



Searchlight Pictures presents
In Association with TSG Entertainment

NEXT GOAL WINS

Starring

Michael Fassbender as Thomas Rongen
Oscar Kightley as Tavita
Kaimana as Jaiyah
David Fane as Ace
Rachel House as Ruth
Beulah Koale as Daru
Uli Latukefu as Nicky Salapu
Chris Alosio as Jonah
Semu Filipo as Rambo
Ioane Goodhue as Smiley
Lehi Falepapalangi as Pisa
Hio Pelesasa as Samson
With **Will Arnett** as Alex Magnussen
And **Elisabeth Moss** as Gail

Directed by..... Taika Waititi
Screenplay by..... Taika Waititi & Iain Morris
Produced by..... Jonathan Cavendish p.g.a., Garrett Basch p.g.a., Taika Waititi p.g.a.,
Mike Brett, Steve Jamison
Executive Producers..... Andy Serkis, Will Tennant, Phil Robertson, Kathryn Dean, Josh McLaglen
Director of Photography..... Lachlan Milne, ACS
Production Designer..... Ra Vincent
Editors.....Nicholas Monsour, Yana Gorskaya, ACE, Tom Eagles, ACE, Nat Sanders, ACE
Costume Designer.....Miyako Bellizzi
Music Composed by.....Michael Giacchino
Casting by.....Mary Vernieu, CSA, Michelle Wade Byrd, CSA

<https://press.searchlightpictures.com/>

Running Time: 103 minutes

Rating: PG-13

Los Angeles
Julia Krom
845.248.0711

Julia.Krom@searchlightpictures.com

Regional West
Cristina Karangelov
714.454.8930

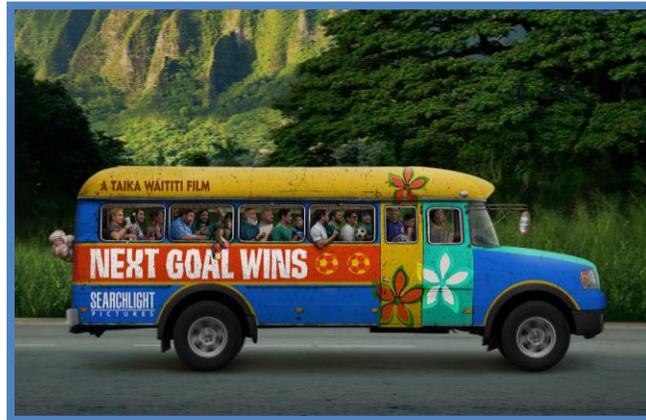
Cristina.Karangelov@SearchlightPictures.com

New York
Brooke Schwartz
201.562.6263

Brooke.Schwartz@searchlightpictures.com

Regional East
Michelle Matalon
212.536.6422

Michelle.Matalon@searchlightpictures.com



Directed by Academy Award® Winner Taika Waititi (*Jojo Rabbit*, *Thor: Ragnarok*) and based on a true story, **NEXT GOAL WINS** follows the American Samoa soccer team, infamously known for their brutal 31-0 loss in 2001. With the World Cup Qualifiers approaching, the team hires down-on-his-luck, maverick coach Thomas Rongen (Michael Fassbender) hoping he will turn the world's worst soccer team around in this heartfelt underdog comedy.

Searchlight Pictures presents, In Association with TSG Entertainment, **NEXT GOAL WINS** starring Michael Fassbender, Oscar Kightley, Kaimana, David Fane, Rachel House, Beulah Koale, Uli Latukefu, Chris Alosio, Semu Filipo, Ioane Goodhue, Lehi Falepapalangi, Hio Pelesasa, with Will Arnett, and Elisabeth Moss. Directed by Taika Waititi, and penned by Waititi and Iain Morris, the film is produced by Jonathan Cavendish p.g.a., Garrett Basch p.g.a., Taika Waititi p.g.a., Mike Brett, and Steve Jamison. Executive Producers are Andy Serkis, Will Tennant, Phil Robertson, Kathryn Dean, and Josh McLaglen. Rounding out the team are director of photography Lachlan Milne, ACS, production designer Ra Vincent, editors Nicholas Monsour, Yana Gorskaya, ACE, Tom Eagles, ACE, and Nat Sanders, ACE, costume designer Miyako Bellizzi, composer Michael Giacchino, and with casting by Mary Vernieu, CSA, and Michelle Wade Byrd, CSA.

INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY

**That Pretty Much Actually Happened*



Scene: April 11, 2001... The International Sports Stadium in Coffs Harbour, Australia. Australia sets the world record for the largest victory in an international football match in a 31-0 thrashing, and the American Samoa football team becomes the laughingstock of the sports world following this defeat in the World Cup – setting the stage for Academy Award® winning Māori filmmaker Taika Waititi (*Jojo Rabbit*, *Thor: Ragnarok*)’s **NEXT GOAL WINS**.

The calamitous loss became the worst defeat in international football history, a humiliation that hung over the small Pacific Island of American Samoa like an unforgiving cloud. The American Samoa team remained the lowest ranking in the FIFA world standings until November 2011, when things finally changed and the tiny island achieved its first-ever international victory in a 2-1 win over Tonga during the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) World Cup Qualification.

This is where the story begins. When Waititi learned about the epic failure and the story of an underdog team whose dreams finally come true, he knew he had to make this film. “You’re always looking for inspiration, but with this one, it was all already there,” he says.

Inspired by the tale of loss, redemption, and joy, producer Jonathan Cavendish and executive producer Andy Serkis, under their production banner of Imaginarium Productions, secured the rights to adapt the 2014 documentary *Next Goal Wins*, which previously captured the story. The documentary directors Mike Brett and Steve Jamison also serve as producers on the film, along with Waititi’s frequent collaborator, Garrett Basch.

They knew that Waititi was the perfect person to lead this re-imagining. “There was no other filmmaker in the world who could or *should* make this film with this cast and crew that he assembled,” states Brett.

In 2015, Waititi joined the project as director, recruiting his longtime friend, BAFTA nominee Iain Morris (*The Inbetweeners*), to co-write the screenplay.

Four years would pass before Waititi would have a very short window of availability and the producers took the film to Searchlight Pictures for a Fall 2019 shoot in Oahu, Hawaii. Throughout that time, Waititi remained passionate and committed to the project. As he explains, “It always felt very special to me. It’s the ultimate feel-good underdog story.”

Cavendish adds, “It was such a classic story, and we thought it had all the right ingredients. We didn’t want to make to remake the more dramatic documentary, we wanted to re-imagine it.”

“Throughout the process, Taika’s top priority was authenticity, particularly in depicting Polynesian culture,” says producer Basch. “We paid close attention to every aspect of the production, including casting, wardrobe, and production design, to ensure a genuine portrayal of the American Samoan people and their environment.”

Waititi and his producers assembled an impressive cast of familiar faces and newcomers, drawing upon a large and diverse group of actors representing the Polynesian Triangle – the region of the Pacific Ocean with the three islands of Hawaii, Easter Island and New Zealand at its corners. The cast also includes the formidable acting talents of Michael Fassbender, Elisabeth Moss and Will Arnett. And they added comedic cameos from Rhys Darby, Angus Sampson, and Luke Hemsworth.

Academy Award® Nominee Michael Fassbender, who plays Coach Thomas Rongen in the film, says of Waititi, “Taika is a very special talent. When you’re making human stories and you really want to take somebody on an emotional journey, laughter is always the best tool. He has an understanding of that and of people and he loves what he does.”

“I think what makes an auteur filmmaker is that they have a tone to their films that is very singular to them,” adds Golden Globes® and Primetime Emmy Award® winner Elisabeth Moss, who plays Gail, Thomas Rongen’s ex-wife. “Taika’s mastery of how to mix comedic timing with something that breaks your heart is unique and very hard to do.”

Co-writer Morris recalls his approach to weaving new elements into the script. “Our intention was to try and make it as funny as possible, while retaining the tone and warmth that was actually there from the beginning,” he says. “We wanted a version that felt true to the story, but also true to the beats of the story that come across in real life.”

Says Waititi, “When you’re making a film that’s an adaptation of a documentary, you have to allow yourself the freedom to change things. It’s an opportunity to get deeper into the characters and understand them on a human level, making them relatable to the audience by opening them up.”

