



With Beijing hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics, China has tapped some of the biggest names in the hockey world to fast-track its program and lay the foundation for (relative) success at the Games in three years – and after that, the sky's the limit

> BY RONNIE SHUKER

IN DECEMBER 2016, MIKE KEENAN was at an IIHF symposium in Moscow, where a delegation from China's Kunlun Red Star had flown in just to meet with him. With the 2022 Olympics approaching, the group wanted him to review a plan it had put together for the Chinese national teams and for growing the game in China.

Kunlun's reps handed Keenan a five-page outline. After looking it over quietly, he put it down, smiled and then politely laughed. Now, Keenan wouldn't detail what that original plan was, but suffice to say in his mind it missed the mark wider than a Dion Phaneuf slapshot. So, never one to mince words, 'Iron Mike' spoke his mind. "I said, 'You really have no idea what you're doing, do you?' " Keenan recalled. " 'Or maybe you do. That's why you're asking for help.' "

Indeed, for a few years now, Kunlun Red Star has been actively recruiting many of the game's brightest minds and biggest names. The purpose? To help turn China into a formidable force in hockey while growing the sport in the biggest untapped market on the planet.

RISE OF THE RED DRAGON

With the 2022 Olympics only three years away, and China's flyweight national teams set to compete against hockey's heavyweights, there's much work to be done. A lot is happening on that front, but China isn't being shortsighted when it comes to hockey. It doesn't just want to play with the popular kids in the world's biggest icebox and then get kicked out after 2022. It has grander am-

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— IIHF president Rene Fasel

bitions, and the plan goes well beyond whatever was handed to Keenan back in Moscow. It's happening at all levels – youth hockey, college, junior, minor pro, the KHL and, especially, internationally – and driving the bus is the Kunlun Red Star Hockey Group, led by its owner, billionaire and rabid hockey fan, Billy Ngok. “I think hockey can be one of the top four team sports in China,” Ngok said. “With continuous growth and continuous effort, I think the women definitely have a chance to one day win a gold medal. With the men we still have a long way to go, but they should be at least among the top clubs in hockey, as a new power in the future, a powerhouse.”

Needless to say, these are lofty goals for a country that sits closer to Turkey than to Canada in the IIHF rankings, and there's really no precedent for making such a dramatic move up the hierarchy. But Ngok and his team insist the country is in this for the long haul. Even China can't buy a gold medal by 2022, but down the long road it wants to be able to go toe-to-toe with hockey's heavy hitters.

If your immediate reaction is to snicker, well, to each their own. IIHF president Rene Fasel, for one, loves the swagger and doesn't doubt China's commitment for a moment. “China is very good in that when they decide to do something, they do it,” Fasel said. “And I love this Canadian approach, ‘We want to be the best in the



DRIVING FORCE

Rich, powerful and a big fan, Ngok has high hopes for China's hockey future while acknowledging there's a lot of catching up to do.

have won every gold and all but one silver between the Olympics and World Championship. Finland, Russia, Sweden and Switzerland have won the bronzes.

So far, none of hockey's rotating cast of outsiders – Austria, Belarus, Denmark, France, Germany, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Norway, Slovenia, etc. – has been able to crack this clique. And with its men's team ranked 33rd, China is barely a blip on the horizon. But the Red Dragon is an entirely different beast than all others in the IIHF's stable. It has the talent pool and financial reservoir to scale the game up over time to the heights of hockey's international superpowers.

All together, the Big Eight have a population of 547 million. With 1.4 billion people, China nearly triples that. Beijing, at more than 20 million, is twice the size of Sweden and the Czech Republic and about three times the size of Finland and Slovakia. And with the second-biggest economy, China's GDP is greater than Russia's, Canada's, Sweden's, Finland's, Czech Republic's, Slovakia's and Switzerland's combined. “There

world.’ But just be better, you know? And it's so boring not to be challenged. If you're scared to lose or not to go forward, you go backward and stay home. Maybe go fishing.”

