China bets on panda pundits for World Cup

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File photo taken on September 23, 2013 shows new-born panda cubs in a crib at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding in Chengdu, China's Sichuan province

A crack team of baby pandas will be used to predict World Cup scores in China, according to reports, in a homegrown answer to deceased soccer soothsayer Paul the Octopus.

The cuddly creatures will predict match winners by picking food from a choice of baskets and climbing trees at China's flagship panda breeding base in the southwestern province of Sichuan, the official Xinhua news agency said on Monday.

China hopes the bears will be odds on to match the worldwide fame achieved by Paul, the German octopus who correctly predicted the results of several 2010 World Cup games using its tentacles.

During the group stages, pandas aged between one and two years old will select food from three bamboo baskets representing either a win, loss or draw, Xinhua said.

For the knock-out rounds, the animals will select winners by climbing trees marked with the national flags of competing nations, it added.

They will have to go a long way to beat Paul the tentacled oracle, however, who successfully predicted the outcome of eight matches by choosing a mussel or oyster from one of two boxes bearing the flags of competing nations. He died in 2010.

China has about 1,600 pandas living in the wild, mostly in earthquake-prone Sichuan province in the country's southwest.

Pandas have a notoriously low reproductive rate and are under pressure from factors such as habitat loss in their home terrain of Sichuan, northern Shaanxi and northwestern Gansu provinces.

Biologists working at the panda base in Sichuan province have carried out a long but to date unsuccessful project to reintroduce human raised pandas to the wild.

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