

Disney Road Trip With the 1995 Chinese World Cup Champions

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The following is a day-by-day log--initially sent out to the racewalk internet mailing list--detailing a visit to LaGrange, GA by the 1995 World Cup winners in March of 1996:

Tuesday, March 26th, 1996:

20 km World Cup Champion Zewen Li and 10 km champ Hongmaio Gao went nuts at the Ryan's Steak House all you can eat buffet and opted for a nap instead of an afternoon workout. 50 km god Yongshen Zhao showed up with his Provincial coach and Sonny--our translator for the Beijing World Cup trip.

We did a 25 km at "the lake" at 5:00 down to 4:35 per km--not what I would have chosen for a post-20 km race workout, but then again, how often do you get the chance to have your butt kicked by a world champion? (This workout was 2 days after I walked 1:26:28 at the National Invitational.)

The first thing I noticed was Zhao's incredible stride rate, especially considering the relatively slow pace at the outset--5:00 per kilometer or 8:00 mile pace. I was clicking off about 188 strides per minute while Zhao was at about 206. He's not all that short--probably 5'8" or 5'9" so he's sacrificing a good deal of stride length to maximize his turnover.

Not to make anybody jealous, but it was about 70 degrees, sunny and fairly humid today, but Zhao wore a full warm-up suit, a rain jacket and a hat. I was expecting to take them off after the warm-up, but he wore them for the entire 2 hour + workout. Zhao also drank only as an afterthought. He didn't bring any of his own bottles, and actually seemed surprised that we would bother with water during our workout. He also didn't drink anything after the workout. This reminds me of two things: First, the Byelorussian coach, Boris Drazdov told an assembled group of walkers and coaches in 1994 that athletes shouldn't drink much water. We at first figured he meant "vodka," which is pretty much the same word to them, but no, he meant H₂O. Second, between bowls of Cap'n Crunch I once read a book on macrobiotics--basically a Taoist diet plan. Well, one of the tenets is that drinking at meals, or drinking too much water in general throws your yin and yang all to hell

for some reason. I guess the kidneys can get used to just about anything, but my muscles get pretty tight if I don't drink lots of water.

Which brings me to the next point. Zhao didn't stretch at all the entire day. He also laughed at the idea of lifting weights when I brought him to the weight room. I guess I figured he'd be doing ta'i chi all day or something, but stretching, sit-ups, etc., don't fit in the program--which probably explains the high turnover rate: No stretching + no hydration = extreme muscle tightness. Stride length suffers so you make up for it with faster turnover. Just a theory...

What Zhao does like is a good Jacuzzi and a sauna. So do I. I love a relaxing 20 minute steam after a hard workout. Not for Zhao. This guy thinks the sauna is another workout, or worse, a competition. I swear he was in there an hour if he was in a minute. I thought it was a little weird that he stayed in the (hot) Jacuzzi for nearly half an hour, but he really gets nuts in the sauna. He did get up for about 45 seconds every 10 minutes or so to splash some water on his face, but he probably did that so I would think he was human. He probably used HOT water...

I dropped the kids off at Ryan's again for dinner and left them, so I don't know how much sleep they get, but we're going out for a nice 30 km jaunt tomorrow at 8:00. More details tomorrow.

P.S.: I interviewed Mr. Zhao's coach and came up with the following: The 50 km guys do 200 kilometers (125 miles) per week. The 20 km guys do 160 km (100 miles) and the women o 120 kilometers (75 miles) per week. Of course they don't have Nintendo to keep them busy, so we win on that front.

Wednesday:

Well, I guess these guys are better weather forecasters than we are. Today arrived wet and cold--the sweats and rain suit were appropriate, just a day early. Zhao wasn't allowed out to play today. Coach seemed to think it was a tremendous waste of time to drive all the way out to the lake to train (20 minutes). The Chinese did their training in loops around the hotel--it couldn't be more than a 300 meter loop. It seems they do ALL of their training at home either on the track, or in loops around the perimeter of the stadium. That way coach can keep an eye on technique and turnover rate. It also gives him something to do--he must have gotten awfully bored waiting for us to circle back on our 10 kilometer loops yesterday.

Anyway, the Chinese had their national championships on March 10th. That and jet lag may explain their relatively easy schedule at the moment. They seem to be content with doing one or two 1-hour workouts around the hotel--I bailed on this invitation today.

