



Hollywood, here comes football!

THE GUARDIAN

It may be the beautiful game, but until now football has proved to be resolutely uncinematic. Though sports such as baseball, horse racing and American football have all inspired classic movies, soccer has wallowed conspicuously in Hollywood's second division.

On Sunday, Clint Eastwood's boxing movie Million Dollar Baby scooped seven Oscars. By comparison, the few memorable roles football has produced range from the quirky, like Parminder Nagra in Bend it Like Beckham, to the plainly absurd: Sylvester Stallone in Escape to Victory. Ricky Tomlinson was never in the running for a gong with Mike Bassett: England Manager.

Yet this could be about to change. With the release this year of an unprecedented number of films about the game, it appears that Hollywood is finally waking up to the appeal of the world's most popular sport.

The most ambitious project started shooting at Pinewood and Newcastle in January and aims to be in cinemas by the end of the year. Goal! is the brainchild of first-time producer Mike Jefferies, a former internet entrepreneur who has recently been linked with a takeover bid for Liverpool.

"Movies that are sports-related are very expensive to shoot," says Jefferies, who raised \$30m (£15.6m) for his film. "Part of our ability to get the type of cash that can do justice to football is that we were able to tap into the fact that the sport is significantly hot enough in the States. Every studio head we went to see - and we met them all - had kids who play football. Now they get it over there. They understand the potential is enormous."

Goal! hopes to have global appeal by showing the fortunes of a Latino player from LA going to the Premiership. A sequel in the Spanish Liga will be filmed this year and the trilogy will end with its hero at next year's World Cup. The screenplay was written by the Auf Wiedersehen Pet veterans Dick Clement and Ian Le Frenais, and Danny Cannon, who directed Judge Dredd, is now in charge after the more celebrated director Michael Winterbottom was removed from the project for his "creative differences".

Goal! has been a high-profile project since it won the backing of Adidas and - for the first time - Fifa, who were attracted by the promise of expanding into new markets. "We sat down with [Fifa's president Sepp] Blatter to establish a quid pro quo," says Jefferies. "We want access in the broadest sense. In return we will give you exposure, particularly in the Americas and Asia."

Another project, with a similar name and plot, is also scheduled to start filming this year. In The Goal - a \$16m picture executive-produced by the occasional Arsenal fan Spike Lee - a footballer from the slums of Rio (played by the sitcom star Mario Lopez) goes to the US, where he becomes the world's best player.

Goal! and The Goal both hope to use the celebrity cachet of top players to attract audiences. The former has announced the participation of Alan Shearer, David Beckham and Zinedine Zidane, and the latter hopes to enlist the Brazilian national team.

"Everybody is trying to tap into a market: the US," says Michael Gubbins, editor of Screen International. "Football is one of the truly global games, yet there is a great hole in there - and that

happens to be the US, which is the centre of film."

Though Americans have yet to embrace professional soccer, the world of soccer moms - the suburban junior leagues - is an established part of the cultural landscape. In Kicking & Screaming, to be released in September, this milieu will become the setting of a Hollywood movie for the first time. The comedy is a vehicle for Will Ferrell, who plays the coach of a team in competition with another team run by Robert Duvall, himself no stranger to football films having played the coach of a small Scottish team in 2000's The Cup (also known as A Shot at Glory) alongside Ally McCoist.

With the growth of football films, a new position on set has become necessary - football choreographer. Kicking & Screaming hired Simon Clifford, the boss of a Leeds-based chain of soccer schools who was responsible for teaching Keira Knightly her tricks in Bend it Like Beckham.

"One of the reasons football films have been embarrassing is that they hired actors who couldn't play football," says Clifford. "Either you cast people who are already footballers - which is what Jefferies has done - or you invest the time in preparation. With Keira we spent four months training every day."

For many film makers, the success of Bend It Like Beckham - which grossed \$32m in the US - was a turning point for the sport in cinema. "It empowered us. It told us we didn't need to shy away from football," says Lexi Alexander, whose film about hooliganism, The Yank, is due for release in August. "Football is a great environment for a movie because there is such passion for it and so much adrenalin."

In The Yank - which will be called Hooligans in the US - Elijah Wood plays the role of a Harvard dropout who comes to London and gets involved with a West Ham gang. It was filmed at Upton Park, where Wood endeared himself to members of the local "firms". The author and hooley expert Cass Pennant worked as a consultant: "I had a few lads who were pissed out of the hobbogin. But he won them over. He was very serious. His fans will be horrified to see their idol covered in blood."

Hollywood often uses sporting success as a metaphor for the American dream. The US football team's most remarkable victory happened more than half a century ago, when they beat England 1-0 at the 1950 World Cup in Brazil. That match is the subject of the Game of Their Lives, due out in the US in April. The movie begins with Patrick Stewart, as the veteran journalist Dent McSkimming, reminiscing about the match to the real-life teenage football prodigy Freddy Adu.

