

What comes to your mind when you hear about the deserts of Saudi Arabia, known for its heavy reliance on oil money, but now they also have football.

The Saudi Pro League (SPL) is now the talk of town; they have the biggest transfers and most expensive signings of summer window 2023.

The latest is Brazilian footballer Neymar, who will be playing for Saudi Arabia's Al-Hilal after six years with Paris St Germain.

The star has signed a two-year contract where he will be paid US\$100million for the next two years.

The transfer roster in Saudi Arabia is astonishing, from Cristiano Ronaldo who plays for Al-Nassr, to Karim Benzim, N'golo Kante, Fabinho, Sergio Mane, and Riyad Mahrez, these are the biggest names in global football and now they're playing there.

Back in January, Cristiano Ronaldo became the first big name to move to the Middle East after the five-time Ballon d'Or winner signed for Al Nassr.

Since then, the Saudis have been trying their best to lure some of football's biggest names to move to the country.

It was reported that Kante signed a deal worth an eye-watering £86 million per year, whilst Benzema is set to take home a staggering £172 million a year.

For the Saudi's, the primary focus is attention and popularity but not age, since most of these players are past their prime. For them, quality can follow.

The deal sums up, Saudi's plan to dominate football across the globe. That is what Saudi Arabia is counting on; they have a great market for football around 70 percent of their population is less than 35 years of age, they are young and like the game.

In addition, they have the affluence; since they can afford the expensive tickets for any football game. Financially it makes all the sense in the world.

Over the past few years, football has become part of the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), who wants to shift the version of Saudi Arabia from fossil fuels, to become a prominent footballing nation.

MBS has set some targets as well, to triple the league value to US\$ 2billion. The English Premier League is worth 17 billion dollars, so it is a long way to go.

Secondly, the Saudi league ranks 58 on football rankings, MBS wants to break into the top 10 leagues in the world.

Saudi football ambitions are not just financial but also more political; the country is associated with three things, desert, oil and human rights.

This month, the Saudi's hosted the peace talks to end the war in Ukraine.

By getting the big names, Saudi's hope to challenge the big leagues in the world. Unlike Europe, Saudi Arabia is not short of money to spend.

Clubs can pay as much as they want. SPL is not bound by the UEFA Financial Fair Play rules whose objective is to stop clubs from over spending, most of the clubs are owned by sovereign funds, meaning the royal family.

The other aspect is infrastructure, top players like Ronald or Neymar need top training facilities whether their gyms or swimming pools and stadium. Saudi's are building those too.

Since 2021, the Saudi government has invested over 6 billion dollars in sports infrastructure, for many of us, this might sound like a lot of money but just to remind you, Saudi's manage 600 billion dollars in their sovereign fund.

All these investments were aimed at Saudi Arabia's plan to host the FIFA World Cup, before withdrawing; reports say that they could bid for the 2023 edition.

Lastly, for the fans going to Saudi, you won't be just coming for football but tourism as well. Lionel Messi, is an ambassador for Saudi Arabia tourism.

And, the details of his contract recently just leaked. He could make up to \$25 million over the course of three years for vacationing in the country once annually, posting to social media, and participating in an ad campaign.

Ronald is also an ambassador for the SPL, his team won the Arab Champions League. Al Nassr beat Saudi rivals Al-Hilal 2-1 after extra time on Saturday despite playing for more than an hour with just 10 men.

Whether you like it or not, there are two sides to the story, Saudi Arabia could make football more accessible to a lot of people in Asia.

For instance, not any Ronald fan from Bangladesh, Vietnam or India, could have flown to Italy to see him playing, very few could but Saudi Arabia seems to be achievable for the Asian fans.

Apart from football, the Saudi's have also effectively bought global golf. In other words, Saudi Arabia just bought the sport of Professional Golf.

On the other hand, there is a challenge to all this; Saudi Arabia is a closer society when it comes to human rights. Riyadh is accused of sport washing.