A lot of people have asked for more technique information. A few asked about forward lean. I'm not sure who's fomenting this myth, but I'm still waiting for it to die. If you watch tapes of any of the top walkers, there isn't a "3-5 degree lean from the ankles." Any lean is an artifact of a strong rearward propulsion (which the Chinese don't have, but many; the Italians, Mexicans, etc., do.) Let's say a walker has a 36" leg, measured from hip to heel. When the leg passes behind the vertical, it actually "grows" several inches. Sort of. As the walker pushes from behind he flexes the ankle and rolls up onto the toe. The leg becomes a longer (more powerful) lever. Instead of a 36" lever, he has a 40 or 42 inch lever. Imagine a camera tripod with 2 legs at 40" and one shortened to 36". There is going to be a bit of a "forward lean," but in the walker, this lean actually stops at the waistband. (Camera tripods don't have waist bands, so we'll talk about walkers now...) The hips are slightly tilted forward as an artifact of this "longer" rear leg, but most elites walk with an erect upper body posture. Carrying the torso with a forward lean puts a great deal of strain on the lower back and hamstrings, limits hip mobility and puts the center of gravity forward of the knee of the front leg, which can easily lead to "creeping." Anyway, the Chinese don't really use much rear drive, mostly just a hell of a lot of short quick turnover. Shoulders are very relaxed with the hands carried low--below the waistband.

Bengt Bentsson noted that Zhao was the only walker carted away in an ambulance at the 1995 World Championships in Gothenburg, Sweden. Maybe they can get by on a cool day without drinking, and maybe any day if it's "only" a 10 km or 20 km, but a hot 50 is deadly if you don't drink. This may also explain why the Chinese have a stable of great 10 and 20 km walkers, and only 1 good 50 km guy. (They only sent 1 walker to the Olympics in the 50 km--their 2nd best walker "only" does 3:54.) If we can pull these guys away from the macaroni and cheese at Ryan's we're going to a Chinese restaurant tonight. Should be fun. More on this and whatever else turns up tomorrow.

Thursday:

It would be "culturally insensitive" for me to say these guys are nuts... Oh what the Hell--These guys are nuts! LaGrange woke to a light drizzle this morning with temperatures expected to reach 72 degrees my mid-day. I pulled up outside the Chinese contingent's block of rooms at the LaGrange Super-8 motel at 9:00 a.m. as instructed. The coaches, Ms. Gao and Yongshen Zhao piled into the van, but Mr. Li took another 10 minutes to get dressed in his vintage Rocky Balboa grey sweats.

Apparently Zhao's nickname is "sleeping boy" because of his Herm Nelson-like hibernational tendencies, while Mr. Li is more of a night owl who doesn't get as much sleep but is harder to get up in the morning. (Of course Herm--our own Mr. Bear--combines both qualities by sleeping constantly AND having great difficulty getting up for morning workouts.)

On the way to the track--or so we thought--we nearly passed the West Georgia Commons Mall. As soon as the coaches saw the mall they began frantically gesturing for us to pull in. I figured they wanted more rain gear, or perhaps they saw the signs for the J. C. Penny White Sale, so I complied. As soon as we got in, Sonny, our semi-fluent translator, looked the place over, smiled and said "O.K., we stay." Another coach clapped his hands together, said "gnug hao" (or something close to it) and the walkers scrambled. Whether they even intended to go to the track, I'll never know, but I had to quickly resign myself to the fact that I was going to be buzzing the blue-haired mall walkers for the next 90 minutes whether I liked it or not....

The morning workout is called "general training." I started out jogging with Mr. Zhao. Even at a very slow pace, the Chinese employ a very quick stepping shuffling jog. Everything is done to enforce a very high cadence. After 12 minutes coach barked another gnug hao and Zhao began racewalking at a very slow pace, but retained his very high cadence--about 200 strides per minute. I figured we were only doing about 5:30 per km, so it was very difficult to keep up the turnover. Things only got worse when I realized he was actually doing a drill the whole time. Not only was Zhao spinning his wheels extremely quickly, he was doing it while walking on his heels the entire time! My shins gave out after less than one minute; Zhao continued for 5. When we finally began walking in earnest, Zhao kicked the pace down a bit (5:15 per km?) but kept the turnover rate way up. After 10 minutes I noticed Mr. Li was doing something closer to what I would judge to be racewalking, so I bailed out and latched onto Li. Big mistake...

Li looked like he was walking at about 8 minute mile pace. As soon as I hooked up with him I realized he was actually walking closer to 7:20, and after a few minutes he decided to put it to me, kicking it down to under 7:00 pace. (All paces are based on heart rate, perceived exertion, and a complicated algorithm using an extrapolation from the time taken to walk from Radio Shack to the Video Arcade.) We plugged away for 45 minutes until coach hao gnugged. We slowed to about 8:00 mile pace again, which came as a tremendous relief to both the UPS man, and the woman valiantly walking laps while towing an oxygen bottle and an aluminum walker. My reprieve lasted about 10 minutes then came another gnug hao and we were off to the races again. By the final two laps we were strafing another flight of mall walkers and legitimate shoppers at close to 6:00 per mile. Coach clapped and coughed up another command; Li immediately segued into the quick step shuffle-jog for a final 5 minutes to bring the total to over 90 minutes.

