



THE FOOTBALL LAB

WHAT IS YOUR ASIA STRATEGY?

*The Asia Imperative:
Why Every Sports Strategy Now Needs an Asia Chapter*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the better part of the last four years, the global sports industry has been mesmerised by the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) fuelling the Saudi Pro League's headline signings such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema; LIV Golf's \$5 billion insurgency; Boxing's Riyadh Season with Usky vs Fury (twice); the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar; and the annual glitz and glamour of the Abu Dhabi F1 have all dominated boardroom conversations from London to Los Angeles. All of this is before we discuss the purchases of Manchester City, Paris St. Germain and Newcastle United as other examples of the broader Gulf strategy of leveraging sport as a vehicle for economic diversification.

The money was real. The ambition was staggering. Up until a few weeks ago the Middle East appeared to be the only game in town for sports executives.

However, as a former banker and as any good portfolio manager will tell you, a lack of diversification leads to concentration risk. The sports industry's overwhelming tilt towards the Middle East, however justified by the scale of capital on offer, has left it dangerously undiversified.

The current period of geopolitical uncertainty in the region has not ended the Gulf's sports story. Far from it. Make no mistake, when that uncertainty resolves, the UAE and its neighbours will shine as brightly as ever.

It has however, exposed an uncomfortable truth: serious operators in sport need more than one geography in their strategy. They need a properly diversified portfolio. The seasoned sports industry professionals already know this, but as with all industries many people got lazy, or perhaps at best too comfy.

This current moment is not however a crisis, but an opportunity.

To use the Churchillian adage of "*Never let a good crisis go to waste*", this is a window in which the industry can finally give Asia the strategic attention its 4.7 billion people deserve. Not as a Plan B or a fallback, but as an essential pillar of a credible global sports strategy, approached with respect, local knowledge, and long-term commitment.

Every sports strategy needs an Asia chapter.

The Football Lab, already operational across the region, offers the know-how, experience and expertise the industry needs to build that pillar now.

THE GULF GOLD RUSH

Let us give significant credit where it is due. What Saudi Arabia and its neighbours achieved in sport between 2022 and 2025 was extraordinary in its speed and scale.

The Public Investment Fund (PIF) is not a new invention. The Kingdom's PIF was actually launched in 1971, and the first star football signing was the great Brazilian Rivellino, in 1978 who joined Al-Hilal. However, the recruitment of Cristiano Ronaldo, to their rivals Al-Nassr, at the start of 2023, was a statement of intent that rewrote the rules of sports geopolitics overnight.

PIF suddenly became a term everyone knew in the sports world. Others followed. Neymar, Benzema, Mane joined CR7. Some with more success than others, but the broader Saudi Pro League spending spree was without modern precedent.

In other sports it was no different. LIV Golf was already wrestling with the PGA Tour, into an uneasy détente. SURJ brought elite motorsport to the streets of Jeddah and Riyadh. The 2034 World Cup bid, uncontested and confirmed, cemented Saudi Arabia's position as the epicentre of sports investment. Add to this Riyadh Season, Jeddah Season, and the Kingdom's systematic courting of boxing, MMA, tennis, and eSports, and the picture is one of a nation using sport as the primary instrument of Vision 2030 - the strategic blueprint for a post-oil economy.

The Western sports industry, starved of transformative capital after years of incremental growth, was only too happy to oblige. Agencies, rights holders, federations, consultants, and intermediaries flocked to the Middle East with the fervour of a gold rush.

For many, the region was their entire strategy and whilst that concentration at the time may have felt understandable, it is this kind of portfolio imbalance that leaves organisations exposed when conditions shift.

SPORT'S PERFECT STORM: WHY THE OLD MODEL IS BROKEN

Roger Mitchell, one of the sharpest analytical minds in the sports business, published *Sports Perfect Storm* in late 2023. His thesis is as uncomfortable as it is compelling: the sports industry is caught at the intersection of three converging crises in sport, media, and finance that are fundamentally reshaping the economics of the sector.

One of Mitchell's expertly crafted central arguments is one of valuation disconnect.

Sports assets are priced on the assumption of perpetually rising media rights revenue, and yet the media landscape that underpinned those valuations for years has now begun to fragment beyond recognition. Only industry leaders with a vested interest still claim that media rights will continue to grow materially in the coming cycle.