★ ★ ★

According to the IIHF, the hockey world consists of 76 countries in varying degrees of membership, ranging from longtime superpowers and wannabe powerhouses to mid-range hangers-on and relative newbies. In reality, however, it's much smaller. The real hockey world is made up of just eight countries, and it's been this way for basically a century.

In 100 years of international play, collectively Canada, the United States, Russia (Soviet Union), Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia) have won 429 out of a possible 444 medals between the Winter Olympics, the World Championship and the World Junior Championship. Only three other countries have won a medal – Austria, Germany and Great Britain – and Germany's silver at the 2018 Olympics was the first any country outside the Big Eight had won since West Germany's bronze at the 1976 Olympics.

And that's just the men. With the women it's essentially Canada and the U.S. always at the final dance while a bunch of wallflowers look on. The two

are 15 cities (in China) with populations over 10 million and four cities over 30 million,” said Scotty MacPherson, Kunlun's vice-president and international development director. “The numbers are just astronomical.”

Yet China isn't just wishing upon a star to make these numbers work. The country knows it needs infrastructure and interest to solve the equation. Enter the Chinese government. “The one thing we can trust the Chinese on is that when they want something they have the support of the government, so they have the money,” Fasel said. “I can 100 percent say that the government is 100 percent behind it.”

China's government has publicly stated it wants 300 million citizens playing at least one winter sport ahead of the 2022 Olympics. And it wants three million of those people playing hockey. To accomplish this the government is building 300 rinks ahead of the Beijing Games, and about 100 have already been completed. That's still well behind Canada (8,300) and the U.S. (2,035), but it's at least in line with countries like Sweden (498) and Finland (323).

With the government taking care of the infrastructure, Kunlun is working on increasing interest in the game. The organization, with offices in four cities, has put together an international advisory board to help seed and fertilize the game at the grassroots level. After a short stint as coach-GM of the KHL club, Keenan is now working as a part-time scout and advisor. In 2017, Kunlun brought in Hall of Famer Phil Esposito, who has experience putting hockey in non-traditional markets from his days as GM and president of the expansion Tampa Bay Lightning in the early 1990s. “When I first came to Florida, people said that I was nuts trying to put an NHL team there,” Esposito said. “They never come back and tell you they were wrong. But that's OK. I just love proving them wrong.”

Along with Keenan and Esposito, Kunlun added the biggest name in the game last year when Wayne Gretzky came on board as an ambassador. “It's a global effort,” MacPherson said. “People all over the world are coming together to try to grow the game here, and we have great people onboard. Mike Keenan, Phil Esposito, Wayne Gretzky, these are superstars in hockey circles and are absolutely invaluable to grow the sport in China. These guys are experts.”

And Kunlun has plenty more to draw upon, especially among its coaching staff. They include former NHLers Curt Fraser, Alex Kovalev and Steve Kasper, as well as former NCAA coach Bob Deraney and Russian-Finnish coach Alexander Barkov, father of the Florida Panthers' Aleksander Barkov.

With all this overseas expertise, Kunlun is essentially deploying a two-pronged strategy in China. In the short term, it's scouting players for the Chinese Ice Hockey Association ahead of the 2022 Olympics. At the same time, Kunlun is putting pieces in place to build off the Beijing Games and sustain the sport for the long term.



STAR POWER

Wayne Gretzky, Phil Esposito and Mike Keenan are among the big names in hockey on China's international advisory board.

The most pressing order of business is obviously the national program. Now, no one is taking China seriously for the 2022 Olympics, not even the Chinese themselves. But getting their donkeys handed to them in their own backyard, with the entire world watching, would not go over well. “Everybody wants gold, but we need to be realistic, you know?” Ngok said. “For the men, we should build a competitive team, not like Korea, Pyeongchang. You can't lose 10-0. We need to score goals and maybe win a game. For the women, we're more ambitious. The women's team finished fourth at Nagano in 1998...Our goal is to try to achieve a medal.”

