

# The Tour Of China, Part 2

## CHAPTER 2 – EPIC STORIES FROM AN HISTORIC RACE

*(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 2 below shares many poignant episodes from the race, many of which have never been shared at this level of detail before. [Chapter 1](#) previously covered how the race came together, despite the odds. [Chapter 3](#) will cover important business lessons Medalist learned, and which could benefit the sport today.)*

From the airplane's window, luminous white squares began to appear through the heavy dark clouds at 500 feet. Somewhere below was the landing strip at the Hong Kong's legendary Kowloon Airport. People began to appear, some in their underwear, within the windows of buildings less than 200 meters to the side of the wings as if sketched on a gray fluffy canvass. Rain began to hit the aircraft as the wings tilted violently in the gusty winds.

Four hours after landing, we were scurrying between heavy raindrops and light fog into a Swiss restaurant in Hong Kong for a planning meeting for the inaugural Tour of China. The city had become dark, ominous, as red and yellow neon colors reflected in the gathering puddles on the brick pavement. For a second, I was expecting Harrison Ford to pop out of the shadows because it was eerily like the set of *Blade Runner*.

This was the beginning of a 35-day odyssey that would take a group of Americans and a few Brits along the eastern seaboard of China into the cities of Hong Kong (then a British protectorate but with Chinese influence), Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and the capital city of Beijing.

The Prologue time trial set the tone for all of us, thanks to John Gatch. At 5'5" and 130 pounds, Gatch was a former club racer from Cincinnati, but was not in the safe surroundings of Ohio anymore. He was on the backside of the Prologue course and outside the boundaries of the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club, trying to stop traffic from bleeding onto the race course which was on a major thoroughfare. (By UCI rules, the Prologue distance had to be more than 5 kilometers but the grounds within the club could only yield slightly more than 4 km. Thus, a plan was devised to skirt outside on to a thoroughfare and circle back inside to make the distance.)

Gatch found himself fighting back drivers who were wondering why a very-western-looking fella with yellow hair was standing in the middle of the street with a radio in hand trying to impede traffic. *Was he mentally ill?* He nervously radioed back to Plant at the start line. It was 4:53 pm. The first rider would go off at 5 pm. *The course was unsecured.* Plant reminded Gatch that Medalist Sports had never *not* started a race on time and it wasn't about to start now. Gatch stuttered and asked Plant for immediate help.

A van was dispatched to the area, which was more than a kilometer away. Minutes later, Operations Director Barb Shively thrust herself on the hood of a car just as a police motorbike and the first cyclist turned onto the main thoroughfare. Gatch would later joke at the day's debriefing meeting: "I guess a

short blond-haired guy with a radio didn't have enough sway and it took a large-busted American woman to stop traffic."

Steve Hegg, riding for sponsoring Chevrolet-L.A. Sheriffs, ended up winning the Prologue to conclude the first stage of the Tour. The race couldn't have hand-picked a better first race leader. As a former Olympic gold medalist, the Chinese media could translate that into a very understandable story. With his tanned, all-American good looks, images would be pushed around the international news wires and over an international broadcast to more than 100 countries – a former Olympic champion winning the first ever professional cycling race in China.

State-run CCTV broadcast the race to a national audience of more than 300 million people in China alone. The country would welcome a new sports hero. His name was "Sasha Egger," which is how the announcers pronounced "Steve Hegg" in Mandarin. With the massive audience, it's safe to say, "Sasha Egger" would become a household name and wouldn't have to buy a beer ever again in China.

A monster logistical day followed the Prologue, including a border crossing, the start and finish of a road race, and then a 200-kilometer transfer to Guangzhou. A 20-hour day for all. It started with a 6:45 am departure with three double-decker buses in front of the HQ hotel in Hong Kong. Plant warned all staff and athletes that "anyone not on time would be left behind." At 6:44 am, the entire entourage had been loaded. Not a stray European was missing or seen sneaking in a last-minute espresso in the hotel's cafe.

