Big Money As Saudi Makes Foray Into Cricket With IPL Auction

AFP – Saudi Arabia hosts this year's Indian Premier League player auction in a partnership between a money-spinning cricket tournament expanding its global reach and a kingdom using sports to improve its image.De facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has backed extravagant sports investments – set to culminate in Saudi Arabia hosting the football World Cup in 2034 – to diversify its oil-rich economy.
Critics point to Saudi Arabia's human rights record and the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018, accusing the kingdom of "sportswashing".

The two-day auction beginning Sunday in Jeddah is the first cricketing event of this stature to be hosted in Saudi Arabia, a country with an under-served fanbase for the sport among millions of South Asian migrant workers.

Saudi cricket federation chairman Prince Saud bin Mishal said that staging the auction reflected the kingdom's "commitment to developing the sport and showcasing its position as a global destination for sporting events".

Saudi Arabia's big spending on sporting events had helped "to promote the narrative of a changing kingdom", Rice University's Kristian Coates Ulrichsen told AFP.

"To the extent that there is now a buzz associated with Saudi Arabia in football and in boxing, the spending has succeeded in changing the subject," he added.

Saudi Arabia has in recent years recruited top footballers including Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar into its league while hosting world championship boxing, Formula One racing, tennis and golf.

Visit Saudi, the state tourism arm, and state-owned energy giant Saudi Aramco have both been IPL sponsors.

Cricket already has a fanbase in the kingdom among expatriate workers.

Non-Saudi nationals account for more than 13 million of Saudi Arabia's 32.2 million people, over 40 percent of whom hail from cricket-mad India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, according to the 2022 census.

The kingdom's cricket federation is also trying to boost the sport's popularity among Saudis and has launched a programme to introduce it in schools.

"There is a general perception that it's a street game," Kabir Khan, the federation's head coach, told English-language daily Arab News in August.

"We need to change that perception."

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) is not required to regularly publish its finances and details of the agreement for Jeddah to host the auction have not been released.

But the IPL has generated billions in revenue since its inception in 2008, turning the BCCI into one of the richest governing bodies in sport.

Two years ago it sold the broadcast rights for five IPL seasons to global media giants for $6.2 billion.

Its player auctions are watched by millions eager to see which of the sport's top stars will make their teams and the BCCI has sought to broaden the tournament's profile by staging the spectacle abroad.

Last year's auction was held in Dubai, a regular host for international cricket tournaments and which also has a large

base of prospective fans among its migrant worker population.

Veteran Indian cricket journalist Ayaz Memon told AFP that holding this year’s auction in Saudi Arabia benefitted both the kingdom and the board.

“Saudi authorities have been very keen on promoting sports in their own country… and you get to expand the horizons of the IPL in the sense of creating more awareness for the sport.”

A total of 574 players are up for grabs this year with Indian wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant, England veteran James Anderson and New Zealand all-rounder Rachin Ravindra among the top names in contention.

Australian pacer Mitchell Starc smashed auction records last time when he signed with Kolkata Knight Riders for $2.98 million.

An incremental rise in the tournament’s salary cap means his price is likely to be eclipsed in the coming days.

“Just as always you will find certain players breaking records,” media analyst Karan Taurani of Mumbai-based advisory firm Elara Capital told AFP.

For all the big names, Taurani said many cricketers on the auction list were promising youngsters at the start of their career and signing an IPL contract was their first shot at a big payday.

“There are not too many players who have got more than two to three years of international experience,” he said. “Those players will see a big jump in terms of compensation.”

Dates for next year’s IPL have not been released but seasons usually run from March to May.

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