

# THE SLOW TRAIN TO CHINA

BY TR FOLEY

**THE UFC IS MAKING INROADS IN ASIA—  
BUT WITH AN ATYPICAL APPROACH.**

**D**ana White has a brash, unapologetic, in-your-face marketing style. China has the strongest economy on the planet, bursting onto the economic stage with vigor, determination, and little regard for protocol. Seems like a match made in heaven—the burgeoning and bullying superpower and the rogue billion-dollar sports franchise. However, while China and the UFC share a similar reputation, their courtship won't resemble the head-butting of mountain rams as much as it will the stylistic forms of Shaolin monks.

Noticing that their brand wasn't well represented in the Asian market, White and the Fertitta brothers hired Mark Fischer, a veteran brand manager who recently ended a 12-year stint promoting the NBA in China and throughout Asia. By any metric available, Fischer did one hell of a job. Visit any major city (and in a country of 1.6 billion people, most cities are major) and you'll likely have access to an NBA television station, local highlight shows, and droves of fan websites.

The NBA is arguably the most powerful sports brand in the country. You get that sense just by walking around Beijing, where it seems like every other shirt being worn is a Kobe Bryant or Yao Ming jersey. Countryside communities have more basketball rims

than soccer nets. Even VPN connections—which allow Chinese Internet users to scale the Great Red Firewall to access sites like Facebook and YouTube—are hidden behind NBA fan websites.

If the UFC is to succeed in China, it will need broad access to viewers—something that is difficult with a nationwide Firewall and 35,000 Internet police reading emails. “We need to get media programming, and we need to get on broader platforms like CCTV5 [Chinese National Sports Channel], as well as the national satellite stations and the provincial stations around the country,” says Fischer. The goal is also to get onto the Internet where the UFC feels it will have more flexibility. “We need to get on the biggest portals here, places like SoHu and QQ [online communities with more than 700 million users]. China is the biggest Internet market in the world, and it provides less sensitivity to content than the television.”

One of the reasons the UFC is focused on China is the advantage of their enormous marketplace—primary among them is the nation's unquenchable appetite for brand-name goods. Shanghai, the economic engine that runs China, is filled with these representations of wealth—high-end retail stores like Fendi, Gucci, Mont Blanc, and Tag Huer are in gross excess.



# WORLD DOMINATION



## INDIA

The martial arts scene in India has always consisted first and foremost of Kushti wrestling, one of the most popular sports in the country. With Sushil Kumar winning bronze at the 2008 Olympic games, government officials began reinvesting in the sport with the hopes of one day winning a gold medal. Kumar's success and the sheer number of poor—but physical—wrestlers could provide talent for the UFC, while the 1.2 billion current residents should provide enough marketing incentive.

## RUSSIA

The best wrestling country on the planet also has a strong tradition of combat sambo. While Fedor is tracking south, there is an entire country of tough-nut former wrestlers and sambo fighters looking for bigger money than what's being offered by Russian promotions. Should the UFC ever make inroads in Mother Russia, it won't be without some catering to M-1 Global. Less profit, but more brand reach could be something the UFC is willing to do.

## MEXICO

There are 111 million people in Mexico and a majority of them want to watch a fight. Street fairs in Mexico City are known to showcase 9-year-old pugilist sans headgear. Cain Velasquez's success in the States is being heavily marketed to the Mexican community, but the transition to MMA from historically favored boxing, seems slowed. While Cain is a draw, he's a rare heavyweight talent. Lightweight fighters of Mexican descent will be the key to UFC domination in Mexico.

Stores that only dot Chicago's Magnificent Mile are stacked one above another in dozens of shopping districts around the city, sometimes even placed across the street from one another, as if by accident. What Fischer, White, and the UFC seem to understand is that the Chinese want to participate in popular Western culture through brand-name designers and brand-name sports. The Chinese love winning at sports—just look at the \$50 billion plus they spent on producing the Olympic Games. "This is a country that looks up to successful franchises, and we are one," says Fischer. "We can build a relationship with them and market to their needs and cultural values. This can be a powerful marketplace for the UFC."

If there are obvious advantages to accessing the Chinese market, there are also incredibly complicated roadblocks. The marketing genius of the UFC in America is based on representing all races, creeds, and individual characteristics. Fans latch onto the fighter they feel represents their particular flavor of aggression or appreciable life story. In China, and across Asia, the multi-culturalism we elevate is less celebrated, making the march to success more tenuous. For example, Tiequan Zhang is the first Chinese fighter in the UFC, and he has a 2-1 record

since joining Zuffa. He's a tough fighter with a wrestling background that seems easily marketable. But Zhang is Inner Mongolian, and though he's half Han (the ethnic majority in China), he's not considered Chinese enough to be a Bruce Lee-like celebrity. Fischer didn't comment on Zhang, but he does think the UFC brand will continue to grow, despite any type of class or ethnic conflict.

Fischer also notes that his job isn't just in Beijing and Shanghai. "This job is about more than China, it has ramifications throughout all of Asia," says Fischer. Even with White announcing that he expects the UFC to host a fight in China within the next 18 months, Fischer and his team are working on deals in the Philippines, Korea, and Japan.

The UFC's reliance on Fischer's talents already seems to be paying off. In fewer than eight months, he's already used contacts to create new opportunities for the company overseas. The UFC is airing *The Ultimate Fighter* from the Philippines, and Dana White has promised that the UFC will come to China before 2013. "China has a rich fighting tradition, and the UFC is right for China," says Fischer. It's just going to take a little time to really make the big impact we all want to see. 