-thane in the midsole.

"They'll be fun and interesting," Steinke said.

Neither company would disclose the terms of the licensing agreement, other than Steinke's estimate that the minimum commitment will be for several mil-

lion shoes.

Catapult will be L.A. Gear's major new product for 1991, spokeswoman Stephanie Burchfield said.

The company stumbled this year when it bet on a low-tech, high-fashion Michael Jackson shoe, while Nike and Reebok pushed their high-performance Air Jordans and Pumps.

In fact, L.A. Gear expects sales and profits for the year to be lower than in 1989 because marketing costs have soared while the retail climate soured. Nike posted record sales and profits for 1990 fiscal year, and Reebok projects flat sales for the year.

L.A. Gear won't say much about Cata-

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