Perhaps the most unexpected casting decision was to give the only speaking role in the England team, Stan Mortensen, to Gavin Rossdale, the lead singer of the British rock band Bush. Gubbins wonders whether it is possible to make a truly global film about football since every country has its own attitudes towards the game. "I love Clement and Le Frenais," he says. "But it suggests to me that [Goal!] will be wry British humour, which is not necessarily going to do something in the US or internationally."

Jefferies disagrees: "What did you want to be when you were a little boy? A footballer. It's a common, international, non-religious, non-denominational dream." One country where football is synonymous with national identity

is Brazil. The Bafta-winner Walter Salles is developing the script of Linha de Passe, about four brothers, one of whom becomes a footballer. Another factor in the spate of football films is the proximity of the 2006 World Cup in Germany. It was announced this month that the Berlin film festival and the German FA will produce a portmanteau film about football including vignettes directed by Kenneth Branagh, Emir Kusturica, Jean-Jacques Beneix and Werner Herzog, to be shown as part of the World Cup celebrations next year.

Lastly, Michael Apted, the British director of Gorillas in the Mist, has recently signed up to direct a documentary about globalisation and football, which will follow stories in eight different countries.

COMING ATTRACTION

Goal! (2005) Dir: Danny Cannon. Starring: Santiago Munez. Plot: US Latino makes the big time - at Newcastle

The Goal (2005) Dir: Art Sims. Starring: Mario Lopez. Plot: Brazilian makes the big time - in the US

Kicking & Screaming (2005) Dir: Jesse Dylan. Starring: Will Ferrell. Plot: Father coaches son's team - with hilarious results

The Yank (2005) Dir: Lexi Alexander. Starring: Elijah Wood. Plot: Former hobbit is caught up in the hooligan underworld

Game of Their Lives (2005) Dir: David Anspaugh. Starring: Wes Bentley. Plot: USA beat England at the 1950 World Cup

Linha de Passe (TBC) Dir: Walter Salles. Starring: TBC. Plot: Four Brazilian brothers try to make it - only one does

Untitled (2006) German portmanteau production featuring several name directors

Untitled (TBC) Dir: Michael Apted. Documentary about football and globalisation

Maradona has his stomach reduced!

REUTERS, Cartagena, Colombia

Former Argentina soccer World Cup-winning captain Diego Maradona had his stomach stapled to reduce his ballooning waistline, his Colombian doctors said on Saturday.

Maradona, 44, had the two-hour operation in the picturesque port city of Cartagena on Colombia's Caribbean coast.

"Everything went well," Francisco Holguin, head of Cartagena's Medihelp clinic, where the operation was performed, told reporters.

He said the former superstar, who is 5-foot-6-inch-tall weighed 267 lb when he checked in, will spend three days in the clinic recovering.

The former midfielder only stopped playing professionally in 1997 but has grown almost unrecognizably fat in recent years despite spending much of his time in a Cuban clinic fighting cocaine addiction.

Maradona, considered with Brazil's Pele to be one of the finest soccer players of all time, will be fed intravenously for two days before going on a two-week liquid diet to be followed by solid foods, his doctors told a news conference. He is expected to remain in Colombia for about two weeks.

"In eight to 10 months he should be back to his ideal weight of 165 lb," Holguin added.

Stomach stapling, also known as a gastric bypass, reduces the stomach's capacity for holding food and bypasses part of the small intestine, forcing individuals to eat less.

PRIMERA LIGA

Eto'o again Barca's hero



REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona stretched their lead at the top of the Primera Liga to eight points on Saturday after they edged a 1-0 win at struggling Osasuna while second-placed Real Madrid were held to a 1-1 draw away to Valencia.

African Player of the Year Samuel Eto'o took his goal tally for the season to 18 with the winner against Osasuna when he smashed home a fierce first-time shot five minutes before the break.

Brazilian striker Ronaldo ended his recent drought with his first goal in eight games to cancel out Pablo Aimar's early strike and earn Real Madrid a point in a pulsating encounter at the Mestalla.

The results mean Barca lead the table with 62 points from 27 games, Real follow on 54 while Villarreal, Valencia and Sevilla all have 43.

Sevilla missed the chance to pull ahead of their immediate rivals when they slumped to a 3-0 defeat at Atletico Madrid in Saturday's late match.

Barcelona, wearing black armbands in memory of former coach Dutchman Rinus Michels who died on Thursday, took control from the first whistle at a rainswept El Sadar but were slow to take advantage of their domination.

The Catalans eventually broke the deadlock just before halftime

when Portugal's Deco won the ball in midfield and slipped a neat through ball into Eto'o's path with the outside of his foot.

