

LeBron James's Olympic Cheat Sheet Is Growing: Scott Soshnick

Scott Soshnick(Bloomberg)

First published on March 28, 2008 on (Bloomberg.com) -- LeBron James can jam. We'll soon know if he can cram. Almost a year ago the National Basketball Association star and Vogue magazine cover boy was invited to join professional athletes in signing an open letter to the Chinese government. The letter, penned by James's former teammate, Ira Newble, urged China to pressure Sudan, a major trading partner, to help end what President George W. Bush called a genocide in Darfur. James declined, saying he needed more information -- extensive knowledge was how he put it. Let's not forget that his endorsement portfolio includes Nike Inc., a company whose sales in China surged more than 50 percent in the third quarter. So days became weeks, which turned into months and James still hasn't addressed the carnage and killing in Darfur. To be fair, he's busy trying to again lead the Cleveland Cavaliers to the NBA Finals. One of the skills you acquire in college is time management. James is such a good basketball player, though, that he was able to skip coeds, keggers and March Madness, not to mention hitting the books, going straight from high school to the pros. Which makes me wonder: How much studying awaits James and his fellow Olympians before the August start of the Beijing Games? After all, it isn't just Darfur anymore. Anyone who has opted for CNN over ESPN in the past week, or the front page over the back, knows China is very much in the headlines. Who's Talking Word of China's suppression of protesters in Tibet is out in the open. Just how many people lost their lives depends on which side is dispensing the information. The Dalai Lama's Tibetan government-in-exile says 140 have been killed since March 10. China says 22, and Premier Wen Jiabao described the protests as "organized, premeditated, masterminded and incited by the Dalai clique." Speaking of information, Google Inc. is also weighing in on China. Investors in the most popular Internet search engine earlier this week proposed the Mountain View, California-based company create a committee on human rights and establish policies that forbid it from engaging in censorship. That followed efforts by the Chinese authority to tighten control of Internet content as the government tries to contain the unrest, which is an awfully polite term when you consider it refers to protests, beatings, imprisonment and death. The Chinese government has every intention of censoring not only NBC, which paid almost \$900 million for the rights to broadcast this year's Summer Games, but all networks, which will face guidelines as to where they can point their cameras. The government, the Associated Press says, has banned live shots from Tiananmen Square, site of the most lopsided matchup since Bambi Meets Godzilla: Man versus tank. 'Mysteries of China' Meantime, in France, President Nicolas Sarkozy refused to rule out a boycott of the Games' opening ceremonies while calling for a dialogue on China's clampdown in Tibet. And the U.K. Foreign Office's Human Rights annual report said China's human rights violations overshadow its economic development. Dick Ebersol, chairman of NBC Universal Sports, told the New York Times the International Olympic Committee awarded the Games to China because it was important for the world's biggest sporting event to take place for the first time in the world's most populous nation. "As it relates to the mysteries of China, including human rights," he said, "I believe giving the Games to China shines a light on a part of the world that wouldn't otherwise exist." To which Tom Porteous, a London-based director of Human Rights Watch, counters: "But there's no reflection on how the Olympics may give the U.K. an opportunity to put pressure on China." Heavy Stuff Whew. That's heavy stuff for James, or anyone, to ponder. Genocide. Censorship. Human rights. Perhaps the athletes will use cheat sheets to help recite the safe, scripted answers to difficult questions. Or maybe, like quarterbacks, they'll wear reference material on their wrists. "Individuals should be free to express themselves on these matters," said NBA Commissioner David Stern, whose international stable of players -- including China's Yao Ming -- will be among the most recognizable athletes at the Games. "People should be encouraged to speak out and allowed to." On the bright side, James and his fellow Olympians might escape questions on less important matters like smog, which prompted marathon world-record holder Haile Gebrselassie to pull out of the Games, fearing what the pollution would do to his asthma. And potentially tainted food, which explains why the U.S. delegation is lugging its own grub to Beijing. Quiet Please IOC President Jacques Rogge earlier this week told the Associated Press the human rights situation in China was imperfect, but improving. "We believe," he said, "that China will change by opening the country to the scrutiny of the world through the 25,000 media who will attend the Games." Just so we're clear, that's the same media, yours truly included, that will be told where it can shoot and what it can show. Rogge didn't specify what, if anything, he's doing to ensure that China move closer to the Olympic ideal. We do know that he's employing what he termed "silent diplomacy." That works for James, who has mastered mum.

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