

China's AFL link is kicking goals

Steve Harris

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WHEN Qantas flight 191 lands in Beijing on Monday night it will mark the start of a new phase in the Australia-China business relationship. On board are 1000 footballs, hundreds of pieces of football gear, a dozen businessmen, nine AFL rising stars, two sporting icons and one game plan: to kick goals for Melbourne.

The 10-day mission is a small part of the "tipping point" needed for Melbourne and Victoria truly to reap sustainable long-term benefits from 25 years of building relationships with China.

China already is the biggest source of Melbourne's 100,000 international university students, our biggest trading partner, and on the verge of being the biggest source of tourists. But governments and business are increasingly seeing the need to further elevate and enrich relationships.

This is why this mission has the support of major corporations and agencies with a big stake in the world's fastest growing economy. Supporters include Qantas and Australia Post, which have big ambitions in tourism, freight and logistics; the Australia-China Business Council, Australian Trade Commission and AustChams of Commerce in China.

The use of sport and popular culture to brand a city or country is not unfamiliar to Melbourne, and the Chinese are embracing it aggressively via the 2008 Olympics, 2010 Expo and 2011 Asia Games. China has an enormous appetite for "foreign" sports and will compete in the 2008 International Aussie Rules Cup in Melbourne for the first time.

If economics is increasingly to follow culture rather than the reverse, and our core cultural identity is sport, and our biggest sport is Australian football, so then "football diplomacy" can help open doors, relationships and economic engagement.

Sister-city strategies may be sniffed at by some, but the Melbourne-Tianjin relationship is widely regarded as one of the best in the world.

About 150 future business and government leaders from Tianjin have come to Melbourne on three-month programs, been taken to games at the MCG, been made honorary members of MELBOURNEfc, and made to feel welcome.

Our club this year also welcomed 4000 Chinese university students at a game, and we have regular coverage in local Chinese newspapers.

The mayor of Tianjin, the influential Dai Xianglong, a former governor of the People's Bank of China, asked Melbourne Mayor John So to take Australian football to China and make Tianjin a home of AFL.

While a demonstration and competitive match is still for future years, much progress has been made. This mission is the biggest football step into China and will generate considerable media coverage; Australian football is an approved program in Chinese schools; an AFL youth

ambassador is based in Tianjin; a range of students are regularly playing; physical education teachers receive training in Melbourne; the rules of the game have been translated; and Tianjin and Shanghai media firms are hungry for coverage.

Why is MELBOURNEfc so interested in China? Put simply, because we want to improve our business and brand, and the appeal of our game.

On the business/brand side, we support city and state strategies in China, we are embracing an important long-term constituency in the international students, we are helping Australian businesses reinforce their "Aussie positives" and profile through football, and we are looking for opportunities for Chinese companies to elevate their profile here.

On the game side, we see football, a game born in Melbourne, as the epitome of Australian values of competition, diversity, and physical well-being, all of appeal to China. And as the ICC develops cricket grounds in China, and cricket will be part of the 2011 Asia Games for the first time, so the infrastructure for football increases also.

Can any sporting code, business or city seeking to be serious about growth and relevance afford to ignore China? Consider just three facts:

- ■China has more speakers of English as a second language than there are in the whole of the US.
- ■Cities like Shanghai and Beijing have populations almost as large as our whole country.
- ■China must build infrastructure equivalent to Melbourne every two months to help accommodate the 300 million Chinese moving into its cities.

Exciting opportunities exist to elevate our club business, our game, our city, utilising our whole Melbourne cultural team: football, the arts, business, education. And we know the old Chinese proverb: when you drink from the well, remember who built the well.

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