

The Tour Of China, Part 3

CHAPTER 3: EAST MEETS WEST – MEDALIST’S MARKETING CHALLENGE

(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, most of which have never been shared before. Part 3 will cover important business lessons Medalist learned, and which could benefit the sport today.)*

The midpoint of the inaugural Kent Tour of China was in Shanghai. We had already made it through a lot of unplanned events, challenging transfers, and more than a few mishaps. No matter how well we had everything planned, something unexpected was right around the corner. The two Shanghai circuit races were in some ways the tamest days of the race. Mainly through industrial parks, they were set up for hospitality and viewing. Unlike the two previous road stages in the Guangdong province, the circuits gave ample time to activate Kent’s sponsorship.

The marketing team had cooked up some basic Western sports marketing for Stages 3 and 4. Kent had produced several kilometers of cardboard pennants, laced together with plastic lines. In major Chinese cities, boulevards are populated with trees every five meters, the perfect distance surmised to string up the pennants. We commenced stringing them up at about 8 pm the night before near the venue. Happy with the result, we couldn’t wait to show them off to BAT executives attending the next day. The flags would be a strong branding tool leading around the course, along with the billboards on the major thoroughfares we had placed.

One man’s marketing tool, as we found out, is another man’s shingle. Upon arrival a couple hours before the next day’s stage, all the pennant flags had conspicuously disappeared – in less than 14 hours. The police and local authorities had not taken them down because everyone knew we had cleared it with them. It became a mystery until leaving the venue after the event that night. There, pedaling a three-wheel bike with basket on back, was an elderly gentleman. A pile of Kent Tour of China pennants stacked in the basket at least two meters high. Beyond the pedaling marauder was a hut, with our pennants covering obvious holes of that makeshift home. Kent’s brand activation would go way longer than one day.

The same-day sampling was taken to a new level as packs of Kent cigarettes were handed out course side. The B.A.T. and Kent brand managers were ecstatic at the visual. It was their brand in motion. The mostly shy roadside spectators along the course weren’t sure if they could accept the packages at first. This wasn’t your local criterium crowd-dive for freebies. It was a new-form of brand engagement in a country waking up to western marketing.

About 30 minutes into the exercise, the state-run police had picked up on the energy beginning to resonate from the crowd. The throng seemed to be digging the freebies. They would turn around and

smoke the cigarettes on the spot as the cyclists warmed up near the start/finish line – another perfect photo op.

However, the spontaneous good-will and fun abruptly stopped when the energy from the crowd superseded the maximum fun volume the police would tolerate. A few billy-club swings later and the crowd's frenzy had subsided to a whimper as onlookers became gray and somber. That was the end of the great western marketing sampling experiment much to the dismay of the Kent brand manager.

The final stages of the race took place in Beijing and The Great Wall of China. The Great Wall is actually a series of walls constructed mostly running east to west over an amazing 3,500 kilometers lengthwise. The walls were erected over an estimated 1,000 years and were used to control borders, inhibit tribal raids, exclusion and inclusion to commercial trade routes. Garrisons and towers are included on many of the sections. It is by all standards one of humankind's greatest structural feats.

We had been able to schedule a photo shoot at The Great Wall on the second day off, following the transfer from Shanghai to Beijing. Even in 1995, not many Westerners had not been on The Great Wall of China. Removed from urban environments, the closest route from Beijing was more than 80 kilometers away. The Great Wall was an exotic excursion and often monitored by government agents. Aronhalt, Giannini, Watts and Page would accompany me from a staffing and production standpoint. It felt like an adult field trip into the unknown, and the bus we rented was noticeably abuzz with chatter. By many measures, it seemed as though this would be the highlight for the athletes with us.

Race leader Steve Hegg and teammate Jim Copeland, Saturn teammates Scott Mercier and US Pro champ Norman Alvis, Michael Carter, Andy Bishop, two-time world-champion Gianni Bugno and his teammate Marco Saligari (a former Tour de Suisse champion), and eventual winner Viatcheslav Ekimov became the photo bait. Surprisingly, all of them were up for the excursion, even the reserved Bugno, a larger than life cycling personality of that era. "Bugno, Saligari, Ekimov and us on The Great Wall," said Alvis, who raced the Tours of France and Italy, and in 2017 broke the Master's World Hour Record. "It was one of the most memorable days of my career off the bike. Once-in-a-life stuff."

After driving 30 kilometers out of Beijing's urban sprawl, the group would ride 50 kilometers with one security vehicle and the journalist van following. We had several noted international sports photographers on board, including Mike Powell (who has shot extensively for *Sports Illustrated*) and the legendary Graham Watson. Video would be limited that day due to heavy governmental restrictions.

We pulled up at The Great Wall and were greeted by several guards. Evidently, they hadn't got word that the brightly-colored world-class athletes with their funny-looking bikes were coming to pay a visit. Page used a 20-minute negotiation session to eventually convince guards to have the riders bring their bikes and themselves on to The Wall.