After the workout the vultures descended. Both coaches sized me up, squeezing my calves and playing with

my feet, ankles and arms. Then, they finally concurred that I had "much abiwrity." Then they proceeded to mercilessly hack away at my technique. The main problem was shoulder tightness. I was able to do what they wanted as far as strong, low arm swing goes, but they were really not very happy with my shoulder tightness. They tried to get me to walk in place with both a very strong hip drive and a very strong arm stroke with relaxed shoulders. My shoulders are very tight. My shoulders have always been very tight. Finally one of them asked my age. When I told them I was thirty they looked at each other in amazement/disgust then immediately gave up on me. Oh well, I guess I didn't make the cut....



World Class Mallwalkers. The Chinese are used to doing all their training either on the track or in the parking lot of the track stadium. They do not like big loops or out and back course because they are used to being constantly watched by their coaches. On a rainy day we went mallwalking--at 7:15 per mile pace!

On the way back to the Super-8 I found out more about H₂O and the macrobiotic way. The Chinese don't drink much water at meals because it dilutes the "digestive juices." They do drink in 50 km races, but only after the first 20 km. They drink a mixture of lemon water and minerals--K, Zn, Mg, Ca, etc. Plain water dilutes the sweat, which I guess is bad. Also, they eat all of their vegetables, then meats. And they never, ever eat tomatoes and cucumbers at the same sitting. Maybe too yin, maybe too yang, or maybe just too gassy. I don't know.

According to the coaches, altitude training is very important for racewalkers. They all train at 6,000 - 7,000 feet. Coaches disagree how far in advance to come down to sea level before a race. Some say 7 days, some say as long as 20 (I've always gone with ten, so I guess I split the difference pretty well). They agree that the TYPE of training at altitude is much more of a concern than the timing of the return, however. Unfortunately they didn't elaborate. They never seem to give many details. Any time we start getting close to something really juicy, the coaches all smile and change the subject. Or the language...

Li was 3d at the national championships (Olympic Trails) on March 10th. There were 5 walkers about to go under 1:20, all within 10 seconds of each other. In the mad dash for the finish 2 were disqualified, including Bo Lingtang who holds the world road record for 20 km.

Things may get very interesting. I was planning to fly to Miami this weekend to do a clinic. Sonny got really

excited when he heard this, and he's trying to convince the other athletes to go if I drive the 15 passenger van instead of flying. I'm not at all above being a bad influence--especially if there's a big van, free gas, and 7 impressionable Chinese nationals involved. (Although Sonny was the one who suggested the topless bar last night..)

More after the afternoon workout.

Thursday Afternoon:

Gao stretched! I escorted Hongmao Gao and Zewen Li to the track with Sonny and Ms. Gao's coach. Yongshen Zhao hibernated through lunch and was unrouseable for the afternoon workout. Apparently he stayed at the mall until noon. By my calculations he walked approximately 35 kilometers at 5:30 per km (based on the Radio Shack/Video Arcade extrapolation) in very oddly shaped 400 meter loops on a slippery tile floor, dodging baby strollers, blue hairs and surly teens the whole way.

Although nobody ever seems to know what the workout is until it's finished, I had taken a late morning nap and was ready to do whatever Mr. Li did. Well, as it turned out, Li wasn't scheduled to do anything--he just wanted to get out of the hotel room for a while. I almost decided to do whatever Ms. Gao was going to do, but I wisely decided to do my scheduled 12 x 200 meters so I would be ready for Li tomorrow. Good thing. Gao was on for a 5 x 2 km workout that would have blown any chance of me walking like a Hunan tomorrow.

Gao did the shuffle jog for 2 km, then went right into the workout. Although she did take off her rain pants, she kept on tights, a sweat top, and rain jacket. It was probably 60 degrees with a light mist, which would have made for a comfortable walk in a t-shirt and shorts for this kind of threshold workout.

Gao started out hitting 1:55 per lap, but steadily dropped that down to 1:50s. Her last 2 km was a very comfortable looking 9:06. Rest intervals were between 2 and 3 minutes, but I'm not sure what decided the duration. Gao's coach wore a Polar Heart Rate Monitor watch, but I didn't notice her wearing a transmitter, and he didn't seem to be looking for a rest interval heart rate from her. After the 5 x 2 km Gao walked two very fast 400 meter reps with a 400 meter jog in between. After her workout, Gao did two laps of the shuffle-jog, then 1 lap of backwards jogging to "relax" the hamstrings. (Coach's terminology.) Then she did a weird arm swinging exercise to "relax" her upper body, then some kind of funky jig to loosen up whatever was left, I imagine.

Then it happened! Gao did about 20 seconds of a bouncy squatting hip flexor stretch, and about 20 seconds of a bouncy one leg out to the side squatting groin stretch. If I blinked I would have missed it, but she stretched!!!

While Gao was training I gave Li his first driving lesson. I'm so proud! I may need his services on the (probable) road trip tomorrow. The vote was five in favor, with Mr. Zhao's coach, by far the oldest of the three coaches, abstaining. "Confucius" abstained because everyone else has so far been afraid to tell him about the proposed trip. Apparently he has veto power over any majority. So much for democratic reform...

