

The Tour of China, Part 1

CHAPTER 1 – THE RACE THAT COULD HAVE CHANGED PRO CYCLING

(Editors' Note: The Tour of China in 1995 was a unique moment in pro cycling history, taking place at the tipping point in China's political and economic history when it emerged as a global commerce superpower. Medalist Sports, in its original iteration led by founder Mike Plant, produced an event against seemingly insurmountable odds. When the opportunity arose to break into the international market, and corner what could have been a lucrative long-term commitment to build world-class racing in the Far East, Plant and his Medalist team seized the moment and made history.

*What follows is the first-hand account of **Steve Brunner**, currently the President of KOM Sports Marketing, but then a Vice President of Medalist. Brunner, a trained journalist who covered eight Tours de France for such publications as the Los Angeles Times and USA Today, and a meticulous storyteller, shares the highs and lows of this grand adventure in three parts. Chapter 1 below covers how the race came together, despite the odds. [Part 2](#) will share many poignant episodes from the race, many of which have never been shared before. [Part 3](#) will cover important business lessons Medalist learned, and which could benefit the sport today.)*

The Tour of China had been a pipe dream of sorts, built on the success of America's biggest international race to that point, the Tour DuPont. That race, which started life as the Tour de Trump in 1989, ran along the eastern seaboard of the United States from 1989 to 1996 and is widely considered to be the most successful U.S. stage race history, not just by the size of its crowds, but also by its worldwide television distribution and profitability.

Mike Plant, a young former Olympic speedskater-turned-event-promoter, was the founder of Medalist Sports, and had built the Tour DuPont up into one of the world's top three stage races. And if a race could be produced in places like New York, Boston, or Washington, why not Shanghai, Hong Kong and Beijing? That is what was surmised by Plant and his Tour of China partners: Chinese businessman and political insider David Chu; British businessman David Cicilitera; and Billy Packer (then an entrepreneur and top sports announcer for CBS).

While there were hundreds of thousands of bikes on the streets of China's major cities in the 1990s, the prospect of a Tour de France-type bike race with closed roads in some of the most densely-populated cities in the world, in a country coming out of Mao's communist China, seemed as likely as man landing on Mars. Possible? Maybe. Executed to a world-class level? That would be like landing on one of Saturn's rings.

"It was by all standards the most challenging project of my career," said Plant, the current President of Operations for the Atlanta Braves, and who recently completed a \$1.3 billion-dollar project to build its new team ballpark and co-located commercial and residential districts. Plant put his shoulders down and made 22 trips to China between 1994 and 1995 to piece together the first iteration of the event. Despite many of us having worked together since that first Tour de Trump, this race had no blueprint. It was so hands-on, Plant logged about a quarter million air miles and another 50,000 ground miles in China during that period. Every organizational decision seemed like a chess match to us.

For starters, none of us spoke Chinese, and the country had never closed its roads for a running race, let alone a lengthy, multi-day bike race through its major cities. First, Plant's team had to convince the Chinese government the race would be good for the country, and then, there were district "everything's" to pay off, including a hefty sanctioning fee to the Chinese Cycling Association. And the State-run police

were not your average neighborhood watch group. The CCA budget was around \$750,000 USD, and some of that essentially built China's archaic cycling federation into what it is today.

But Plant's street smarts, native-Milwaukee sensibilities, and blue-collar work ethic would pay off. "It was beyond the wild west," said Plant. "Every day was another conundrum. Having money helped. We had done some pretty-challenging things in the U.S. like closing Central Park or The Mall in D.C., but this was 12,000 miles away in a country that was still for the most part 3rd World. The government kept a close eye on everything. Beyond any monetary gain, the state-run government intrinsically knew it was good public relations. But they didn't make anything easy."

Plant's massive library of behind the scenes stories include renting an Air China Jumbo 767 – on his American Express card. He also convinced American Express for a \$500,000 credit line on that card. For almost eight months, he personally floated most the project with no guarantees it would succeed. It was a titanic display of financing bravado, but Plant's crazy calculus may have met the perfect suitor in China, circa 1995.

"China was a place everyone wanted to visit back then because it had been a closed country for so long," Plant reminisces. "It honestly had this mystery and aura with a rich history to explore. A lot of the top European cyclists jumped at the chance."

Mao Zedong was the forefather of The People's Republic of China. Though he died in 1976, his futuristic plans remained indentured into China's plans for the 21st Century. Deng Xiaoping became China's leader in 1978 and in the 1980s opened political and economic reforms which led to capitalistic "Economic Zones." Deng's progressive economic movement opened its stride in the mid 1990s.

China's Economic Zones would entice western companies to build in these zones within certain cities, essentially reinventing itself with Western money, but using its own people as human capital at low prices. Western companies would be forced to pay heavy tariffs that would help pay for the infrastructure for rebuilding. It would start at the city's center and move out in concentric circles in typical and historic Chinese fashion. Economically speaking, it was a beautiful plan as Western companies wanted to broaden globally into the growing and very populous Chinese market.