This section of The Wall was wide, almost eight to 10 meters in spots, and undulated with grades of 20 to 30 percent. As far as the eye could see, The Wall extended like some mystical serpent into the horizon. Guards were stationed at high points in towers with watchful eyes on the folly below. We were the only westerners within 80 kilometers, without doubt. And, judging by the Chinese on-lookers on The Wall, the cyclists were as common as seeing a three-headed dragon.

At one point, Alvis, Mercier and Aronhalt went down off The Wall on a section that featured camel rides. The sight of three Americans, two in team kits, riding camels inset with The Great Wall of China made for one of the day's best photo ops. Mercier and several other riders would eventually don Mongolian hats as part of the formal photo shoot.

Eventually, the guards grew leery, it was time to end the photo ops, but Bugno and Saligari had gone

missing. The rugged hills of The Wall had consumed them. They were out of sight and lost on The Wall. As the responsible agent, I scrambled up one crest then another to look for them. After about 10 minutes, I came to the apex on an elevated section only to look down and see Saligari pogoing on his front wheel with a circle of eight or so Chinese around him. They were clapping in unison and smiling. The international language was the bike.

The Kent Tour of China would end with a 30-kilometer time trial through the streets of Central Beijing. Plant and Birrell hoped it would be the event's crowning achievement. "A time trial of any distance in a densely-populated area is difficult," said Birrell, "but in Beijing, it was going to be like nothing we'd ever done." It would be another shot at landing on Mars for all of us.

Beijing had vast sections of Third World areas. It also had new commercial areas that made many part of the U.S. look ancient by comparison. The clash of social classes and architecture was most noticeable in the capital city, which would go on to host the 2008 Olympics. The finish of the race would be China's sporting window to the world 13 years before the transformational images of the Olympic Games.

The fact that 30-kilometers would show off the good, the bad and the ugly of Beijing wasn't lost on the Government, which wanted a good course to showcase Beijing. Everyone in the organization spent the whole week trying to figure out how the course could be secured, while showcasing good roads against a good backdrop of Beijing. Tiananmen Square was off limits, as well as the Forbidden City. And other districts had ripped up roads, or only newly-created dirt roads.

A course near the center city was eventually found that suited all parties. It was agreed the state-run police would occupy every 10 meters of the course to assure no one would impede the riders in the all-important time trial. It took an estimated \$500,000 USD to assure safe passage and the state-run police did such a good job that the throngs of people lining the road were quiet and at attention, like watching a military procession.

"It was the strangest thing," said Hegg, who was a time trial specialist like Ekimov. "Here I was hammering through thousands and thousands of people in one of the busiest cities in the world and no one was making a sound. Maybe some polite clapping here and there. Mostly crickets."

Ekimov would win the final time trial in dramatic fashion and don the final Kent-branded race champions jersey while holding up the winner's check for \$50,000 USD. Kent and governmental officials along with Plant and his partners were all smiles at the final awards ceremony. Ekimov would pop champagne on the podium. And, for the first time all day, spectators would erupt in cheers without fear.

A Russian Olympic gold medalist had defeated an American gold medalist in a bike race that traversed four provinces and more than 1,000 kilometers of race courses through some of the country's biggest cities. The East had met the West. Cycling had conquered a new frontier.

Most of the record keepers have forgotten the race. Results don't even show up on ProCycling Stats, by most the gold standard of results keeping. Wikipedia doesn't even show the dates and connects the 1995 and 1996 events with a race 18 years later. It's as if the Kent Tour of China was lost in the mist, a ghostly relic that was urban legend.

"All the moons had to align, and sometimes you had to push them together," said Plant more than two decades later. "For a bunch of westerners to go into China back then and pull off what we did is kind of unbelievable really."

Even the story for the first Kent Tour of China seemed like an improbable Hollywood script. Russian star Viatcheslav Ekimov beat American Steve Hegg on the final day to win the overall event after a week-long

battle. Ekimov's stoic all-business persona and elite pedigree was the perfect antagonist to the blonde-haired California surfer-boy vibrancy of the laid-back protagonist Hegg, who's Chevrolet-LA Sheriffs were like a band of misfits who raced like demons.

Russia vs. USA is easier to understand than a group of trade name teams. The Chinese media and curious on-site spectators ate up the circus environment and its two main characters even if they didn't know anything about professional cycling and the men in brightly-colored underwear. And more importantly, with the global television deal Plant had struck, the rest of the cycling world was watching.

"It really was this Rocky Balboa vs. Ivan Drago thing," said Hegg, referencing the movie characters from *Rocky IV*. "It was a great story. No doubt, I was Rocky and Ekimov was Drago. We had this underfunded small American team versus Novell, which was one of the big-budget teams at the time. This was before Twitter and Facebook and social media. Inside the industry, there wasn't this organic buzz because there were no photos and videos being posted by all the riders and teams. We had to rely on news wires and television and you weren't sure outside of the massive Chinese audience who was seeing you."

The television production, at the hands of Mole, would carry the storyline like a Hollywood script but without the Hollywood production equipment. "I remember it to be a pretty wild adventure," said Mole, who has produced and/or directed five Olympic Games, a decade of X-Games, various IAAF World Championships for Track and Field, as well as many of the top domestic U.S. stage races.