On the way back to the hotel we went food shopping: Empty cart up aisle one, down aisle two, up aisle three, down aisle four, half way up aisle five, and ...RAMAN NOODLES!!! At 19 cents a package it's VERY difficult to spend \$30 dollars, but these guys pulled it off. There was no Kim Chi left in LaGrange--if there ever was any--so Sonny & Co. rounded out their supply cache with three 20-stick packs of Doublemint gum and a 24-bar box of Milky Ways. And the U.S. National Team coaches think WE'RE weird on trips!

Thursday Evening:

The kids are apparently heroes back home. When I told my friend Yuan, a.k.a. "Stanley" (Why do the Chinese

pick such goofy names when they try to Americanize? I'll have to ask Sonny...) that the athletes were here he got really excited and made me take him to the motel to get his picture taken with them. He knew everything about them--wins, losses, DQs. He seemed especially smitten with the lovely Ms. Gao...

When we first got there we caught the kids watching MTV. Now I know why they want to go to Miami. It's Spring Break! Sino-American relations may suffer as a result, but we're packing them in the van and heading to Miami tomorrow! Call ESPN--this is going to be a hoot!

Friday Morning:

My life as a Chinese racewalker continues... I was up at 5:30 this morning to train with Mr. Li. Gao was also out, but Zhao slept in--I must have trained him into the ground on Tuesday. Poor lad.

The Chinese are not as ascetic as I had first thought. This morning's workout was around the motel parking lot. But the loop was not the 300 meter torture route that I had described earlier. The loop actually circumnavigates both the Super-8 AND the Ramada, so it comes in at a spacious 500 meters.

When the Chinese train easy they train EASY. The workout consisted of a 12-minute shuffle-jog, 45 minutes of EASY racewalking (probably 6:00 per km, although I no longer have the Radio Shack for reference) followed by another 5 minute shuffle-jog and a series of goofy cool-down exercises.

I'm starting to feel a little guilty about convincing the Chinese that it will only take eight hours to get to Miami. 11 is more likely, and 13 is a possibility. But then again, I don't suppose the Chinese felt too guilty when they bombed Pearl Harbor. Or was that the Germans?

Anyway, about the sweats. The coaches are very concerned that they don't have a reliable supply of Chinese herbs in LaGrange. (Although "Confucius" has gotten very adept at using the crowbar from the van to dig wild onions out of the Super-8s front lawn.) They're afraid that the athletes may get sick from the changeable weather, and they don't want them to have to take American medicine because of IAAF drug testing. They were adamant that none of the walkers use anything illegal... The coaches are also concerned that they don't have a reliable source of Kim Chi in LaGrange so it's off to Miami!

Friday Afternoon:

After the morning workout, I went back to my place to shower, then--rather fortuitously as it turns out--I stopped in at the car rental agency to sign on to the insurance policy for our gorgeous Chinese Army red 15-passenger highway assault vehicle. I never did get around to telling my passengers that it would probably be at least 10 hours to get to Miami--barring unforeseen problems, and with the speedometer needle buried at 85 mph.

Mr. Li turned out to be a very curious "Giver of Directions Behind Yourself"--Sonny's translation of "Backseat Driver." His one driving lesson gave him all the ammo he needed to egg me on to drive as fast as possible. He doesn't even know what miles per hour mean, but if the needle fell below 80 mph I heard about it.

Our first stop was at a gas station outside of Plains, Georgia--home of Billy Carter and about 300 other Bumpkins. The featured attraction was the gas pump. As soon as I started filling the tank (about 32 gallons!) all seven kids--the three athletes, the three coaches and Sonny--all piled out and stood around the gas pump gawking. Then about as many Bumpkins came out of the woodwork and gawked at the gawkers.

After much trouble--several phone calls and a conference of hayseeds--we got the cashier to cash a \$100 travelers check filled out in Chinese characters to pay for the gas, Sonny's pork rinds and other treats. Just to

make trouble I signed the American Express charge slip for my film and Gatorade with similar Chinese characters, but the cashier was already so flustered she didn't even notice.



Our first gas stop on the way to Florida in VERY rural Georgia. The Chinese seemed extremely fascinated by the spinning numbers on the gas pumps. The local rednecks were equally fascinated by the Chinese who did not exactly blend in.

Next stop was the Burger King in Valdosta, Georgia. We were drawn off the highway by a billboard for a Chinese buffet, but found the place boarded up. Burger King was, of course, the next best thing. Nobody complained about the 99 cent Whoppers--they were all too busy taking advantage of the free refills at the drink machines. Mr. Li apparently likes his coffee with a dash of orange soda...