A border crossing from Hong Kong into mainland China wasn't like crossing from Wisconsin into Illinois. It took six months of planning and the pre-screening of more than 350 workers, athletes and team support personnel. Plant hired and assigned this dubious task to a British ex-pat who was a former rugby player. His sole task was to make sure the border crossing went smoothly and without delay. The Brit felt he had cued things up so well that the crossing would go unabated within an hour.

Plant told the British ex-pat to "not screw it up." He responded *Mei Wenti* – our now ubiquitous phrase for 'no problem.' Four packed double-decker buses were now stopped at the border loaded with guys like two-time world-champion Gianni Bugno, eventual Olympic gold medalists Viatcheslav Ekimov and Alexander Vinokourov, who was a 21-year-old riding for the Kazakhstan national team; and the world's top sprinter at the time, Djamolidine Abdoujaparov, of neighboring Uzbekistan. Plant had instructed everyone, including all athletes, to on their buses while things were being cleared for crossing. The lower the profile, the better. The British ex-pat took more than 350 passports and a bag of money to the border patrol shack. Plant monitored every step of his hired gun as he made his way toward the guards.

Sixty minutes later, the brawny Brit was still at the shack with an interpreter from the Chinese Cycling Association. No visible progress was being made. Plant fidgeted in his seat and eventually said: "What in the hell is going on here? I thought this was all taken care of."

The two-hour mark passed. Irritated athletes and workers got off their buses. Plant was visibly irate now, got off the bus and lumbered toward the shack, his thick frame an imposing figure to the slightly-built guards. The British ex-Pat waived him off, as though he had it covered. They exchanged words and Plant came storming back.

Nearing the three-hour mark, Plant's forehead was noticeably getting red and he pushed all personnel back on their buses. The previous night he reiterated that "every Medalist Sports event had started on time". It was closing in on 10:30 a.m. and the race's start was noon. More than 20 kilometers of driving remained but cars and vehicles needed to be claimed for entourage travel, as well as other pre-race protocols like "rider sign-in" completed.

Plant came back and sat down in his seat and mumbled: "I can't believe this s\*%t. Do you know what is

holding all this up? Even though everyone was pre-screened, they think Abdu and the Kazakhstan team could be spies.” Minutes later, the former rugby player and the interpreter from the CCA returned with a bundle of passports. *Mei Wenti*, or so it seemed. Later it was reported that China had entered a secret border war with Kazakhstan just days before.

Stage 1 into Shenzhen would take our breath away – literally. Even by Chinese industrial standards of the late 20th Century, the southeastern city of Shenzhen (pop. 12.5 million) was dirty. By the rust-colored smog and abhorrent odor, this city would make the steel-mill towns of 1950s America seem like a Maui vacation. Stage 1’s road race would take the race from Shenzhen to Mission Hills, a journey from industrial expansion to a virtual oasis.

The stadium starting point looked like an alien spacecraft, but it only became visible if you were right on top of it, the smog was so thick. Lined up around the stadium were bald-tire taxis, dilapidated mini-vans and a host of odd-sized mini-buses. (I had applied and was granted a temporary driver’s license – no course required but a fee ? the Chinese way, as I would learn. I would put it to use driving one of the mini-buses full of journalists.)

Roof racks were haphazardly secured on each team’s caravan vehicle. The MG-Maglificio Technogym team featured Bugno and Marco Saligari, a three-time Giro d’Italia stage winner and Tour de Suisse champion. They were examining their 25-year-old autos with both perplexity and awe, pointing and making numerous hand gestures. It was a grand departure from the team’s Ferraris back home in Italy.

“I had to pull cars from numerous rental facilities, repair shops and independent taxi companies,” said Stage 1 and 2 coordinator Todd McKean, with more than a hint of pride. (McKean still resides in Guangzhou and works for Apple.)

