

Media Release: 29.3.17

THE BIG GOAL: Foreign Correspondent

Airs Tuesday April 4 at 9.30pm on ABC & ABC iview

China is executing a masterplan to dominate world football, pumping billions of dollars into buying up foreign players, coaches and entire European clubs, and grooming new generations of its own young stars.

China is the world's rising superpower - but in the world game, it's a pushover.

In the race for football's great prize, the World Cup, it's a perennial dud. Even in Asia it lags behind its neighbours.

But that may be about to change. National pride demands it.

China has just exploded out of nowhere – Trent Sainsbury, Australian Soccerroo playing for Jiangsu Suning FC

Sainsbury's club is owned by a giant electronics group which has splashed nearly \$100 million on imported players in the past two years. It also spent \$380 million buying Italian superclub Inter Milan – where Sainsbury is now on loan - in just one of a series of Chinese takeovers of European clubs. Other Chinese clubs spend even more.

The Australian league is on a budget basically but over here there is no budget. Club owners can spend as much money as they please – Trent Sainsbury

As China correspondent Bill Birtles reports, after decades of neglect, money is also starting to flow at grass roots level. Birtles travels to the backwater town of Zhidan where juniors coach Ding Changbao has pioneered a program that's produced more than 80 players for clubs across the country.

A lot of Chinese people are now flocking to football because they want their children to become stars – coach Ding Changbao

Among coach Ding's charges is rising star Gao Baosen, aged 12. He and his family live in a one room house and struggle to get by. But he dreams big.

My dream is to be like Ronaldo, to be a professional player like him. I hope when I grow up I can look after my parents for the rest of their lives. I don't want them to suffer – Gao Baosen

Baosen and coach Ding are small pieces of the Government's plan to have 50 million players and 50,000 coaching schools by 2025 – and, by 2050, to sit atop the football world.

The Big Goal, by China correspondent Bill Birtles, airs on Foreign Correspondent at 9.30 pm Tuesday April 4 and 10.30 am Thursday April 6 on ABC TV, and 6.30 pm Sunday April 9 on News 24. Also on ABC iview.

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