At the obligatory stop at the Florida Welcome Center the team was quite literally mobbed by families of Chinese tourists and immigrants on their way to Disney World. The athletes wore their national team uniforms everywhere so they were pretty easily recognized by anyone who knew anything about Chinese athletics. How long would Michael Jordan be able to go incognito if he wore his Chicago Bulls uniform in Tianamen Square?



At the border. While relaxing at a picnic table, the team was rushed by a crowd of Chinese tourists who knew each walker by name, times, races won, etc. A scene that would repeat itself at Chinese restaurants and tourist traps all along the way.

The Florida Turnpike is a VERY long stretch of road. After about 7 hours and 58 minutes of driving, Sonny asked if we were almost there. (Did I REALLY say it would only take 8 hours?) I mumbled something about the traffic around Orlando and admitted it would be a few more hours. After a lengthy translation the "teeth sucking" began. Apparently the Chinese express their frustration/displeasure/urges to kill by making a sucking sound by pulling air between their front teeth. It wouldn't be the last time I heard it during the trip....

Soon thereafter I noticed a "Service Plaza 2 Miles" sign. I looked at the gas gauge and noticed it was getting a bit low. Not quite empty; AT LEAST 1/16th of a tank, I swear! Well, almost immediately the van started coughing and wheezing. We slowed from 90 to about 40 and then began coasting. The van was a 1996, so I figured we didn't blow a gasket, even though we were moving fairly rapidly. But I KNEW we couldn't be out of gas since the needle wasn't really that close to empty. Well anyway, Big Red gave out about 300 meters from the gas station. After finally deciding maybe it was actually out of gas, I ran ahead with my water bottle, filled 'er up with 67 cents of unleaded and headed back. Didn't work. I suspected something horrible mechanically, but Mr. Li's coach began gesturing for me to pump the hell out of the gas peddle. This, and a lot of bouncing got the gas up to the business end of the vehicle and we were on our way. I could only assume that Coach has had some prior experience in running out of gas...

With tragedy narrowly averted, we were on our way again, but by now night had fallen and we were still 2 hours away from Miami. An unnerving cacophony of teeth sucking was the only thing breaking what would have been an unbearable silence. Mr. Li had even tired of his "Direction From Behind Yourself" hours earlier.



Somewhere in the middle of the van ride from Hell. Mr. Lee partly obscured as he badgers me to drive faster.

We finally pulled in to my friend Linda's driveway nearly 12 hours after departing LaGrange--only 50% longer than my predicted driving time. After quick introductions--a couple of handshakes and lots of bowing--Sonny took control. Linda had a wonderful pasta dinner planned. Sonny boycotted the idea and began throwing every vegetable in the house into the frying pan. I wisely escaped to get some meat and Cap'n Crunch from the "Piggly Wiggly." When I returned--less than 30 minutes later--Sonny had an 8 or 10-course meal ready. My butt was saved. Old Chinese proverb: Athlete with full stomach doesn't stay pissed off too long.

I dropped the troops at "The Runway Motel"--so named because of its extreme proximity to runway 3 of Miami International Airport. I'm not sure what the "special taxes" were that the Cuban gentleman added to the room price, but it came out a lot higher than the advertised \$32. He explained that the Chinese got "special" rooms, but from the look of them they were special only in that most of the paint was still on the walls, and there were very "special" mycology experiments going on in the showers. Like the great athletes they are, they took it all in stride. But judging from our accommodations during the World Cup in Beijing they had seen it all before....

Saturday:

The next day I was kept busy conducting private technique sessions at the local track. My girlfriend, Mo, took the team to tour the topless beaches of Miami--at Sonny's request. I wasn't there so I can't give a first hand account. Sonny did convey that he was a bit perplexed by our customs, however. He wondered why we had to wear our "up-trousers"--Sonny-Speak for underpants or shorts--in the Jacuzzi, but not at the beach. The opposite is true in China. Nude is the rule in the public baths, but not on the beach. They probably wear their sweats and raingear there too....

At the end of the day Mr. Li joined me for a 10 x 400 meter workout. I had intended to do 12 x 1 km but coach vetoed the idea--he didn't understand that the local race the next day wasn't anything to get stressed out about. We jumped the fence at the nice rubberized community track and were on our way. As usual we began with 2 km of shuffle-jogging, then 2 km of progressively faster racewalking. By the end we were at about 7:00 pace. then we did 2 laps of fartlek with bursts in the Mach-3 range.

Coach wanted 400s in about 1:40 which came as relief--I expected something crazy. Well, Mr. Li also expected something crazy, so he went out in :43 then slowed to cruise in at 1:28. A shouting match ensued between Li and coach, then Mr. Li indicated that I would be leading the next interval. I decided to play along, so I took the next one out in :42/1:26. Coach was not amused. I got the point and did the next six in 1:39 to 1:40. Coach then made Mr. Li take off his watch. I wanted to prove I knew pace, so I gave up my watch as well and cruised in at 1:39.9--according to coach's watch. I figure's we'd do the same for the next one, but Mr. Li jumped out to the lead. He hit 200 meters in what must have been :38 while I tried to hang on for dear life. He fell off a bit, but still came in at 1:18. I've learned that hard, smart training has a lot to do with walking success, but genetics also plays an important part. Mr. Li picked his parents wisely--that boy can cook!

