

'Next Goal Wins' scores a victory with its charming cast

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «««« out of «««««

Running Time: 103 minutes

This film from Searchlight Pictures opens in cinemas on Friday, Nov. 17.

During World Cup qualifying rounds in 2001, the American Samoa national soccer team suffered the biggest defeat in history. Even though few expected this group to progress into the tournament, at the time it was still considered a major embarrassment and dogged the country for years. They immediately became FIFA's lowest-ranked team and languished over the following years.

This hardly sounds like the material for an inspirational sports comedy/drama, but *Next Goal Wins* tells the story of their struggle for redemption. Director/co-writer Taika Waititi (*What We Do in the Shadows*

, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*

, *JoJo Rabbit*)

takes a breezier approach to the story than in his previous efforts. Still, for the most part, it does

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succeed in delivering laughs.

Dutch-American Thomas Rongen (Michael Fassbender) is a temperamental soccer coach known for his on-the-field outbursts. With his career in trouble, he is forced to accept the role of new mentor for the American Samoa team and turn them into a competitive squad for a new series of World Cup qualifiers. Rongen initially writes them all off, butting heads with mellow American Samoa Football Federation Head Tavita Taumua (Oscar Knightley), the man who actually fought for the coach's appointment. The intense figure doesn't fare any better with the team, including transgender player Jaiyah Saeula (Kaimana). While the mission is essentially impossible, Rongen must change his personal philosophy in order to bring some measure of success.

A lot of humor comes from the team's loser status. Knightley is extremely entertaining as his country's soccer federation official, local TV-series cameraperson and more. Despite suffering many indignities, his sweet nature is endearing and most of the gags involving the character land.

This is a fish-out-of-water story, with a lot of material involving the down-and-out Rongen having to adapt to local customs on a small island. Naturally, there are plenty of gags derived from the coach encountering noted officials and team members in unexpected places. And the fact that all the players have a relaxed attitude toward the game also results in comedic conflict between themselves and their exasperated trainer. The entire team ensemble is excellent and maximize the comedic potential of just about every scene they appear in.

The movie also manages to deliver a couple of twists on the underdog sports film formula. This group is never going to reach great heights, so it is interesting to see them deal with this fact and celebrate much smaller victories. There's a hilarious moment involving an inspirational speech delivered by a newly motivated Rongen. He races up a mountain peak with the team, but finds himself completely out of breath when trying to deliver his big message.

There are also plenty of fun cameos from the likes of Will Arnett, Rhys Darby and the director himself (as the story's narrator and local priest).

Admittedly, the film does have its issues. The tale offers plenty of engaging moments with

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fascinating American Samoan characters and feels like more time could have been spent with them.

While the tone is light and silly early on, the backstory involving the coach becomes considerably serious and melancholic. It does resolve itself in a sweet, emotional confession to the players. Yet this admission makes a few of the American Soccer Federation members come across as even more insensitive during their early interactions with the lead. The gags will likely still earn chuckles, but the ramifications of the reveal may briefly take one out of the story.

Regardless, the movie is a well-intentioned and mostly winning tale of a group of outcasts finding suffering, as well as eventual joy and happiness, through the game of soccer. It doesn't all work, but in the end the charming cast helps *Next Goal Wins* secure a victory.

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