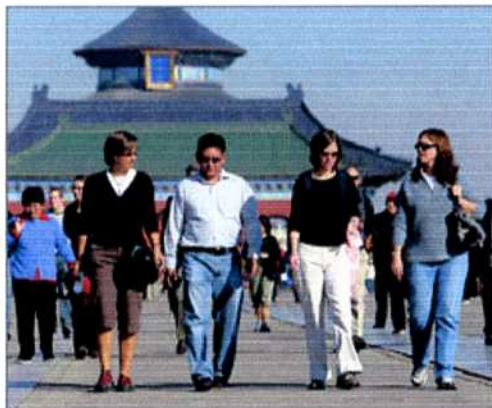




When in China: Winning more than medals

Updated 11/8/2006 1:07 AM ET

E-mail | Save | Print | Reprints & Permissions | Subscribe to stories like this **RSS**



Enlarge By Natalie Behring for USA TODAY

U.S. Olympic team officials tour the Temple of Heaven in Beijing.

By Vicki Michaelis, USA TODAY

BEIJING — Aron McGuire's taxi driver, Li Wan Ming, has been listening to English language tapes while waiting for McGuire to tour a section of the Great Wall.

McGuire, manager of elite athlete programs and national teams for USA Track & Field, sees this when he returns. He points to the tape player and says, "You speak English, and I'll speak Chinese, OK?"

For the next hour, they trade words and phrases. After they repeat the Chinese words for "stop" and "go" several times, McGuire asks, "How do you say, 'Watch out!'" Li honks his horn. They laugh.

The exchange takes place far from playing fields, yet it is a glimpse at the USA's unprecedented preparations for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

The U.S. Olympic Committee, looking for every edge in what is expected to be a tight medals race and trying to avoid any "ugly American" incidents that could hamper its ongoing efforts at better international relations, for the first time ever plans to train the U.S. delegation, including athletes, in the culture of the host country.

The USOC also plans to outline much more specifically the behavior it expects from U.S. athletes at an Olympics. At this year's Winter Games in Torino, Italy, misconduct such as the public feuding between speedskaters Chad Hedrick and Shani Davis marred the U.S. image.

"It's the old adage of your weakest link is how you're going to be judged," says Steve Roush, the USOC's chief of sport performance. "We're just going to take and strengthen every one of our links so that from our standpoint everybody's fully prepared, from top to bottom, on how to best be an ambassador at the Olympic Games."

Mending a battered image

The training began last week in Beijing, where nearly 60 USOC officials and Olympic and Paralympic team leaders — the people responsible for directly managing the athletes and their needs at a Games — learned everything from Chinese dining etiquette to how to build business relationships to how to find the train station. The USOC will bring the team leaders to Beijing again next year; many of them will return several times before the Olympics for competitions and planning purposes.

Last week, they also did case studies of Games incidents, including the

Tickets

Buy and sold out

Search by

Loc

Genr

Power

Ticket hol
Looking t
now.

TEAM USA PREPARES FOR 2008

Photo gallery: Americans hope to succeed both on and off the playing field at the 2008 Summer Olympics



DON'T WRITE ON BUSINESS CARDS

Team leaders and other officials from the U.S. Olympic Committee last week learned important points about doing business with China before and during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Some highlights from the presentation by [Shen Xiao Hua](#), a senior trainer and consultant with [San Francisco-based Cultural Savvy](#):

Greetings: Handshakes in China are gentler and last longer than the typical American handshake. The greeting might come with a short bow, from the shoulders, not the waist. If it's a first-time meeting, business cards are always exchanged. Present your business card with two hands and receive the other person's card with two hands. Read it, perhaps asking a question such as correct pronunciation of a name, before putting it away. Do not write on the card.

Relations: Cultivating relationships over a period of time is central to doing business. Chinese people are process-oriented rather than goal-oriented. Saving face is very important, whether your own or that of the person with whom you're dealing. The words "no" and "not" can cause loss of face, so they should be replaced with phrases such as "that would be inconvenient." Formal titles and adherence to hierarchy are highly valued. Consensus and cooperation are emphasized over competition. Modesty is prized more than confidence.

Dining: The most important host sits facing the door, and the most important guest sits to the host's right. Guests should sample every dish. Do not put your chopsticks standing up in your rice, as it symbolizes death.

If you are hosting, walk your guests to the door, or to their car, then pay after they leave. It is impolite to handle money in front of guests.