Sponsorship models are also under pressure as brands demand granular engagement data. Modern sponsorship isn't about rather passive eyeballs and vanity metrics. It's about brands being given a connection to rich fan data to allow for a direct, qualified conversation. A precursor to an eventual sale. Most critically, the younger demographics upon whom the industry's future depends are not consuming sport the way their parents did. To quote *Sports Perfect Storm*: "We as an industry over-estimate our importance: *'..it's sport, everybody must love sport...'* - well, not really."

Mitchell draws a direct parallel with the music industry's catastrophic failure to anticipate Napster. Having witnessed that collapse first-hand as a senior executive at EMI, he sees the same complacency in sport an industry convinced of its own indispensability, dismissing emerging threats with the familiar refrain: "Small thing, won't affect us. We'll be fine." Within three years, the music industry's business model was facing an existential crisis. Ironically many blamed piracy, which is now a common refrain from today's sports executives.

Much of the capital that has flowed into Middle Eastern sport has been deployed on the assumption that traditional models: big-name player acquisitions; broadcast-centric media deals; and stadium-first

strategies can simply be transplanted into new geographies. Mitchell's framework suggests this is precisely the kind of thinking that precedes disruption.

The Gulf will undoubtedly remain a major venue for global sport - the 2034 World Cup alone guarantees that - but organisations whose entire growth thesis rests on a single region, and a single model, are the ones most vulnerable when the next storm hits.

THE ASIA OPPORTUNITY: SCALE, PASSION AND A DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

Asia is home to approximately 4.7 billion people. Yes you read that correctly it's home to 60% of the world's population. China alone has a population exceeding 1.4 billion; India's recently surpassed it. Southeast Asia's 700 million inhabitants represent one of the fastest-growing consumer markets on earth, with a median age in many countries below 30.

More importantly, these are populations with a deep, organic love of football. The Premier League's most watched markets are overwhelmingly Asian. Southeast Asia alone accounts for hundreds of millions of engaged football viewers. China's appetite for European football has driven broadcast deals worth billions. Japan and South Korea have produced world-class players and hosted a World Cup.

This is not an audience that needs to be persuaded to love sport. It already does. What it demands is respect and that is precisely where the industry has consistently failed.

GETTING ASIA WRONG: THE ARROGANCE OF EXTRACTION

The sports industry's record in Asia is, to put it charitably, mixed. For decades, the default approach has been extractive: fly in, sell merchandise, stage a pre-season friendly, and fly out. Asia has been treated as a revenue source, not a partner - a market to be tapped rather than a community to be served.

The consequences are now visible. Inter Miami's tour of Asia in 2024, headlined by Lionel Messi, became a case study in how not to engage the region. When Messi failed to appear in a highly anticipated match in Hong Kong, the backlash was immediate and severe - not merely from fans, but from government officials. The damage to Inter Miami's brand in Asia, and by extension to MLS's regional ambitions, has been significant and lasting. In fairness to Miami the non-appearance by their Argentine superstar was not a club acting on a standalone basis, but rather fans reacting to years of being taken advantage of.

The message however was unmistakable: Asian fans will not be treated as second-class consumers.

The situation in China is even more instructive. Elite clubs from Europe have faced ongoing restrictions and, in some cases, outright bans on touring in China. The reasons are multifaceted; geopolitical tensions, regulatory shifts, a growing assertion of domestic sporting sovereignty, but the underlying dynamic is clear. China, and Asia more broadly, is no longer willing to be a passive recipient of poor sporting products and token, meaningless tours at sky high prices. The era of "parachute tourism" is over.

This is Mitchell's framework in action. The industry has been "selling a product to a demographic that doesn't care about 90 minutes" - or, more precisely, doesn't care about a product delivered on someone else's terms. Asian audiences are educated, well-travelled and commercially savvy. They want content that is compelling, competitive, culturally relevant, locally produced, and delivered on platforms they actually use. They want participation, not passive spectatorship. They want to be creators, not consumers.

The proof already exists. Look at what Singapore has done with its F1 night race. The organisers understood that a modern sporting event is not ninety minutes of action bookended by advertising - it is an entire weekend of entertainment, culture, and experience. They reinvented the race weekend as a regional destination, drawing fans from across Southeast Asia not just for the cars but for the concerts, the street food, and the content moments. That is what engaging Asia looks like when you do it properly.

LEARNING THROUGH DIVERSIFICATION:

Let us be clear about what the current moment represents. The Gulf's sports ambitions have not evaporated. Saudi Arabia's 2034 World Cup preparations are advancing. Dubai's events infrastructure remains world-class. Abu Dhabi, Qatar, and Bahrain will continue to host elite global sport.