Sonny mentioned that the kids liked seafood, so after showering we headed for my favorite \$12.99 all-you-can-eat sushi place, which I figured would be a treat. Within 2 minutes we were quite nearly physically thrown out of the place. I was busy negotiating for a table while Sonny and the boys were snooping around the sushi bar. Apparently the Chinese don't like Japanese food, the Japanese don't like the Chinese, and nobody likes a wise guy. While I was still talking to the hostess, everyone rushed past me and out the door, followed by the owner of the place. Words were exchanged, most in some Asian tongue, but in English the owner finally seethed: "You no like sushi, you go Chinese place down da road and don't come back my place!"

So, already starving, we escaped the Ginsu knives and drove to the Red Lobster--the only place I could think of that had the required non-Japanese seafood. The nearest Red Lobster was about as close as Chinese is to English--not very. It was getting close to 9:00, and the teeth-sucking was getting pretty nerve rattling when we arrived at what USED TO BE the Red Lobster. Lights out, no cars, and a small sign telling us that the restaurant had moved three miles further down the road. After about the 14th red light in a row Ms. Gao's coach began coughing very loudly--he must have gotten a tooth stuck in his throat during a sucking fit.

We finally arrived to find the place packed with a 1-hour to 1:15 wait expected. After a good deal of begging, much tooth sucking, and some creative shuffling, we harassed our way into two tables for five in the same section after about 25 minutes. Unfortunately it turned out to be the designated slow-service section. Our Jamaican waiter was definitely working on Caribbean time and was completely impervious to the tooth sucking of three very impatient coaches. He was also impervious for requests for more water, Tabasco sauce or just about anything else we requested. He did pull through with a special request for a slice of cake for Ms. Gao's 23rd birthday--although he could only muster two other wait-staff-person servers for a Jamaican/Redneck-tinged rendition of "Happy Birthday to You." Ms. Gao was either very touched, or wincing from the out-of-synch singing.



Happy Birthday Ms. Gao!

We finally got back to The Runway close to midnight which precluded Mr. Li and Mr. Zhao's participation in the morning race--which was just as well....

Sunday:

The walk-coordinator for the race was a severe Butthead. Now, I haven't directed many races, but tell me if this sounds right to you: You have a ten-time U.S. National Champion and a World Champion and World Record Holder showing up for your local race. Should you deny a request for a comped entry fee, threaten to judge them very harshly because you've seen videos of "these people" off the ground, and then tell them they're not eligible for awards--even if they pay the entry fee--because it wouldn't be fair to take the trophy away from the locals. Maybe I'm crazy, but this seems a bit extreme.

Anyway, the gun went off, and Ms. Gao got a creeping call within the first 2 seconds by Ms. Butthead I spoke so fondly of in the last paragraph. I spent the rest of the race worrying about what kind of International Incident was going to develop. The other judges were very reasonable people, so Ms. Gao "got away with" whatever the World Cup judges let her get away with. I figured I'd get my butt handed to me by Ms. Gao, but Ms. Gao only walked about 25 minutes for the 5 km which had me a bit perplexed. When I asked Sonny about it he said she went so slowly so I would "Save Face." I don't know, but where I come from if a girl slows down so she won't beat you, it's far worse than getting beaten fair and square.

Immediately after the race Sonny and Ms. Gao's coach were "late for the door," as they always are. Every time we settle down somewhere, Sonny jumps up and says "O.K., we go now." The free food and the Reggae band were enough to get him to sit still for the award ceremony, but as soon as we were finished stealing our awards from the locals we were gone. Well, after pulling half the bumper off the van we were gone. I'll spare

the details, but the van corners like an aircraft carrier. On the way out of the parking lot I tried squeezing between two illegally parked cars which were in my way.

I actually maneuvered quite well, in that I only hit one of them. And that was really only a scrape--I scraped off the guys running light, some bumper foam, and lots of other trim, but really, just a scrape. To cut the story short, I "did the right thing," and called the police. I guess chasing drug and gun smugglers and all that other "Miami Vice" stuff is easy potatoes compared to fender-benders because the officer who handled the case was totally stumped. The "accident guy" was off that day, so I had to walk this guy through everything.

In addition to the damage already mentioned, the car I hit had a tail light knocked out. But since there was no lens plastic on the ground or in the light housing it was fairly obvious that it wasn't recent damage. I had to explain this in extreme detail to get the officer to understand that I didn't hit the back of the car, just the front. Next, Supercop tried to call in a report. Our van was registered in Alabama, but I overheard him telling the dispatcher it was a Georgia plate--I guess because I had a Georgia licence. I tried to correct him but he said he was "aware of that" and that he was perfectly capable of doing his job on his own, thank you.

