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## Pacific 12 Conference promotes its teams, and U.S. college athletics model, in China

Submitted by Jake New on September 4, 2015 - 3:00am

In November, the University of Washington and the University of Texas will face off in their first basketball game of the season. Neither team will have a home court advantage, however, as the contest will take place more than 5,000 miles away from either campus.

For the first time in U.S. sports -- intercollegiate or professional -- two teams will play a regular-season game in China <sup>[1]</sup>. The game, taking place at the Mercedes-Benz Arena in Shanghai, is a key step in a broader effort by the Pacific 12 Conference, as well as U.S. college sports more generally, to expand the global presence of their teams and to promote the American model of intercollegiate athletics.

College teams for years have played special exhibition games in other countries, but a conferencewide effort to ensure a regular season opener in China every year, as the Pac-12 is starting, is something new. On Monday, the Pac-12 announced it had hired Carter Westfall to serve as its vice president of international, further affirming a commitment to its Pac-12 Globalization Initiative.

"There's this idea that athletics are supposed to be the front porch for their colleges," Larry Scott, commissioner of the Pac-12, said. "They're meant to bring attention to an institution and provide connection. Globalization is an important strategy for universities, generally, and athletics now has the opportunity to be a part of that."

The initiative began in 2011, soon after Scott became commissioner of the league, bringing with him years of experience working globally as chairman of the Women's Tennis Association, as well as the idea that U.S.-style college athletics shouldn't be limited to one country. The initiative has now sent players from several Pacific 12 men's basketball, women's basketball and volleyball teams to compete in China <sup>[2]</sup>. The tours -- including the upcoming Texas-Washington game -- feature elements of both road games and educational trips similar to college travel courses.

Last year, the conference became the first league to stream men's basketball games played in the U.S. to China, and it will stream another 27 basketball games <sup>[3]</sup> in the country this season.

Since 2012, the conference has hosted three symposia on sports development, with the goal of

helping China move toward a model of intercollegiate sports more akin to the United States'. To that end, the league signed a memorandum of understanding with the Federation of University Sports China, the fledgling Chinese equivalent of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The federation is part of China's Ministry of Education.

"Getting a partnership with the government was so important," Erik Hardenbergh, the Pac-12's vice president of public affairs, said. "It's going back to the 'Ping-Pong diplomacy'<sup>[4]</sup> of the early 1970s. It fits under this larger goal of a people-to-people exchange with China and the idea that sports can help. They are very focused on learning how the American intercollegiate system works and how they can use some of our learnings back at home. To date, intercollegiate athletics has been uniquely American."

The symposia organized with the FUSC have included sessions on creating conferences, marketing conferences, creating athletic department revenue streams and improving academic support for athletes. While colleges in China sponsor athletics, the teams are similar in nature to club sports, rather than the highly professionalized and expensive programs seen in the United States.

David Ridpath, a professor of sports administration at Ohio University, who recently traveled to Europe to study college athletics there, said there might be some positive lessons that China could learn from certain tenets of U.S. college sports -- such as corporate sponsorships and alumni engagement -- but he cautions other countries from outright adopting a model that is increasingly seen by critics as flawed and easily corruptible<sup>[5]</sup>.

"What I have found in my travels is that the rest of the world is fascinated by U.S. college sports," Ridpath said. "People are fascinated by the system because other countries do not have anything like it. I would caution them, however, if they're going to adopt an academic eligibility model and those types of things. In reality, going the other way might be better, where we learn from other countries. We have to get to the point where we are creating models beyond our current system."

While the Pac-12's initiative is meant to be global in nature, it unabashedly remains focused on China. Basketball is immensely popular in China and is played by about 300 million people there. The country is an increasingly important market for U.S. colleges and universities. Nationally, the number of Chinese students in the U.S. has risen fivefold since 2000<sup>[6]</sup>.