China faces the same dilemma South Korea did in 2018: how to ice two competitive teams. South Korea's quick fix on the men's side was to give citizenship to a handful of North Americans. China won't go

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BOTH: ELENA S KOCHIEVA



this route. Instead it's recruiting players with Chinese ancestry who have been raised on the high-yielding hockey soils of North America (and to a lesser extent Europe) to go along with homegrown players such as New York Islanders pick Andong Song, the first Chinese-born player drafted into the NHL. "They need to find 25 players who can play, because the Chinese don't want to get blown out 20-1 every game," Keenan said. "They don't want to get embarrassed."

FOOT IN THE DOOR

With two CWHL teams (since merged into one) on its own turf, China exposes some local players to elite women's play and mentorship.

THEY CAN PUT TOGETHER A DECENT TEAM. THEY HAVE A CHANCE TO BE COMPETITIVE (IN THE 2022 OLYMPICS) IF THE NHL DOESN'T GO

— Phil Esposito

To find these players, Kunlun has been scoping out potential recruits of Chinese descent through its global network and sending Keenan and other scouts to evaluate them. They've held multiple camps in Toronto and Vancouver, as well as in China, and Keenan said they've identified upward of 10 "AHL-caliber players" for the men's team. Among them is Tyler Wong, an undrafted 23-year-old right winger with the AHL's Chicago Wolves who led the WHL with 51 goals in 2016-17



before signing an AHL contract with the Vegas Golden Knights organization. There are also all the KHL club's Chinese heritage players, who have a range of experience: Brandon Yip and Victor Bartley (NHL), Cory Kane (AHL), Greg Squires (Sweden), Zach Yuen (ECHL), Luke Lockhart (major junior) and Chris Seto (junior). Add all these players together and Esposito believes China has a shot to be competitive in 2022. "They do, they really do," Esposito said. "The can put together a decent team of players 25 years old and under. They have a lot to choose from. There's just a lot of teaching to do. They have a chance to be competitive if the NHL doesn't go."

While the men remain a work in progress, the women at least have an outside chance at a medal. China just missed out on bronze at the 1998 Olympics, but it hasn't finished higher than seventh since and hasn't qualified since 2010. Currently the women rank 20th.

To expedite their rise up the rankings, Kunlun placed two CWHL teams in China in 2017 so that it could groom Chinese players right at home ahead of the Beijing Games. Since merged into one club, the Shenzhen KRS Vanke Rays, the roster contains several players born in China as well as North Americans of Chinese descent, including NCAA grads Jessica Wong, Rose Allewa and Madison Woo. To accelerate their development, Kunlun has brought in elite imports such as Finnish goalie Noora Raty and American forward Alex Carpenter, to effectively mentor these players while growing

the women's game in China. The goal is to have the team made up of all Chinese players, whether domestic or overseas, by 2021-22.

However you slice it, China has its work cut out in the short term. In the long term, however, the sky's the limit. And in that respect China is aiming high.

While it tries to help piece together China's national teams, Kunlun has been creating a feeder system that will not only start sending Chinese players up to the KHL club but will also begin to broaden the country's own talent pool. "The KHL team in Kunlun is set up so that in four years' time, 90 percent of the team will be made up of players of Chinese descent," Keenan said. "At least that's the objective anyway."

To facilitate this feeder system, Kunlun has set up affiliates in Russia's second-tier pro circuit, the VHL, and its junior circuit, the MHL. Between the organization's three clubs, Kunlun has roughly 40 players born in China or of Chinese descent. Kunlun has also teamed with Russia to rebrand the VHL into the Silk Road League for next season. The SRHL will have 29 teams, including two from China, with plans to increase to five. On top of this, China's own domestic pro league will reportedly begin in 2019 and feature eight clubs, including at least one from Kunlun.

On the women's side, Kunlun has set up an affiliate for the CWHL team. The club is made up solely of



to end. "By age 15 they usually quit hockey to focus on academics," MacPherson said. "Our plan is to show them that, 'No, you don't have to quit. You can get a top-notch education and still play hockey.' About five percent of Chinese hockey players are really good. Those players usually go to North America. Our goal is to try to keep them in China."