The Cameroon international cracked a stinging shot towards the far post and although Osasuna keeper Juanxo Elia got a hand to the ball he was unable to stop it spinning into his net.

Eto'o should have grabbed another goal early in the second half when he was put clear by Ronaldinho but he ran too wide and saw his angled shot turned past the post by Elia.

Osasuna, who were on a nine-match winless streak, battled hard in the second half and laid siege to the Barca area in the closing minutes but keeper Victor Valdes produced a string of top class saves to deny the home side an equaliser.

Valencia, who have experienced a mini-revival since Antonio Lopez replaced Claudio Ranieri as coach, were the first to show at the Mestalla with Ruben Baraja and David Albelda bossing the midfield and Pablo Aimar probing for gaps in the Real defence.

The home side were rewarded for their early domination when Aimar gave them the lead with a slickly worked goal in the 14th minute.

Baraja charged through a gaping hole in Real's midfield and slipped the ball to Aimar who played a neat one-two with Mista on the edge of the area before sending a precisely struck shot flying past the out-

stretched Iker Casillas into the net.

Real, who were missing Zinedine Zidane, Raul and Michael Owen, struggled to find their rhythm but still managed to draw level just before the half-hour thanks to some great skill from the makeshift forward combination of Guti and Ronaldo.

Guti threaded a disguised pass through the defence and into the path of the Brazilian who jinked his way round goalkeeper Santiago Canizares, left defender Carlos Marchena sprawling on the grass with a shimmy and guided the ball into an empty net.

Valencia held the upper hand for the remainder of the game but Real, and Ronaldo in particular, still posed a serious threat on the break.

Real keeper Casillas pulled off a fine save low to his right to stop a sharp shot from Mista on the hour but Canizares produced an even better stop to deny Ronaldo at the death.

TOP SIX

Spanish football league standings after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Barcelona	27	19	5	3	51	18	62
Real	27	17	3	7	47	23	54
Villarreal	26	12	7	7	43	24	43
Valencia	27	11	10	6	41	28	43
Sevilla	27	12	7	8	32	32	43
Espanyol	26	12	6	8	32	28	42



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid superstar Ronaldo (C) tries to make his way through Valencia's Fabio Aurelio (L) and David Albelda at Mestalla stadium in Valencia on March 5.

SERIE A

Juve stay on par



REUTERS, Milan

An Alessandro Del Piero penalty gave Juventus a 2-1 victory at AS Roma keeping them in step at the top with AC Milan.

Milan won by the same scoreline at Atalanta after Andrea Pirlo's winner with the last kick of the game, putting them joint top of Serie A with Juventus on 60 points after 27 games with Sampdoria a distant third 16 points behind.

Juve's victory came in a bad-tempered game with Roma disputing both goals from Fabio Capello's team.

Capello was returning to Roma, where he won the title in 2001, for the first time as Juventus coach after leaving the capital at the end of last season.

Juve went ahead in the 11th minute when Zlatan Ibrahimovic's header was blocked by Roma keeper Ivan Pelizzoli and Fabio Cannavaro stooped to head home the loose ball, although television images suggested he was in an offside position.

Antonio Cassano brought Roma level in the 39th minute with a confident strike after being put through by a perfectly executed pass from Francesco Totti.

Del Piero's decisive goal came from the penalty spot after a hotly disputed penalty awarded after Roma's Greek defender Traianos

Dellas brought down Uruguayan striker Marcelo Zaleyeata.

Roma insisted that the foul had taken place just outside the area but after several minutes of angry protests, Del Piero kept his cool and blasted home the spot kick.

Roma's Argentine defender Leandro Cufré was lucky to stay on the pitch just before the break after he slapped Del Piero in the face but the incident was not seen by the referee.

After the break Juventus had an effort from Swedish striker Ibrahimovic disallowed for off-side.

"It was a vital game for both teams and so we ended up with a bad-tempered game. But that's normal, football is not made for ladies," said Capello.

"We did very well in the first half although we paid for a loss of concentration with their equaliser. We struggled a bit after the break due to some good play from Roma who are in form and played well," said Capello.

After being matched throughout by Atalanta, Carlo Ancelotti's side took the lead in the 72nd minute through a header from substitute Massimo Ambrosini.

The advantage lasted only a minute. Impressive Nigerian striker Stephen Makinwa brought the Bergamo side level with a header from an inswinging free kick.

Both sides had chances to win

the game in an exciting finale but Milan snatched the points in the fourth minute of injury time when Filippo Inzaghi's header was parried by Atalanta keeper Alex Calderoni and Pirlo pounced to drive home the loose ball.

"That was a genuinely difficult game for us," said Ancelotti.

"Atalanta played so well, really pushing on and creating a lot of chances. We didn't do well at halting their breaks."

