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Demons' diplomacy charms China

Stephen Rielly | May 22, 2007

CHINA, home to the world's fastest-growing economy, has a voracious craving for Australian iron ore, but might it also have an appetite for Australian football?

A party, which included officials from the Melbourne Football Club, Melbourne City Council and the AFL, returned from a 10-day "football diplomacy" trip late last week convinced that if it doesn't now, it will.

Over the course of the visit, which took in the cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Melbourne's sister city Tianjin, commitments from several Chinese education, health and sports authorities were secured, allowing for the introduction of the Australian game on an unprecedented scale over the next 12 months.

Moreover, according to Melbourne chief executive Steve Harris, the AFL got strong indications from several large regional television broadcasters that they are keen to add AFL content to their schedules.

"Bear in mind that the word 'regional' in China has more than a slight difference of meaning to its use here. Tianjin, Beijing and Shanghai have all got between 15 and 20 million people each in their cities," Harris said.

Melbourne has been keen to forge a relationship in China that, through development of the game there and here, may lead to commercial benefits.

To that end, the Demons are courting the sizeable Chinese community in Melbourne, specifically the student population, which numbers approximately 25,000. The club was also present at last week's AsiaConnect 2007: New Opportunities in Asia conference.

The Melbourne website, for example, recently has added content printed in Mandarin and this Sunday, up to 1000

Chinese students will be at the match against the Kangaroos at the MCG with explanations of the game and comments provided in Mandarin.

Harris confirmed that a squad of up to 15 players will be heading to China in October to run a series of clinics and training seminars for expatriate and local players, one for as many as 500 children in Tianjin, where the possibility of playing an exhibition match next year has been explored.

The Demons intend to bring at least one and possibly two Chinese players to Melbourne over the summer, to train with the team and learn more about the game in the hope that the exchange will help with the penetration of football into the schools market. "So that, at the very least, they can go back and play and teach and train other locals," Harris said.

"It is such a vast country and quite clearly different from region to region but we were very heartened by the developments that were made. For example, we received confirmation that Australian football has been granted state endorsement for schools and universities to play. The Tianjin education commission committed to having Australian football in 10 junior schools, 10 middle schools and three universities by the end of this year.

"Through a national fitness and wellbeing campaign, known as the Sunlight program, which aims to offer every child one hour of physical exercise per day, schools and universities will be supported if they opt to add Australian football to their curriculums.

"All of which opens up the need to train and teach more locals about the game and its various forms of development programs, such as Auskick."

China is also expected to participate for the first time in the AFL-sponsored International Cup next year, as the competition broadens from 12 to 16 nations.

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