Colors: Red is a lucky color in China. People in China wear red to weddings. When someone dies, the Chinese people wear white. Red and gold paper are best for gift-wrapping. White or black paper symbolizes death.

By Vicki Michaelis

Hedrick-Davis quarrel.

"What happened in Torino put a new perspective on what the USOC needs to do to make (the USA) look good," says Lindsay Mintenko, national team managing director for USA Swimming. "We all need to work together to show a positive image of U.S. Olympic sports in general, not just the USOC or swimming or snowboarding."

The USOC plans to start taking the message directly to potential U.S. Olympians and coaches through a new Olympic Ambassador Program next year.

"What we are trying to do now is be more clear as well as more explanatory on expectations and walk through circumstances that might arise and how athletes can react and deal with those," USOC CEO Jim Scherr says.

In an era of emerging sport superpowers and eroding U.S. influence globally, the USOC says it can no longer carry a go-forth-and-conquer attitude and little else into an Olympic Games. The USA has won the medals race at the last three Summer Olympics, but in Beijing challenges to that dominance are expected from China, Russia and Germany.

Especially with China's influence in sports and world economics rising, the USOC knows its goodwill with the Chinese must continue after the Games.

"The 'come in, take over and win and then leave' — that's where the ugly American moniker really seems to (come from)," Roush says. "It's like, 'They really didn't embrace the culture, they didn't embrace Olympism.'"

An insular approach also can leave a bitter taste among international sponsors and officials whom the USOC must court for funding and the all-important right to host an Olympics. The USOC has made burnishing its image a top priority as it ponders a bid for the 2016 Summer Olympics.

International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge repeatedly has encouraged USOC leaders to improve international relations.

Ignoring the culture of the host country also ignores the effects environment can have on athletic performance. The last time the Summer Games were held in an Asian country, the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, the USA finished third in the medal count.

Getting down to business

The USOC training began with an all-day session by Shen Xiao Hua, a China native who works for Cultural Savvy, a San Francisco-based company that specializes in cross-cultural training. Parts of Shen's presentation were basic, such as what countries border China (there are 14).

Other topics were more complex. She gave an overview of several tenets of Chinese culture, including the ultra-important function that relationships play in business.

"That's my biggest concern. If we have to have something done by a certain timeline, how do we cut through all of that and get it done without becoming ugly Americans about it," says Tom Parrish, 2008 Olympic team leader for USA Archery.

Some of the team leaders put their training into use immediately. Carol Callan and Sean Ford from USA Basketball met Thursday afternoon with an official from the Chinese basketball association to discuss possible competitions between the USA and China leading up to the Olympics. They quietly fretted at one point over whether they should have allowed her, as the host, to sit facing the door. (Answer: it was OK.)

"We're not going to get anything done in this country if we don't play by their rules," Ford says.

Acclimating athletes to the culture they'll encounter at the 2008 Olympics was part of the reason the U.S. men's team played two exhibition games in Guangzhou, China, this summer before the world championships in Japan.

"It's one of those things where, it's like with my own kids, when I tell them what they should know, they aren't listening. So you create opportunities for them to experience it," Callan says.

Last week, few embraced the experience as fully as USA Track & Field's McGuire. During a group visit to the Temple of Heaven, he began talking to several Chinese schoolchildren and led them in a chant. During a scavenger hunt, he bought a green hat — taboo in China because it marks the wearer as a cuckold — and tried to get a picture of a taxi driver wearing it. The driver held it at arm's length and laughed along with McGuire.

"When we work with our athletes," McGuire says, "we as a staff can say, 'We've been there, we've done it, it's a great situation and something to be excited about.' "

Posted 11/8/2006 12:11 AM ET

Updated 11/8/2006 1:07 AM ET

[E-mail](#) | [Save](#) | [Print](#) | [Reprints & Permissions](#) | [Subscribe to stories like this](#) **RSS**

Newspaper Home Delivery - [Subscribe Today](#)

[Home](#) • [News](#) • [Travel](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

About USA TODAY.com: [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Jobs with Us](#)
[Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Right](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Press Room](#)

News Your Way: [Mobile News](#) | [Email News](#) | [Add USA TODAY.com RSS feeds](#)

Partners: [USA WEEKEND](#) | [Sports Weekly](#) | [Education](#) | [Space.com](#)

Copyright 2007 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.