These Economic Zones played an important political role for the event. "The national bird is apparently The Crane," wrote Samuel Abt, who was a an American journalist for the *New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune* and covered the inaugural Tour of China. His tongue-in-cheek comment was more than apropos: four of the 10 cities with these Economic Zones (Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing) were on the Tour of China route. On dirt roads leading into Tiananmen Square in Beijing's center city, to the pristine new concrete multi-lane highways in Guangzhou, buildings were going up everywhere and endless construction cranes breached the skylines.

The Chinese Government would use the bike race to promote these zones as well as the sites, sights, and sounds of post-Mao's China to the world. Plant knew this "Postcard to the World" was the hook to win over the Chinese Government.

Title sponsorship from British American Tobacco (BAT) was pegged at slightly more than \$6 million USD. Only in China could a cigarette brand be a major cycling race title sponsor. But it worked because cigarettes, especially in China in the mid-90s, were as ubiquitous as chopsticks. Plant and his partners were merely riding the consumer marketing wave. It was sports marketing in a new era for China. There were enough challenges on the operational front, and sponsorship was an obvious necessity that would prove direct economic impact. But what really made the race was a hefty international television distribution package to 140 countries, with over 60 hours of coverage that would be broadcast on state-run CCTV to 300 million people.

“Plant was always, to me, a guy who knew what he didn’t know. With the Trump race, it was a huge production for a complete startup, and it was clear he knew he needed enough money to pull it all off. I’m sure China was the same thing,” said Chris Gutowsky, who had served as one of Plant’s lieutenants in the maiden voyage of the Tour de Trump in 1989, a project that had sharpened the wit of everyone at Medalist Sports, especially its leader.

“Mike hired people to run the race who mostly thought the same way (as he did),” continued Gutowsky. “Even if we weren’t that experienced, there was a long leash to get critical stuff done as long as we didn’t break the proverbial furniture. He really had a feel for when a problem needed money thrown at it and when it didn’t. If you busted your ass and stayed focused on the mission, you knew he had your back.”

Jim Birrell, who led the critical efforts behind course direction and operations, diplomatically says of his time on the ground in China, “There were social, economical, language, and cultural differences to overcome.” According to Plant however, it was more like suddenly finding yourself in a distant galaxy.

Beyond Plant, Gutowsky, and Birrell, Medalist’s core Richmond-based team featured current Medalist Sports managing director Chris Aronhalt and event veterans Bob Sicard, Barb Shively, Kris Golashesky, Beth Kozakewicz, John Gatch, Frank Giannini, Heather DuHamel, and Diane Puglisse. I was one of Medalist’s Vice Presidents and spearheaded sponsorship, marketing and communications.

There were several key contractors, including veteran television director and producer Ralph Mole of Tailwind Production and NEP’s Jeff Weinmiller. There were veterans of the USA Cycling Federation and stalwarts like Bill Woodul and Sean Petty. Others included current CrossVegas Race Director Brook Watts, former USA Cycling veteran Evan Call, and routing and signs veteran Rob Bushnell. Steve McCarthy, the president of Alem International, which would go on to run the Torch Relays for the International Olympic Committee, would head the all-important motor marshal crew and assured safe passage on the roads of China.

Plant knew it would take more than his core staff to pull-off this first ever China race, and needed the dual fluency of Chinese/English speakers. He found two Americans that would end up being central to the success, as well as the unsung heroes of the event. Jim Page Jr., the son of a former Olympic Nordic Combined athlete of the same name, had been teaching in the interior of China and would relocate to Beijing. Todd McKean, a former club cyclist from Lake Arrowhead, Calif., who had relocated to Guangzhou, would be his second hire. William Craig, from Medalist’s home office, also relocated to Hong Kong. The triad would be anchors for the event.

Birrell made 11 pre-event trips and spent almost six weeks prior to the inaugural race finalizing courses and logistics. I made four. Aronhalt relocated to Hong Kong for three months prior to the event and assisted in getting the projected situated at its initial base with Craig. (Birrell and Aronhalt are now partners at Medalist Sports.)

A key player on the Chinese Government side was Wo Mingshan, who directed security and safe route passage, while keeping a watchful eye on all affairs. But an even more important catalyst for the whole event’s success was Fadei Li, a short, heavy-set Chinese woman in her 50s. Women weren’t commonplace business or public affairs liaisons at that time in China, but she carried herself adroitly, at times demonstratively pushing key issues important to the success of the event to the uber-conservative governmental agents, while at other times sitting as if subservient, at arm’s length, in the heat of negotiations.

Fadei knew how to play the game and get things done the Chinese way – her husband was a high-ranking government official. Everyone loved Fadei and she became a revered matriarchal figure, and hovered over us like a Buddha sent from the heavens. The CCA, for all its initial bureaucratic tones, was delivering

and had Fadei, Page and McKean to thank for the progress.

Page played a masterful role stewarding political issues from his location near the CCA. He was an avid Chinese history buff, and one of the few westerners to have earned the respect of his Chinese peers because he lived in Chinese the hardened interior of Shaanxi, near Mongolia. The root of Mao's communist doctrines for the *People's Republic of China* were forged during his time hiding out in Shaanxi during World War II. The importance of Page's pedigree having lived in the Shaanxi province played an important role in the Chinese trust.