"We worked with CCTV, the largest television group in China and run by the government," Mole added. "In the mid 1990s, let's just say the equipment and edit facilities in China were more out of the 1970s. No digital equipment to speak of. We edited at night under the watchful eye of the military guard. The storyline with the American and Russian were great. What made it truly special were chronicling the scenes of China from heavy industrial cities with newly-building skylines, to these agrarian 18th century villages. To film it all during this time of radical transformation for a national and world audience was amazing stuff."

With that kind of exposure, Plant and the rest of the Medalist team could smell a winner. B.A.T.'s original executive on the project Dorian Burrows had outwardly said he doubted the whole event would be pulled off. The event was met with historic if not resounding success. The mission, which had hoped to land on Mars, all-but-landed on one of Saturn's rings.

"We had a great group of people who just wanted to 'get it done' and everything else in their careers has probably seemed easy," Plant says of that experience today. "This wasn't a project you just checked down once and moved on. You had to do things eight to 10 times over to make sure everything would go right. There were many times I didn't think we'd get it off the ground. The Tour de France organizers tried before us and never pulled it off. Looking back I'm super proud of our team. We definitely broke the mold and no one can take that away from us."

Some 32 days after the completion of the inaugural Kent Tour of China, Plant and I were seated in the conference room inside Grey Advertising in Hong Kong. On this day, Kent brand manager Andrew Johns entered the room in a jovial mood accompanied by two well-dressed Chinese women in their late 20s. Johns was born in Ireland, raised in England, well-schooled and landed a key B.A.T. executive position years earlier in Asia. True to brand form, he was a chain smoker and had a cigarette in hand, albeit unlit – yet.

Assembled was a 30-page proposal with an event summary included. The deck outlined future marketing plans and benefits for Kent. China had recently announced that all alcohol and tobacco brands would be forbidden in the sponsorship athletic and entertainment events in the future. The ban, however, would not go into effect for another seven years, letting existing events the ability to grandfather in sponsors.

It was 1995 and no Powerpoint slideshows or videos were super prevalent. The deck we had put together was spiral bound. The back page held the proposal for a seven-year deal offered to B.A.T. through 2002. It would maximize B.A.T.'s sponsorship length under the grandfather rule. Within the deck contained a final page with a proposal for \$56 million USD, or an average of \$8 million per year. A whopping figure in the day for a cycling event, but well worth it for the Kent brand under the circumstances.

Three hours passed as each page was scrutinized. Plant and I sacrificed our lung capacity as the chain-smoking Irishman and his two account representatives puffed out an air quality every bit as bad as Shenzhen or Guangzhou. Rounding the corner of the dialogue, you could sense Plant was waiting to negotiate the payoff. If not, donations to the American Lung Association would be on tap for both of us, or, a future bet on a cure for emphysema.

Johns finally arrived on the final page. He leaned back in his chair and calmly took a long drag of his Camel cigarette. He slowly blew the charcoal-colored smoke into the air, never looking up. Plant glanced over at me like a poker player knowing he had a flush yet didn't know if the house had him beat.

"So, what you're saying is \$56 million for seven years, is that right?" Burrows dead-panned, staring at the page and its figure. Without hesitation, Plant looked back at Johns stone-faced and confident: "That's right."

Johns took another drag of his cigarette, glancing slowly back down to the page. During this long pause, almost comically, smoke was swirling around his salt and pepper hair like a halo. All at once it seemed to me to be a match made in heaven, albeit a deal with the devil.

He finally looked up and revealed a Cheshire grin. "You have a deal, Mr. Plant, you have a deal."

Johns clapped his hands and on command one of the account reps rose up, left the room and quickly returned, wheeling in a cart of champagne – iced! It was one of pro cycling marketing's great moments: a \$56 million multi-year title sponsorship deal on a bike race with a multinational tobacco company, in a country full of bikes and cigarettes.

After a 30-minute celebration, Plant and I left the building. It was a proud moment. He had authored what should be considered one of the most ground-breaking events in cycling history, and his leadership left an indelible and poignant mark on me and many others in Medalist: never stop selling, never stop creating, and always innovate while finding solutions.

I felt exhilarated at the possibilities but Plant's jubilation turned pensive as we headed to the airport. Plant notoriously loved to haggle like a vendor plying his goods in one of China's silk trading alleys. It was part of what he loved and he had mastered the art. In this case, there was no haggling. Was the deal too easy for him?

"Dammit," he eventually said. "I knew we should have asked for more." After a few more seconds, however, a smile crested his face. The long-flight back to the United States wasn't going to be that bad after all.

Epilogue: the Kent Tour of China lasted one more year. 1996 had a different course and the protocols were less challenging. The first event was the milestone full of spectacular stories. It would forever be the trailblazer. Much speculation has been made on what caused the demise of Medalist after the final Tour of China. Differences between the owners was the real culprit. As for Plant, Birrell, Aronhalt, and myself, we all moved on to work at Turner Sports, focusing much of our energy on the 1998 Goodwill Games in New York City, another groundbreaking event with a budget of more than \$100 million USD. We would eventually find our way back into producing major stage races in the mid 2000s and continue today in

various iterations.

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.