5 minutes later the dispatcher called back saying there was no such plate registered in Georgia. He of course got really suspicious, so I again told him the van was registered in Alabama, not Georgia. On the third try, he finally said, "yeah, I know, but isn't Alabama IN Georgia?" No lie. Keep in mind that Florida borders both Alabama and Georgia... Maybe he was thinking Atlanta, I don't know, but needless to say it took a long time to clear things up. This is all irrelevant to the Chinese situation, so...

After checking out of The Run(a)way (with your money) Motel we hit the road. Apparently the Chinese tourists from earlier in the trip got Sonny all excited about Disney World, and since he didn't find the rampant topless bathing he was looking for in Miami, he was ready to go.

We found a great parking lot to train in that coincidentally had a decent CHEAP hotel within it. If you've ever been to Kissimmee, EVERY hotel advertises a \$20 or \$30 rate, but you have to be a three-legged elf on a Tuesday in July to get the rate. I found a hotel in the guide book that had tiny Chinese characters printed in the corner of the ad--I found our three-legged elf!

At first we got the "those promotional rooms are all sold out--booked 'til Easter" routine, but I persisted with the "Chinese Olympic Team/ poverty/It's been a long drive" routine until we got five \$20 rooms. Perseverance pays off. Especially when there are only three cars in the parking lot and no other prospective guests bidding for our rooms. After a great dinner at yet another Chinese buffet that was nowhere near as good as Sonny's cooking--according to Sonny--we headed to K-Mart (Where America shops...), and then to the Karaoke in the hotel lounge.

Maybe I missed the boat, but I thought Karaoke was supposed to be kind of a joke. Mr. Li and Ms. Gao actually had very nice voices, but the coaches went up one at a time and caterwauled the most awful sounding aural atrocities that I've ever heard. Even though they sang in Chinese you knew it was awful. Well, I knew I couldn't do any better, but they were persistent so I picked a nice song in Spanish--to spare the English-speaking guests in the bar--and hacked away at a hideous version of Mexico Lindo (Beautiful Mexico).



Mr. Li belting out a request.

When I got back to the table there was a kind of uncomfortable silence and three deer-caught in-the-headlights stunned stares from the coaches. Sonny broke the tension with a "We go now" that Jack Benny couldn't have timed better and we went to our separate rooms. I knew I should have gone with "Guantanamo."

Monday:

The morning workout was a three-ring circus. I was up and out at 7:00 for my usual workout with Mr. Li, while Mr. Zhao was already training in the rather large parking lot of the closed Ramada Inn next to our hotel. Ms. Gao got the pick of the litter. She began speeding around the tiny lot circling the bar on the other side of our hotel. A 200 meter loop at best. What a prize--the smallest circuit of the trip and she had it all to herself. After our 12-minute shuffle jog we did the usual walking warm up, then walked for about 16 km. Afterwards Mr. Li stretched. Total time span was about 30 seconds in which he ran through some arm swings, a weird toe-touch, and the same ballistic groin and hamstring stretches Ms. Gao used a few days ago.

After the "continental breakfast" of white bread, coffee and more white bread--what'd you expect for \$20 per night?--It was off to Orlando's premier, World Famous tourist attraction: Gatorland! Sonny balked at the \$39 ticket price for Disney World which was just as well. I am 100% certain that we could have done the entire park in under 45 minutes. Space Mountain: "Oh, very nice! Line too long, we go now." Pirates of the Caribbean: 52 seconds in line, "O.k., we go now."



In front of Gatorland--Orlando's most popular tourist destination. (For the Chinese, anyway...)

I worked the Chinese Olympic Team angle and got us in to see the 'gators for 1/2 price. We got in at 9:28 and the 'gator wrestling started at 9:30. We scrambled through the park--probably at the speed that Sonny would have taken us through anyway---and made it for the start. The kids loved the show, but even though I tried to stall as much as possible so we could see the snake handling show at 10:30 and the 'gator jumparoo at 11:00, we were back in the van by 10:15. Didn't even get to see the two-headed cornsnake....



'Gator Wrasslin' Gao!

Despite the price, the Holy Grail was Disney World. Like most tourists anywhere, the Chinese don't want to actually DO anything--they just want the pictures to prove that they were there. I just KNEW I could work the poor starving Chinese Olympians angle to at least get ourselves escorted into the park for a few free pictures, if not to see the whole Shebang. I warmed up with the parking lot attendant. It took almost no effort to get a complimentary parking permit (good for Epcot and Universal Studios as well). We took the free parking lot shuttle to the ticket buying area.