When Washington and Texas compete in Shanghai this November, representatives from every Pac-12 institution will join them on the trip in an attempt to entice more Chinese students into crossing the Pacific Ocean for their educations. The conference will host a college fair while in Shanghai, Scott said, which thousands of Chinese families will attend to learn more about Pac-12 universities.

The Pac-12 is not alone in using big-time college sports to reach out to Chinese students. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign enrolls more students from China<sup>[7]</sup> than any other U.S. institution. Nearly a tenth of last year's freshman class hailed from China. The university enrolls about 5,000 Chinese students in all.

Last week, the university announced<sup>[8]</sup> it will begin broadcasting its football games in Mandarin. Already, Illinois offers educational programming to teach Chinese students the basics of football and basketball.

"Our goal with this is to better reach all Fighting Illini fans, whether they attend school here in Champaign-Urbana or have graduated and are living abroad," Mike Waddell, senior associate athletic director, said in a statement<sup>[8]</sup>. "We are very excited to reach both Chinese students and alumni and give them the option to enjoy Illinois football in Mandarin Chinese. We hope that this is the first of many international outreach efforts for Fighting Illini Athletics."

The University of Texas athletic department is also looking to expand its international outreach

efforts. The soon-to-be-annual Pac-12 game in Shanghai will feature a different nonconference team each year. Texas, which is a member of the Big 12 Conference, was chosen to be the inaugural opponent after it started making global plans of its own, Scott said.

The Texas volleyball team hosted a Chinese team last year, and the men's soccer team played against a team from Mexico. In May, the university said it hopes to begin sending its football team to play in Mexico City by 2020. Steve Patterson, athletic director at Texas, told the [Associated Press](#) [9] that the university has a "natural advantage because of its proximity to what he considers to be a lucrative fan base in Mexico."

How lucrative international fan bases are is an important consideration, given that this sort of outreach can be costly. Last year, the University of Kentucky was criticized after arranging [an eight-night trip to the Bahamas](#) [10] to square off against basketball teams from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and France. The university spent nearly \$800,000 on the trip, paying not only for its own travel but also the travel and expenses of the three teams it played.

Cost won't be an issue for the Pac-12 game in Shanghai, though, as the conference has partnered with Alibaba Group, a giant in Chinese e-commerce, to sponsor the trip for at least its first two years. As part of the trip in November, basketball players will also travel to Alibaba Group's headquarters in Hangzhou, the capital of China's Zhejiang Province, to learn about e-commerce. While Ridpath said he's always concerned when athletics trips take students so far from campus when class is in session, he noted there is value in players experiencing and learning from other cultures.

For many of the athletes going to Shanghai in November, Scott said, this could be their only chance to travel outside the country on a university-sponsored trip.

"What I'm really proud of is that this is probably the boldest thing we've done to integrate academics and athletics in a true synergistic initiative that's beneficial for both student athletes, as well as the university more broadly," Scott said.

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**Links:**

- [1] <http://pac-12.com/article/2015/05/12/pac-12-set-host-first-its-kind-mens-basketball-game-china>
- [2] <http://pac-12.com/http%3A/pac-12.com/article/2013/07/10/pac-12-takes-next-step-globalization-initiative-summer-tours-china>
- [3] <http://pac-12.com/article/2015/02/06/pac-12-reaches-agreement-stream-27-basketball-games-china>
- [4] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ping-pong\\_diplomacy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ping-pong_diplomacy)
- [5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/11/19/are-selective-colleges-big-time-sports-greater-risk-compromising-academics>
- [6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/11/17/open-doors-report-finds-increases-international-enrollment-study-abroad>
- [7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/07/u-illinois-growth-number-chinese-students-has-been-dramatic>
- [8] [http://fightingillini.com/news/2015/8/26/Football\\_0826152216.aspx](http://fightingillini.com/news/2015/8/26/Football_0826152216.aspx)
- [9] <http://collegefootball.ap.org/article/official-university-texas-football-could-play-mexico>
- [10] <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/01/19/basketball-teams-expensive-trip-bahamas>

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