To do that will require blending academics with athletics, and that's exactly what's happening in China.

High-school leagues are forming in Beijing. Several private and semi-private academies are integrating athletics into academics in the model of Notre Dame in Saskatchewan or Blyth Academy in Toronto, where Connor McDavid went to school. (Blyth Academy, which has a subsidiary in Beijing, actually teamed with Kunlun to host China's under-18 team for the 2017-18 season.) This season, three academies have gone so far as to move their entire hockey teams to Switzerland, Finland and the U.S. to play against stiffer competition while getting a year of overseas education. "There's been a shift in mentality in China," Keenan said. "The school system used to be focused strictly on academics. Academics are still very, very important. They're just integrating sports, like hockey and other Olympic winter sports, into the curriculum."

Change is also happening at the university level, where China hopes to create a collegiate system similar to the NCAA. Plans remain preliminary, but to help lay the groundwork Kunlun brought in ECAC commissioner Stephen Hagwell along with Harvard coach and former NHLer Ted Donato as part of its international advisory board.

All of these efforts will go for naught, however, unless Chinese hockey undergoes a complete overhaul at the grassroots level. For years, youth hockey in China has more or less been made up of privately owned teams that largely practise on their own and



PLANTING SEEDS

China is blending hockey and training with its academic programs in hopes of keeping its best players on local soil for longer.

national team players and plays a schedule of international matches while training for IIHF tournaments leading up to the Olympics. "Everything we're doing has some kind of significance to Chinese hockey at the national level," MacPherson said. "What you see now won't be the same in four years."

The key, of course, will be keeping Chinese players in China. Currently, any kids with legitimate potential have to give up the game or move overseas to continue their development. Kunlun wants that trend

TOP: VCG/VCG VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: MIKE EHRLMAN/GETTY IMAGES

TOP: YEGOR ALEYEV/TASS VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: XINHUA/SADAT VIA GETTY IMAGES

sometimes play games against each other. Occasionally they coalesce into informal leagues. These private clubs bring in skills coaches from abroad and charge parents hefty fees to have these overseas experts teach their kids. The private club owners are naturally reluctant to give up their golden goose. But things are slowly changing, especially in Beijing, where Song was born and raised. “It’s a lot different now than when I played,” Song said. “They’ve got a bunch of different club teams, and they play a lot more tournaments, a lot more games. When I first started, there was pretty much no structure. You maybe played a few games a year, at most.”

It’s into this environment that the Los Angeles Kings have waded with their Beijing Jr. Kings program for kids 10 and under. Headed by former Kings player Todd Elik, it’s the first such initiative for any NHL team in China. “The kids here are really good offensively,” Elik said. “They have a lot of talent and a lot of skill. But it’s all 1-on-1 private training. There’s very little team concept. When we play games, there’s a lot of 1-on-4 or 1-on-5 play going on, and that’s not how hockey



is played. This program is a North American environment. We try to teach kids how to play as a team.”

This is perhaps the biggest hurdle facing Chinese hockey. China has long been successful at individual sports, especially at the Summer Olympics, and it’s also strong in speed skating and figure skating. But success among team sports, particularly winter ones, is nearly non-existent. Fasel attributes this to the country’s one-child policy, which was finally relaxed in 2013.

“Team sports are not really successful in China,” Fasel said. “Even though they have a strong basketball league, they don’t win gold medals in basketball. In football there is progress but still much work left to be done. In other team sports they’re not really good... It’s really not something where the parents are interested in putting their boy or girl on a team.”

To recircuit this cultural hardwiring, Kunlun is attempting to train a critical mass of Chinese coaches who can teach Chinese kids the North American and European styles of play. To that end, Kunlun has set up hockey schools in several cities where it brings in foreign instructors to hold coaching clinics. Ron Fogarty and the coaching staff at Princeton conducted clinics

LIGHTING A FIRE IN HIS HOMELAND

He fell out of touch with the game as a teenager, but manufacturing tycoon Zhou Yunjie is making up for lost time in a big way with plans to turn his country of China into a hockey hotbed

IN 2013, ZHOU YUNJIE was in Boston on a bit of business when he found himself with a little leisure time on his hands. He hadn’t played hockey since he was a teenager and had basically lost touch with the game he once loved as a young goaltender back in Beijing in the 1970s. But the Boston Bruins’ Original Six brand appealed to the billionaire businessman. So with the Bruins at home, Zhou decided to take in a game at raucous TD Garden.