Adds Cavendish, “Taika always looks for the truth in a scene as well as the comedy. He understands the people, the culture and the sense of humor.”

“He’s just got a very unique style, and you can see that in his films,” Fassbender concludes. “He has an understanding of that idea of outsiders – or misfits – he embraces that.”

THE UNIQUENESS OF SAMOAN CULTURE



“We approached the film as a kind of family project. I know so many people in American Samoa, and I’ve worked with a lot of this crew for years,” says Waititi. “Being around my people and the Polynesian culture, there was an ease. *NEXT GOAL WINS* feels more natural than any other film I’ve made.”

“We always recognized that some narrative elements would have to change between the documentary and this remake, and we welcomed those changes,” notes producer Jamison. “The most important element to keep was the role that family – *Aiga* in Samoan – and family values play.”

Says Lehi Falepaplangi, who plays soccer player Pisa, “I hope our island people will be inspired through watching this. You don’t see many full-fledged Polynesian movies happening, and to see our people on the big screen at this level is wonderful.”

The core values of American Samoan life are selflessness and the priorities of faith, family and acceptance. These are a direct counterpoint to the ignorance and anger that coach Thomas Rongen (Fassbender’s character) carries with him when he first comes to the country at the beginning of the film. As Rongen opens himself up to the American Samoan way of life, his heart cracks open too.

Producer Brett explains, “I think comedy has a way of opening your heart and American Samoan humor is wonderful. It allows a lot of emotion to flow in – particularly for Thomas because he plays it pretty straight. And the joke is on him until he’s able to open himself up to this new culture and way of thinking.”

“With Samoans in particular, the space between two people connects them,” shares Oscar Kightley, Samoan-New Zealand actor and previous Waititi collaborator (*Hunt for the Wilderpeople*) who plays Tavita, the head of the American Samoa Football Federation. “Culture connects us as opposed to just being individuals. Because Taika is Māori, he gets it – it’s part of his work, it’s reiterating our common humanity.”

Henry Sataraka, who served as a cultural advisor on the film, comments, “Nothing is *individual* in Samoa, we sacrifice a lot for our family – the soccer team is basically one big family.”

Waititi was able to rely on the cast to ensure authenticity. “A lot of the cast who portray the players on the team are friends of mine that I know from New Zealand to Samoa,” he shares. “Having them there to keep the cultural specificity was hugely important. I could always rely on them to let me know if something wasn’t feeling quite right or authentic.”

Māori actress Rachel House (*Eagle Vs Shark*, *Hunt for The Wilderpeople*, *THOR: Ragnarok*), who plays Tavita’s wife Ruth, is also from New Zealand and is a longtime collaborator of Waititi’s. She also shares insight into Waititi’s ability to combine the poignancy of pathos. “I love Taika’s perspective and his lens on the world,” she says. “He’s very truthful and he has this extraordinary ability to bring in all different kinds of tones and knit them together. All through Polynesia, humor is such a part of the culture. We’ve brought these characters to life, giving them an authentic voice.”

“Humor is the easiest way to bring down people’s walls,” adds Kaimana, who plays Jaiyah. “You start laughing and walls come down and that opens up the door for connection. It diffuses a lot.” Concludes Kightley, “In our culture, when you mock someone that means you really like them.”

THE TEAM



Michael Fassbender is known for tour-de-force performances that spellbind audiences with portrayals of complex characters. In *NEXT GOAL WINS*, he also reveals a great sense of comic timing and delivery. Fassbender did not base his portrayal of **coach Thomas Rongen** himself, but he did allow his backstory to inform many of the choices he made for the role.

“The Thomas Rongen that I portray in the film is not the Thomas Rongen that exists in real life,” Fassbender quips. “I just want to say that in case Thomas comes after me.”

Rongen was a gruff Dutch-born football player who segued from his playing days into coaching numerous major league and national soccer teams in the U.S. In 2011, following a personal and professional low point, he was offered the opportunity to coach “the worst team in the world” – the American Samoa team who were preparing for the World Cup qualifying tournament.

Recognizing the job as a chance to get himself back into the good graces of football’s governing body, Rongen set off for American Samoa with the goal of saving his career, not knowing the impact this tiny island and its people were about to have on his life.

