

## Chinese, Italians kick off Socceros' hunt for a striker

**Football** Tapping the future talents of the beautiful game.

Nick Lenaghan

It's an all-too familiar scenario: the Socceros' World Cup campaign in Russia is over almost before it began.

Yet, the dream lives on, fuelled by those midnight hours in front of the telly. The next generation of footballing talent is forming and, say the aficionados, let's hope it includes a star striker or two this time.

Tapping directly into those aspirations and the grassroots popularity of soccer in this country, Italian football giant Inter Milan has joined forces with Sparrow Early Learning to run football academies in this country.

The academies are aimed at kids and teenagers between 3 and 16, incorporating Inter Milan's training smarts into

sessions at childcare centres and at after-school and holiday programs for the older kids. It's both a timely tie-up and one that brings together some big business themes and global players into the Australian market.

On the football end is Inter Milan, a storied Italian club which this year reclaimed a spot in Europe's Champions League after years in the doldrums. One of the biggest clubs in Italy and a global brand in itself, it is majority-owned by one of China's largest non-government retailers, Suning.

On the other side of the deal is Sparrow, which operates 28 centres in Queensland and Victoria. It was taken over two years ago by Hong Kong listed conglomerate Fullshare.

Inter Milan has a world network of soccer academies, from Argentina, to China, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia and elsewhere, but it is yet to bring its brand to Australia.

It is a ripe market. Soccer is by far the most popular football code by participation numbers overall in this country,



Andrea Ratti, Inter Academy head coach with children from Sparrow Early Learning in Brisbane. PHOTO: AP

although Australian Rules football captures the bulk of the revenue.

For children, participation rates are just as strong. At 14.1 per cent, soccer is second only to swimming and well ahead of AFL, at 8.8 per cent, according to the latest official figures.

Major global football clubs are also pushing into Australia, such as City Football Group, controlled by Abu Dhabi's ruling family with a smaller stake held by China's Citic Group. The owner of English Premier League club Manchester City added Melbourne City to its global stable four years ago.

For Sparrow and its owner Fullshare – the HK-listed company has interests spanning education and tourism to real estate and renewable energy – the competition is even more serious.

Childcare is big business. Fullshare's majority buyout of Sparrow in late 2016 valued the Australian platform at \$95 million. Anchorage Capital Partners' plan to sell childcare operator Affinity Education could reap \$700 million.

Adding soccer – and especially through a big name like Inter Milan – to its mix of offerings gives Sparrow an edge in a crowded childcare market.

Choosing soccer as its in-house sport makes sense. It's low contact and appeals to both girls and boys – the Matildas and their star striker Sam Kerr sell out stadiums.

"The other good thing about soccer is that it's a world game," said Sparrow's chief executive John Bairstow, a long-



France train ahead of their clash with Argentina at the 2018 World Cup in Russia (above); Australia's Tomi Juric and Tim Cahill couldn't find the net. PHOTO: AAP, AP

suffering Bolton Wanderers supporter. "You get to learn about other cultures."

Sparrow has around 2500 childcare places in its centres and is pushing into the after-school care and holiday program market where the Inter Milan brand will help it stand out.

Sparrow's owner Fullshare has broader horizons in mind as well. Its co-head of investments and financing is Jonathan Broughton, who admits to being a Manchester United fan.

"We're looking to expand the Sparrow branding and the way in which they deliver this type of service in education up in here in Asia as well," he said.

"Particularly in places like Hong Kong and China, there is real demand from parents for a less rigidly structured education system.

"We appreciate the benefits of the education system that Australia has which is focused on more rounded development of children."

That's nice to hear, but it doesn't solve the national quest for the Socceros' next striker.

"If we can have the next star Matildas player or Socceroo that would be fantastic, although that's not the goal," Mr Bairstow said.

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