McKean had made the impossible happen. He couldn’t control the air quality, but, he had put together a fleet of vehicles that seemed earth-worthy. It’s not like there were Hertz locations prevalent at the time in Southeastern China. McKean’s efforts would push the first road stage of a cycling event on to the pot-hole-filled roads of Shenzhen to its finish at the opulent Mission Hills Country Club.

Everyone was hustling and at 12:00 p.m., Plant had a smile on his face as the starter’s pistol went off on time. Steve Hegg, resplendent in the Kent-branded yellow leader’s jersey, led out the peloton around two neutral laps of the stadium through the smog, with a caravan of 60 rusted out, 1970s-vintage vehicles following behind. A few of the cyclists coughed. Some wore masks. Others winced from the sting of the polluted air in their eyes. Two of the riders for the Chevrolet-L.A. Sheriff’s team each carried an unlit Kent cigarette on their lips for the neutral laps ? the perfect photo op for a cigarette-sponsored cycling race. At the finish line, covered in soot, the Sheriff’s riders said it had been like racing in a coal mine.

After 10-kilometers, the race entered the countryside on a large-scale highway cleared for the race. It was new with wide strips of white concrete. Petty, driving one of the support cars for the U.S. National Team, pulled up beside the media bus. He was driving a red, rusted out taxi cab with bald tires. It was noticeably leaning and bouncing on one side presumably due to dead shocks.

“You going to make it to the finish?,” I offered after pulling alongside in the journalist’s bus. Without missing a beat, the affable Petty looked down at his odometer then casually back at me: “Oh, no problem. I *only* have 727,000 kilometers on this bad boy but don’t worry I’m due for an oil change at 730,000.”

The race limped on to dusty rural roads then into and out of a large village before giving way to expansive roads, leading to the finish line at the newly-christened Mission Hills Country Club owned by a Mr. Chu. Out of the beige and brown hues of the village, a large swatch of green appeared as if leading to an Emerald City– an oasis of opulence in an otherwise dreary landscape.

The images at the finish line displayed China's future and promise. It was a stark difference in look and feel from that at the start line in beaten-down Shenzhen. It had been like racing through a dumpster and out onto Rodeo Drive. The race would finish with a few riders escaping on the final circuit before regrouping near the finish. A total of 52 flats (!) would highlight the day. Hegg would remain in the lead thanks to his Chevrolet-LA Sheriff's teammates, like Jeff Pierce and Jim Copeland, who had ditched the cigarettes.

The staff, team support crew, and athletes had served their penance through the course of the day. They would eat in a banquet hall with all the hallmarks of modernity, including marble columns and floors. Everyone was in a good mood, most of all Plant, who toasted the key staff at the teams and staff meal in the banquet hall. He had a special way of making sure the moment of success was recognized. It was an historic moment in professional cycling, something of which the UCI and China Cycling Association (CCA) could be proud of.

But the mood changed when Plant reminded everyone of the long transfer ahead that night, and that the police escort would not wait for any stragglers.

That journey over 200 kilometers of brand-new highway, and past endless sweatshops and manufacturing plants, yielded a severe thunderstorm, three car accidents, and a dead body covered in a bloodied white sheet. All but two of the vehicles made it to the hotel in Guangzhou. Germany's National Team, piloted by two-time Olympic track cycling gold medalist Gregor Braun, suffered a flat tire and was left in the rain about 100 kilometers away. "The tire, it go plop, plop, plop," Braun would say in his thick German accent the next day at breakfast. "I had to stop and wave 'bye-bye caravan'".

"We didn't have cell phones, so if you had an accident or mechanical we had to leave you because the police escort was in a protective envelope. We told people we would *probably* come back for them," said Plant. It was the harsh reality and everyone hoped they had drawn a lucky straw with their vehicle. Plant was able to instruct a police van back to the stranded foreigners. Braun and his colleagues arrived at the Guangzhou hotel at 3:30 a.m. At least he'd have a good story to tell back in Dusseldorf.