That night in Boston relit the hockey fuse in Zhou’s mind. “I always loved hockey and then I went to a live game,” he said. “That gave me the inspiration basically to bring the NHL to China and grow the sport of hockey in China like the NBA. The NBA has been there more than two decades and is very successful there.”

Since that night more than five years ago, Zhou has gotten back into the game in a big way. Through his company, Beijing-based ORG Packaging, he has forged partnerships with the Bruins, Los Angeles Kings and Washington Capitals, as well as a separate deal with the NHL. His plan is to make hockey ubiquitous across his home country of more than 1.4 billion people. “My ultimate goal would be seeing hockey really grow in China from grassroots, so maybe leagues or teams from primary schools, middle schools, and then ultimately China has its own professional league,” Zhou said. “And then, you know, we want to see players in the NHL representing China.”

Zhou’s goal to turn China into a hockey-loving nation has been years in the making. He learned to skate in Beijing when he was eight and began playing hockey when he was 12. He continued competing through his teenage years until 1979, when his team disbanded. It would be decades before he would be reunited with hockey. Although he continued to play a bit after his team folded, he soon lost touch with the sport he had grown to love.

In 1984, Zhou and his mother founded ORG, a metal-can manufacturing company. His focus quickly turned to building his company, but he applied the lessons he learned as a young player to his business interests. “Hockey played a very important role in my life,” Zhou said. “The spirit of a team, teamwork, competition and also perseverance have all been very important in my life and also my career.”



Zhou now hopes Chinese kids take the same lessons about “perseverance and also teamwork” that he learned from the game when he was their age. The ORG-NHL partnerships have invested in youth clinics and camps to get the growth of the game rolling in China, and registration has since doubled – from 1,225 in 2016 to 2,764 in 2018, according to the IIHF.

ORG-sponsored players have taken trips to the U.S. to meet their NHL heroes, and for the past two years the company has been the title sponsor of the NHL’s China Games, which have featured exhibition affairs between Los Angeles and the Vancouver Canucks in Shanghai and Beijing in 2017 and, most recently, the Bruins and Calgary Flames in Shenzhen and Beijing in 2018. “The games provided an opportunity for the kids and their parents to have direct access to live hockey,” Zhou said. “You might see something on TV, but when you go to a real live NHL game, the experience is very different. They got to experience that live and also learn about the NHL, about hockey, about hockey culture. I think it’s very important.”

Back home in Beijing, Zhou owns his own rink, the 2,500-capacity AZ Sports Ice Club, which is where the Bruins and Flames practised when they were in China and where the Jr. Kings (through a partnership with the Los Angeles Kings) play year-round. It’s also home to KRS-ORG of the Supreme League (VHL), the second-tier league beneath the KHL, whose roster will feature many players that will represent China at the 2022 Olympics.

Zhou’s hockey aspirations may have taken a hiatus for a few decades, but he’s more than making up for lost time – bringing hockey to an untapped population and fulfilling some personal fantasies at the same time. “The partnership with the NHL, with the teams...and to have my own rink, my own team in the VHL, it’s a dream come true,” he said. “The thing I enjoy the most is to see kids skating on the ice in my rink. Basically I see myself when I was a little kid, when I was playing hockey. So I’m very happy that I can provide such a platform for the youth in China.” – **MATT KALMAN**

LEFT: ELENA S KOCHLEVA; RIGHT: EMMANUEL WONG/NHL VIA GETTY IMAGES

IT’S A LOT DIFFERENT NOW THAN WHEN I PLAYED. WHEN I FIRST STARTED THERE WAS PRETTY MUCH NO STRUCTURE – Andong Song

last summer, and once the KHL season is over, Kovalev will as well. Gretzky and Esposito have also helped out by filming an instructional series for Chinese coaches.