"But we came away with an excellent result and we hope that can give us a boost for Tuesday's match in the Champions League," added Ancelotti.

Milan host Manchester United at the San Siro on Tuesday, leading 1-0 from the first leg of their first knockout round tie.

As well as Inzaghi's return from injury, Milan also had Dutch defender Jaap Stam back in action and both will be in the frame for Tuesday's game.

TOP SIX

Italian league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Milan	27	18	6	3	46	17	60
Juventus	27	18	6	5	45	16	60
Sampdoria	26	13	5	8	30	20	44
Inter	26	9	16	1	47	31	43
Udinese	26	12	6	8	36	26	42
Palermo	26	11	9	6	28	19	42

PREMIERSHIP

Chelsea happiest



REUTERS, London

Chelsea motored eight points clear at the top of the Premier League on Saturday after they beat Norwich City 3-1 and title rivals Manchester United stumbled to a 0-0 draw at 10-man Crystal Palace.

Champions Arsenal kept their slim title hopes alive after a Thierry Henry hat-trick gave them a 3-0 home win over Portsmouth, though they remain 10 points adrift of the leaders.

Chelsea, who look destined for their first league title in 50 years, have 71 points and a game in hand over United (63 points) and Arsenal (61).

Joe Cole gave them a first-half lead before Leon Mackenzie ended Chelsea's run of 10 league clean sheets with an equaliser. However, goals from Serbia and Montenegro striker Mateja Kezman and Portugal defender Ricardo Carvalho killed the game off.

Southampton improved their survival hopes with a 1-0 home win over Tottenham Hotspur while Aston Villa and Newcastle also enjoyed morale-boosting victories.

But it was the game at Carrow Road that provided a turning point in the season as Chelsea

capitalised on United's slip at Selhurst Park, moving the newly-crowned League Cup winners closer still to a second trophy in their century year.

Cole came through two heavy tackles to fire the London club into a 22nd minute lead and they then brushed off Mackenzie's superb header from a Darren Huckerby cross, their first goal conceded since a 2-2 draw with Arsenal on December 12.

Substitute Kezman, yet to become a first-team regular, followed up a Frank Lampard effort to tap in Chelsea's second goal and Carvalho rose unchallenged to head the third from a corner.

The Champions League offered a potential distraction for Chelsea, United and Arsenal. All three trail before their return legs against Barcelona, AC Milan and Bayern Munich respectively in midweek.

United, seeking a seventh successive league win, rested Wayne Rooney, Cristiano Ronaldo and Paul Scholes at the start and they were fuming after Roy Keane was denied in the first half by an offside flag against struggling Palace.

The visitors' frustration increased when Palace's Hungarian goalkeeper Gabor Kiraly saved superbly from Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Palace's task was made all the harder when the 64th-minute dismissal of Greek midfielder Vassilis Lakis left them to play the last half-hour with 10 men but they held out thanks to a combination of determination, luck and poor United finishing.

"It's a bad result for us," United manager Alex Ferguson told Sky Sports television. "We've given ourselves a real mountain to climb. We've given a great advantage to Chelsea."

Palace manager Iain Dowie said: "It shows we've got a group of lads who are prepared to put their bodies on the line."

At Highbury, Portsmouth's Nigerian forward Yakubu Aiyegbeni headed against the bar before France striker Henry settled a youthful Arsenal team's nerves after 39 minutes with his 20th league goal of the season.

He made it 2-0 eight minutes into the second half and completed his hat-trick with a trademark free kick that went in via the goalkeeper five minutes from the end.

"I'm very happy," said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger. "It was a very young side and for such a young side they have shown great maturity."

Arsenal, though, have defensive problems for Wednesday's visit of Bayern.

Wenger said central defender

Pascal Cygan is unlikely to be fit after picking up a thigh injury on Saturday and they are already missing inspirational centre back Sol Campbell due to injury.

Fourth-placed Everton, with 51 points, host Blackburn Rovers on Sunday and their hopes of clinching the fourth Champions League spot were given a huge lift when the two teams below them lost.

Liverpool remain eight points adrift of their neighbours in fifth spot after losing 1-0 to a spectacular Laurent Robert free kick at Newcastle. Sixth-placed Middlesbrough, with 42 points, went down 2-0 at Aston Villa.

Nigel Quashie's second-half header gave third-from-bottom Southampton the points against Spurs and the south-coast side are two points behind fourth in a bottom Palace. Charlton Athletic drew 0-0 at London rivals Fulham.

TOP SIX

English Premiership table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Chelsea	28	22	5	1	53	9	71
Man Utd	29	18	9	2	47	17	63
Arsenal	29	18	7	4	67	32	61
Everton	28	15	6	7	34	29	51
Liverpool	28	13	4	11	41	43	43
Boro	29	11	9	9	43	39	42