Guangzhou (formerly Canton) was the heart of the ancient Silk Road and dates back more than 4,000 years. Today, it is the heart of the largest urban area on the planet. The 100-kilometer urban sprawl from its concentric boundaries takes in more than 100 million residents. In 1995, it was a mere 90 million – basically the entire East Coast of the United States.

The first signs of modern progress at the time were right across the street from our hotel. Rising from street level were 33 stories of bamboo scaffolding. Migrant workers from Mongolia and rural Chinese provinces, who slept in street-side encampments next to the building, were busy working under headlamps in 24-hour shifts. Like a row of ants scaling a sugary trail of melted ice cream, they pushed wheelbarrows of cement up the vertical ramps and scaffolding. It was a visual that would stick in the minds of the entourage as an indelible image of human performance, surpassing even the efforts of the riders in the race.

The race would not start till afternoon and most everyone took the morning off. Many of the entourage were provided a couple hours to survey the area around the hotel, which included a river that was ecologically dead. No fish, no signs of vegetation, just brown and gnarly. Down from the hotel was a marketplace. Later that night we were relaxing at the hotel and there were no sounds of any wildlife. No crickets, no birds chirping, not even a rat scurrying underfoot. Indeed, anything lower than a human in the food chain had made it to market to serve up to the millions of people in the metro area. Hegg said: "Anything that moved was in the marketplace. It was nasty but you had to take it in." Snakes, rats, birds, skinned boar's heads, insects in glass cages. All for sale. And, all consumable.

The air was brown and smelled of rotten carcass, but the beer on the patio that night tasted nice. “At the time, Guangzhou was the 4th ranked most polluted city in the world,” said Birrell. It didn’t take a statistician to figure out what our tear ducts were telling us.

The Guangzhou stage was raced on a freshly-minted swath of concrete resembling an American interstate, 100 kilometers out and through guarded toll booths to a rural path of land not seen by many westerners. But on the return trip to the finish line, one of the Campagnolo neutral support vehicles – an old Chevy station wagon – ran into a bit of a problem. “We’re on this brand-new concrete highway, it might as well have been a velodrome because we were revving it up so fast and had the wind at our backs,” said Norm Alvis, who was wearing the Stars & Stripes as current U.S. champ at the time for Team Saturn. “Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something. It was a tire. A car tire coming like 100 miles an hour through the peloton. Everyone was like *what the hell!*”

The Campy neutral support’s back tire literally fell off and rolled through the peloton, luckily not hitting anyone. *Mei Wenti.*

Birrell had struggled to find an appropriate finish line and the finish line would be on an off ramp, about 400 to 500 meters to the finish banner. With ripping tailwinds and a smooth concrete surface, the race had wound up to more than 80 kilometers per hour (50 mph). The mix of national teams and what would be today’s Continental trade teams were hungry and smelling ‘international stage win.’ Most of the European big budget teams backed off, smelling ‘major stackage.’

The final 200 meters featured eight-foot high wire mesh barriers, which, medically speaking, would come in handy on this day. Kam-po Wong, an elite track sprinter from Hong Kong was stoking up the sprint with about 150 meters to go. On his left side was another former track rider racing for Saturn named Robbie Ventura. (Yes, *that* Robbie Ventura, now elite coach and part-time TV analyst.) Robbie, with the peloton raging down off the ramp, saw a slight gap along the fence and rolled the dice. Within meters he found himself bouncing very high off the mesh fence.

Carnage ensued on the freshly poured concrete road behind Ventura, the coarse traction lines essentially making the road one big cheese grater. No one remembers the stage winner but the crash was brilliant in a visual way with Ventura seemingly hitting the sun before returning to earth. The national Chinese audience would be treated to cannibalistic visual fodder that night. The Kent Tour of China had claimed its first major crash victims. Fortunately for Kam-po and the K-town Motor (Ventura), Guangzhou had good hospital services.