As soon as the current geopolitical uncertainty resolves, and it will, the Gulf will resume its position as one of the most dynamic sports markets on earth. Anyone writing off the Middle East will be very much mistaken.

This pause, however, has given the industry something it badly needed: time to recognise the need to diversify. For organisations whose Gulf strategies are on hold or running at reduced intensity, Asia offers not merely a backup but an opportunity; to test new models that would have previously not been considered; to build the operational muscle that will serve them when the Gulf comes roaring back.

The smartest operators will use this moment to build in both directions simultaneously.

The fundamentals in Asia are overwhelming: population scale, youth demographics, digital-first consumption habits, genuine passion for football, and rapidly expanding economies with growing middle classes. What has been missing is not opportunity but the right approach - operators who understand that succeeding in Asia requires a fundamentally different model from the one that has defined Western sport for the past three decades.

This means creator-native content rather than broadcast-centric distribution. It means culturally embedded programming rather than translated marketing collateral. It means building communities not just on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube but on the platforms where Asian audiences actually live - Douyin, WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu (RED), and Bilibili in China; LINE across Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan; KakaoTalk in South Korea - rather than chasing legacy broadcast deals. It means shorter formats, participatory experiences, and decentralised content ecosystems that give local voices primacy.

Critically, it means being present. Not passing through.

THE FOOTBALL LAB: GATEWAY TO ASIA

Headquartered in Singapore, The Football Lab using data driven insights operates at the intersection of content, community, and competition.

Its flagship property, Faster Football, connects elite clubs, global talent and content creators with media platforms, broadcasters, sponsors and brands to deliver unrivalled audiences and premium IP. At its simplest Faster Football is a series of tournaments and media events designed for the attention economy - shorter formats, creator-driven content, and platform-native distribution. Through its decentralised content ecosystem, it works with elite clubs, independent creators, players, and platform-native storytellers, generating consolidated reach and genuine engagement with local audiences but with a global footprint.

Crucially, The Football Lab's footprint also extends to Dubai - a deliberate bridge between the Gulf and Asian markets. This dual presence means it is uniquely positioned to serve organisations seeking to diversify across both regions, maintaining Gulf relationships while building genuine Asian capability.

For those now seeking a credible Asian sports strategy, the path is straightforward. The Football Lab has already done the hard work - the local relationships, the regulatory navigation, the cultural fluency, the platform expertise, the content infrastructure.

The Football Lab exists as a Gateway to Asia.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS YOUR ASIA STRATEGY?

Roger Mitchell's warning to the sports industry is fundamentally about complacency - the assumption that what worked yesterday will work tomorrow, that size confers immunity from disruption, and that new money will always arrive to paper over structural deficiencies.

The Middle East remains, a legitimate and exciting sports market. The lesson from the latest bout of complacency is simple. Concentration without diversification is a strategy that only works until it doesn't.

The Gulf will be back much sooner than many expect. Saudi Arabia will host a World Cup. The region will stage spectacular events. It will continue to attract the world's best athletes and biggest brands. The question is what the industry does with the current window - a window that will not stay open indefinitely.

The organisations that use this moment to build a genuine Asian capability will find themselves with a properly diversified global portfolio: the Middle East for spectacle and sovereign capital, Asia for scale, passion, and long-term demographic growth. Those that wait will find, once again, that Asia has moved on without them.

The demographic dividend is real. The passion is genuine. The digital infrastructure is mature. The opportunity is immense. But Asia will not forgive another round of extractive tourism dressed up as strategy. It demands operators who are already embedded, already building, and already earning trust.

The Football Lab is one of those operators.

The question is simple: **What is your Asia strategy?**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dom Lane is the Founder and CEO of The Football Lab, a Singapore-headquartered sports media and content platform building the infrastructure for football's growth in Asia. The Football Lab uses data driven insights to connect elite clubs, global talent and content creators with media platforms, broadcasters, sponsors and brands to deliver unrivalled audiences and premium IP. Using its own existing operational expertise and regional C-Suite network The Football Lab already executes premium football events across Asia, with a global broadcast footprint. With a background spanning banking, marketing, sports media, content strategy, and event production, Dom has spent decades establishing operational footholds across Asia, China, and the Middle East. He can be reached at dom@thefootball-lab.com