There wasn't a guest relations window so we bypassed the huge lines and went straight to the big Mississippi River paddle-wheel boat that took us across the lake to the main entrance of the park. We got lots of great pictures, but I wanted more. We landed and I was ready to talk to guest relations when Sonny decided it was already time to go. Here I had three members of the Chinese Olympic Team wearing little kid Donald Duck sunglasses just wanting to take some pictures in front of Snow White's Castle--or whatever the Hell that big blue thing is called that you see in all the pictures--and Sonny wouldn't even give me the satisfaction of pulling the scam with the guest relations people. Could have been some great Disney p.r., but Noooooooooo.



Dave, Ms. Gao, Mo, Yongshen and Mr. Li sporting our new Donald Duck racing glasses. (They were out of Mickys).

So we took some pictures in front of the big ol' Main Street USA Town Hall thing and next to the Mickey Mouse topiaris and headed back to the van in the (free) monorail. So basically we rode three rides: the parking lot train, the paddle-wheel boat, and the monorail, and got some great pictures all for free and in less than 45 minutes to boot. It was a perfect Disney vacation for Sonny and the world's greatest high-speed tourists.



In front of Main Street, USA Town Hall.

We hit the road and made it to Atlanta in record time--Mr. Li made sure of that. We pulled in to the first decent hotel I saw in town. The poor starving Chinese Olympians story got us \$10 off the Hampton Inn's lowest rate. The Inn is the closest hotel to the Olympic Stadium and the Olympic racewalk courses, and is actually a very nice place at any price. (They didn't pay me to say that, but it's the least I can do for the break they gave us. Oh yeah, Gatorland, Disney World parking, and the Broadway Motel in Kissimmee, FL are also wonderful. Avoid the Runway Motel in Miami Springs at all cost...)

Oddly, there was a Chinese menu on the counter when we checked in. They said they delivered, so I figured it was close. Sonny was adamant that Chinese food is only good when it's hot, so we got right back in the van against my protests that we should stay in the room and wait for delivery. So we drove all over Atlanta looking for this little hole-in-the-wall (accompanied by a whole lot of teeth-sucking after the first wrong turn). This place must deliver by helicopter or something, because I don't know how else it would be worth their while to deliver to our hotel from so far away.

As usual, Sonny complained about the inferior food, but this place was the greatest. (Mr. Tsao's on Piedmont...) Dishes loaded with bamboo shoots and shiitake mushrooms, mounds of chicken and beef with an amazing variety of vegetables, perfectly cooked rice, basically anything Sonny asked for, cooked to order---and none of it up to his standards. I can't wait to eat at Sonny's place next time I'm in Beijing.

Late to bed again--the kids are supposed to be in by 9:30...

Tuesday:

Mr. Li's coach gave us a break, delaying the morning workout until 9:00 due to the hard drive yesterday. Since the hotel didn't have much of a parking lot we had to work out on the Olympic course. Damn! Traffic was pretty Ugly on the main stretch of the course, so after a couple of loops dodging exhaust-belching busses we cut about 1,700 meters off the 2 km loops and began doing loops in--what else--a parking lot that served as one of the course's turnarounds. Coach wanted us to do 2 hours, but Mr. Li stopped after 1. I tried to ask if there was going to be an afternoon workout, but he feigned incomprehension.

I later learned from Sonny that Mr. Li told his coach that the traffic was too bad so I decided we should stop so we wouldn't get killed. The only thing is, we did the last 40 minutes in a closed parking lot. Apparently Chinese athletes will resort to trickery when they want to shag off a workout. So much for the "Stoic Discipline of the Chinese" theory....

After showering and changing, we met with two Reebok representatives who were trying to find out why

none of the walkers train in the shoes that are sent to them. After a lot of back and forth questioning and translating it was decided that if Reebok were to design a pair of shoes just like the crappy \$15 shoes they currently wear, they would use them. Otherwise they will just wear Reeboks during competitions to keep up appearances. So don't ask what happened when the next Reebok walking shoe is a flimsy piece of crap that falls apart after 2 weeks....

After the meeting I took the kids to Underground Atlanta and the "Olympic Experience," then talked our way in to the Coca Cola Museum for free. We made it through 3 floors of exhibits celebrating 100 years of cola history in 9 minutes. No joke. And that included the free samples and the gift shoppe. Next I decided to take them to the CNN studios for a tour. Once you're on the tour you're stuck there for 45 minutes: the worst Chinese torture there is.

Since I had to get the battered van back to the rental agency in LaGrange by 4:00, we said our good-byes, exchanged our addresses, and I left them with the tourists from Ontario to see Larry King's hairpiece--or whatever the heck it is one does on a CNN tour.

All in all I learned very little about the Chinese team's training. I guess they train pretty easy on the easy days, and pretty hard on the hard days. Their mileage is about what the rest of the world is doing, and the workouts are similar--although the training courses are DEFINITELY more monotonous. What I did learn is that they are just regular guys and gals with the same dreams that we have. They want to be good at this crazy sport and are willing to sacrifice to get themselves to the top. But they also seem to have a lot of fun doing it (especially when the coaches aren't looking!) which is something that we all sometimes forget to do: This is supposed to be fun, guys!

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