All these efforts are ultimately aimed at bringing more Chinese kids into the game. But getting more kids on the ice is only the starting point. Off the ice, there’s still an entire supporting cast required to grow the game: broadcasters, trainers, equipment managers, time-keepers, Zamboni drivers, bus drivers, you name it.

Yet Ngok isn’t deterred. As a businessman who’s made his money in the energy industry, he sees opportunity where others see obstacles. In 2016, Ngok founded Kunlun (named for a famous mountain range in China) after falling in love with the game through his relationship with Pittsburgh Penguins owner Ron Burkle and Ngok’s oil-and-gas buddies in the KHL. It’s a personal venture for him but a business one as well. “Business-wise, this is so new to China,” Ngok said. “It’s like the white page that you can have a lot of room to play with. Basically, you can be a virgin to this market for this sport in China.”

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Shortly after Kunlun lured Keenan into the fold, Ngok asked him for a favor. He wanted to know if Keenan could help him land Gretzky. As a hockey ambassador, perhaps he could do for China what he did for California as a player. “He asked me if I could get Wayne Gretzky, and I said, ‘Yes, I could,’ ” Keenan recalled. “But Wayne was a little reluctant at first. He said, ‘I’m Canadian. I’m a red-and-white guy. I don’t want these guys to get too good.’ But after he thought about it a while, he realized he could help build the sport in the biggest market in the world. It’s a new frontier.”

Fasel agrees. He sees Asia as the logical next step to truly turn hockey into a global game. But doing so requires a strong China. In September, the CIHA opened its own offices in Beijing after separating from China’s state-run sports system. At the ceremony, Fasel called it “a landmark moment in the development of Chinese ice hockey.” And all the major players have vested interests in China – the IIHF, the NHL, the KHL – if only they would co-ordinate their efforts. That, Fasel be-



FRONTIERSMAN

Even though he’s Canadian, Gretzky couldn’t pass up the chance to be a Chinese hockey ambassador and help grow the sport globally.

lieves, would jumpstart Chinese hockey in a big way. “I miss, I miss, I miss, really I miss, a co-operation, a common strategy between the NHL, IIHF and KHL on China,” Fasel said. “The NHL wants to do its own, blah, blah, blah. I think it’s the typical American way. You know, they have the big shoes, the big skates, and they think since they’re the best, they will do it any way. It’s not always like this.”

The likelihood of that happening is low. The NHL

has been dipping its toes into the Chinese market with its pre-season China Games. But the league appears more interested in turning China into a hockey-watching country than a hockey-playing country.

Yet that’s exactly what Ngok and others in China, including fellow billionaire Zhou Yunjie (see sidebar on pg. 62), are hoping to accomplish. But becoming a hockey nation is one thing. Becoming an elite hockey nation, even decades from now, is quite another. It still hasn’t happened in basketball, where, despite the sport’s growing popularity since the 1970s, China sits seventh (women) and 30th (men) internationally. And in hockey, China isn’t even the best country in Asia, where both Japan and South Korea outrank it.

But perhaps there is a case study for China. Despite being an IIHF member since 1928, Finland didn’t build its first indoor rink until 1965. And it took 60 years to win a medal at the Olympics or the World Championship, when it took silver at the 1988 Winter Olympics. In the 30 years since, however, the Finns have won 48 medals at the Olympics, worlds and world juniors.

Time will tell whether China is a gold mine just waiting for the rush. But if there’s money to be made, perhaps golds are to be won. Should any of the Big Eight be worried? For his part, Esposito couldn’t care less if Canada has a new rival one day. “Why would I give a s---?” Esposito said. “If China becomes the next superpower, then that’s Canada’s fault, the States’ fault, Russia’s fault, Sweden, Finland, Czech Republic, their fault.”

“If they beat Canada 50 years from now, so be it. I’m not going to be around to see it anyway.” **H**