Birrell was working on the taped show with producer Ralph Mole and editor Dan Baron later that night. A governmental guard assigned to view the tape hovered over them with a rifle and bayonet. “He was there to ensure the edited footage would go out to the pleasing of the Chinese government,” Birrell said. “He was the real editor.”

The following days in Shanghai would visit, by far, the most modern city in mainland China in the mid ‘90s. Shanghai’s center city featured The Bund, a western settlement dating back centuries along the waterfront. Its modern skyline rivaled any major city in the world. If you dropped yourself into The Bund in the ‘90s, you may have well been in Paris or Tokyo or New York. With two days off before resuming racing, many of the entourage made their way to The Bund.

After a night of frolicking, a group from the production unit had made their way to outskirts of The Bund and found themselves beaten and without their wallets. Once western journalists covering the event heard of the situation, we were on the edge of an international incident. Within 24 hours, our security liaison, Wo Mingshan and his security detail had evidently found and dealt with the matter, some suggesting in a very severe way. “We were building a good relationship with the Chinese government,” Plant said. “We didn’t

want this to deter all the positive things that were going on.”

The two Shanghai circuit races were the tamest days of the inaugural Kent Tour of China. Mainly through budding industrial parks, they were set up for hospitality and viewing. Sprinters would win the two circuit stages in Shanghai with Hegg retaining the overall lead. “The area of the last circuit race is now one of the biggest skylines in the world,” Page said. “You wouldn’t recognize it. It’s kinda of symbolic of what China was and is now only 20 years later. The transformation in the 1990s is where China really took off.”

For the first time, the Kent Tour of China felt strangely western. That would all be reversed as we headed north to Beijing for the final two stages and a finish at The Great Wall. In a pre-event site visit, Birrell had come across a 50-meter swath of what looked like gravel in one of the pass-through villages on Stage 5 – like racing through a time machine. The course routed out of Beijing through three rural villages into a heavy mountainous region and back to a hill finish in a parking lot at The Great Wall. By all standards, it was the best and most scenic of stage of the two iterations of the Kent Tour of China.

After stopping to examine the gravel with Page, it wasn’t stone at all but millet. The local farmers had placed the millet on the ground so cars would run over and crack it. “They would then sweep it up and be able to grind it up,” said Birrell. “It was part of their commerce. They would trade their milled flour to the village down the road which would have livestock. And that village would trade for something else. That was rural China and we were going to race through it.”

At approximately 2:21 pm on October 14, 1995, an alien invasion of 58 vehicles led out by eight motorcycles, three camera motorbikes, and eighty-two cyclists (the remnants of the peloton) streaked over the 25 kilometers of millet-swept roads heading toward the mountains off in the distance. Startled villagers stopped their donkeys running circles around their mill posts. Farmers looked up from their fields with sickles or iron plows in awe. A strange string of objects was churning through town with bright lights and neon colors they had never seen.

By 2:54 pm the objects had gone through all three villages. For almost 32 minutes these foreign objects had cascaded through the lives of these villagers never to be seen again. The 21st Century had collided with the 18th Century for a moment. There were no tweets, posts, or even printed flyers to tell them what was coming. Only bright lights and the pending barrage of colors and two-wheeled objects never seen in their world.

Out of the valley and through the villages, the peloton went over a legitimate Category 1 climb of more than 15-kilometers long. The route would meander through hilly countryside before climbing to The Great Wall. At the finish, Danelle Nardello from Mapei would take over the leader’s jersey with Ekimov and Hegg seconds back and within striking distance for the final time trial the next day. The finish at The Great Wall of China would be the postcard that Plant, his partners, and the Chinese Government could bank on. It was a landmark moment – literally finishing in front of a Wonder of the ancient world – that could captivate an international television audience.

“We had done the unthinkable,” Plant said. “It was the sum of a lot of hard work. The finish at The Great Wall was symbolic and historic. We had made history, but it took an incredible amount of work by many hardworking people and we weren’t done yet.”

*Continue the story about The Tour of China [in Part 3 here](#).*

*AUTHOR NOTE: 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.*