"I think they saw that if a westerner could be successful in Shaanxi, there must be something different about me," Page said. "In China, they want to know you intimately before they can trust you in business. Unlike the west, where people dive into business right away, in China there has to be a slow dance."

That dance included a lot of drinking and eating. "Your respect level elevated the more you would go out, drink and eat with them," said Page, now a Brand Manager for Lamborghini living in the Washington D.C. area. "You become friends first and do business second. When you're on a project with deadlines like a major event, you can see how that can accumulate a lot of stress."

Birrell, Page and McKean were Plant's proxies for course recon with the CCA. McKean and Page's stomachs had adjusted to Chinese food – *real* Chinese food. But for Birrell, who was raised on a native Texan diet, every day of recon ended with a gastronomic misadventure. From snake blood to chicken beaks, Birrell built Merckx-like intestinal fortitude behind a straight face at the dining table, where business was discussed.

"If I went over there 11 times, I think I got sick maybe seven," Birrell says of the challenges he endured at the expense of his colon. "I also got to know the word 'gambai' pretty well." *Gambai* is a Mandarin word used while tossing back traditional rice alcohol when toasting success.

The 1995 Tour of China would be 11 total days, with seven days of racing. It would start with a Prologue in Hong Kong before transferring into the Guangdong province of southeast China for road races in Shenzhen and Guangzhou. Chartered air transfers on that new Air China 767 would take place from Guangzhou to Shanghai, and Shanghai up to the capital of Beijing (with two days off while operational equipment made its way north by ground via freight). Shanghai featured two circuit races while Beijing featured a road race to a finish at The Great Wall, and a 30-kilometer individual time trial through central Beijing to finish the event.

"About 10 days before the race was to start, we had no Prologue course in Hong Kong and no final time trial in Beijing. No confirmed course," said Birrell. "And, about a month before the start, we were surveying the course that routed out of Guangzhou for Stage 3. The course went out on to this brand-new highway and eventually into this little, dusty village where the road ended. There was literally a 30-foot pile of wood, dirt and rubble. Beyond that point was supposed to be a bridge over a river. I asked how we were to continue the course with no bridge. And, it was going to be pretty-big bridge. Everyone said to me, *Mei Wenti*."

"Mei Wenti" translated in English means "No problem." It was a phrase often said by the Chinese in pre-planning meetings. It became a catchphrase and one that the Medalist crew would have to sometime hedge their bets on. It was a cultural chasm that would sometimes spook basic tasks that the Medalist crew would often have to troubleshoot later. In this case, Birrell was standing 12,000 miles from his home in Virginia in the backroads of rural China looking at mound of rubble wondering how a major bridge could be built in less than 30 days.

"Let's just say they didn't exactly have a corps of engineers hanging around, but they had human

capital,” said Birrell. And similar to Birrell’s work temperament, the Chinese laborers got the bridge built – *Mei Wenti*. “Not sure if it’s still structurally standing 20-plus-years later but they’d just bring in some people from out of nowhere and build anything seemingly overnight,” he laughed.

Medalist had become advanced at producing very detailed race manuals and Plant took pride in our attention to detail. At the all-staff meeting in Hong Kong two days before the Prologue, Plant stood before the entourage of 400 people holding a copy of the Race Manual with all logistics, routes and operational details. Plant shocked everyone by ripping the Manual in half in a display that got the attention of even the hardest Euro Director Sportifs like Jan Raas, a Dutchman who as a professional had won more than 10 Classics as well as 10 stages of the Tour de France. Raas had seen it all – until now.

“Whatever is in this book, forget about it. This is China. A third-world country,” Plant harpooned. “We’ve done our best to plan but things *will* change and everyone needs to roll with it. We will be sending out a daily itinerary and you will need to read it and use it as your bible. If you’re scheduled to leave in a caravan at 6:30 am, then you are to be there at 6:30 am or be left behind. And you don’t want to be left behind.” Behind the dramatic moment, Plant was just keeping it real. In Mike Plant’s China, there was no translation for the word “failure.”

The message was sent. It wasn’t a Russian Gulag but it wasn’t Shangri-La either. “From then on, everyone pretty much got it,” said Aronhalt. “We had world and Olympic champions and Tour de France stage winners dragging their bike bags off the cargo holds of planes and bringing them to their chartered vehicles. Everyone chipped in. No layers. Just a team of athletes, teams, and support staff and organizers pulling in the same direction.”

“The whole event and time over there was surreal – a real eye opener for all of us,” said American Steve Hegg, who led on GC for most the race. “A lot of craziness on the bike as well as off. We had a lot of the top cyclists from Europe plus us North Americans. We were all in the same boat. We were on this maiden voyage not sure what was out at sea and Plant was that one-eyed captain with a hook for a hand. Everyone wanted to follow a dude like that.”

Continue the story about The Tour of China [in Part 2 here](#).

A note about the author: Steve Brunner is the President of King of the Mountain Sports Marketing in Colorado Springs. He was the Vice President of Development and Communications for Medalist Sports, 1991-96.