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Get ready to vault the Great Wall

RICK BURTON

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Sporting News Radio talk show host Papa Joe Chevalier told his listeners the other day that on the Chinese calendar, 2001, the year Beijing won the right to host the Summer Olympic Games, is the Year of the Snake. Then he noted dryly that 2008 will be the Year of the Rat.

He wondered if those calendar animals foreshadowed anything for the International Olympic Committee and its various business partners.

The Snake, as you may recall from zooming around on Google, presents an air of charm and popularity since snakes are known as seducers. When money is involved, snakes are often "lucky and successful."

If that's the case, Beijing was positively snakelike; the city did not hesitate to spend on its second attempt at hosting the Olympic Games. In fact, according to some reports, the Chinese government has announced it will pony up more than \$20 billion in upgrades to Beijing's infrastructure and environment.

The Chinese Rat, on the other hand, is referenced as imaginative and generous to those it loves but having a "tendency to be quick-tempered and overly critical."

The last two terms, even if only symbolic, are signposts for directing traffic toward the Chinese Olympic Village ahead. The Snake is behind us, the Rat lives down the road.

Beijing was the right selection for 2008 and won this IOC election by more than a 2-to-1 margin over Toronto. It's clear that the IOC electorate believed, as a majority, that international sport truly needed to go to China. Their mandate signaled China as worthy, capable and suitably safe.

But what does this mean for global sports marketers?

Given the likely admission of China to the World Trade Organization in November, it suggests that if you plan to do business in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong or Quanzhou, you should start packing now. Certain organizations (i.e., Nike, McDonald's, Coke) are already there. Others put people on planes on July 13, the moment Beijing was selected.

The reason? China is not a country you simply drop in on (like, say, Australia or Greece perhaps). In the land of dragons, pandas and mystery, you need friends and an ongoing presence. You need employees who speak the language and mature leaders with long-standing relationships.

Seven years is a heartbeat in a land of hundred-year dynasties.

Many in the business community will suggest there is nothing new in that wisdom. Planning for all large-scale events requires a hunkered-down approach. But for many organizations, business in China will demand a completely new cultural awareness. It is not the West, not a capitalistic country like Japan nor a former British crown colony like Singapore or India.

China is distinct. My past three visits suggest it is a land of incredible history and stunning physical beauty. The Great Wall, the Forbidden City and the modern skyscrapers must be seen to be believed. But it is also a land of communism and the Chinese Olympic organizers already have a keen awareness of Western business behaviors and Western intentions.

That inward-looking intuition will be critical since few American corporations were actively involved with the 1980 Games in Moscow. When President Carter enacted his historic boycott (because of Russian military intervention in Afghanistan), our athletes and corporate dollars stayed home. Seoul in 1988 was a different economic landscape from Moscow, but that was 13 years ago and much in our industry has changed in the last decade.

Sponsors now routinely underwrite a host city's operational costs, and advertisers (often the same companies) finance the broadcast.

Beijing will represent the third consecutive non-North American Summer Olympics and fourth of five Olympiads in a row to take place on another continent (Sydney, Salt Lake City, Athens, Turin, Beijing). That means sports marketing agencies with bilingual employees have a wonderful opportunity to support their clients and create healthy annual retainers.

It means networks, such as NBC Sports, and Internet providers like AOL, Yahoo! and CBS SportsLine will need their A game because the time zone issue remains a thorny opportunity. Additionally, if the TV ratings fall again in Athens, Internet players will undoubtedly push new IOC President Jacques Rogge to open doors for real-time transmissions of images, audio and results.

Regardless of media coverage (or mediums involved), time on the ground, not time as a zone, will dictate business success in China. So will appropriate behavior and knowledge of this unique Eastern culture.

China, much more than Salt Lake, Seoul/Tokyo (the 2002 World Cup) or Athens, will provide a telling road map for the future global sports business economy.

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