“He doesn’t want to be there, so that’s how the relationship starts between him and the players,” explains Fassbender. “He thinks that he’s above this job and that they’re untrainable, and that his expertise is being wasted.”

Adds Waititi, “he’s a belligerent, grumpy old guy who can’t really hold down a job because he’s so passionate about the game of soccer, and he takes it too seriously. He forgets that it’s a game.”

Fassbender and the team made a conscious decision not to meet the real Rongen because the character is so loosely based on him, it went in such crazy directions. Elisabeth Moss wasn’t surprised to see how well Fassbender fit into the role. “He’s very chameleon-like and he just melts into the character until you can’t picture anybody else doing the part.”

“I’ve found a real brother in that man,” continues Waititi. “He’s become a very good friend, and I felt very supported and like we were on this journey together. We talked at length every day about different ideas, how we could change things – we share a very similar sensibility and sense of humor.”

Rongen knows very little about the place or people, nor does he care to genuinely learn. But the people of American Samoa have other plans for him, because to succeed on the island, you have to become family.



There to act as Rongen’s ambassador to the island and the people of American Samoa is **Tavita**, the hard-working **Head of the Football Federation of American Samoa** (amongst many other jobs), played by **Oscar Kightley**. He is dedicated to his family and community and there is nothing he wouldn’t do to help his team gain redemption.

“Part of Tavita’s motivation is a love of soccer,” Kightley comments, “but if that [Australia loss] had been the final chapter in the story of American Samoan soccer, it would’ve been a pretty ignominious end. Samoans are very proud people, so part of his motivation was also the thought that, ‘This can’t be the end of our story!’”

Fassbender explains, “Tavita is always glass half full. He is there to buoy spirits and look on the bright side of life. Those people are amazing and essential, and of course, Oscar is a fantastic actor and has great comedic timing.”

“The Federation is very much run by passion and love and hope, and I feel like that all came from Tavita,” explains Kightley. “He was like this calm thing at the center, and he brought Thomas in and believed in him and gave him a shot. Tavita’s the man and I’ve had a big responsibility.”

“He’s kind of the anchor point for the whole story,” says Waititi. “He’s the reason really that Thomas got the job and is able to stay. He’s the one that keeps the team together, and his dream is very simple: to break the curse of never having scored a goal. His whole drive throughout the whole film is just for the team to score one goal.”



NEXT GOAL WINS also introduces **Kaimana** as **Jaiyah**, the team’s striker, who is really the most influential person on the island. Jaiyah is Fa’afafine, which in American Samoan culture are people who have fluid genders that move between male and female worlds, showing two spirits in one person that coexist. “It is a sacred part of their culture, it is just accepted,” explains Waititi.

NEXT GOAL WINS is **Kaimana**’s acting debut, as she steps into the shoes of Jaiyah Saelua, the world’s first transgender football player in a FIFA World Cup qualifying match. Kaimana drew upon individual and collective personal stories to bind the two Fa’afafine into one powerful, singular performance.

Kaimana was the only actor to meet their real-life counterpart and she gives insight on how she is inextricably connected to Jaiyah. “There wasn’t a need to divorce myself between the real Jaiyah and the character in the film because we are so similar,” she recalls. “It was actually the tool that I used to guide me through it.” Jaiyah doesn’t have an agenda except for being herself and supporting the team and the community she loves.

“While Thomas is trying to get his head around what this role is,” explains Waititi, “Everyone else is fine with it – no one ever talks about it again. And that’s what my aim is, if we address things like this in film or TV, it’s to not have to talk about it. It can just be there and it’s part of the thread and the texture and the fabric of the whole story, and you don’t have to have a big scene with a monologue where someone’s explaining why it’s okay.”

By the end of the story, you see how the relationship between Jaiyah and Thomas has evolved and transformed into one of love and trust.



Ace, the assistant coach played by New Zealand-born of Samoan descent **David Fane**, is the team’s assistant coach – formerly head coach but demoted by Tavita. And the new title suits Ace just fine. He has a winning heart and tries to be helpful where he can.

“He’s a dear wee soul and he wouldn’t say boo to a mouse, but Ace has no idea about soccer,” explains Fane. “He knows that there’s ball and that you kick it, and he’s sort of not good at sport or the speech part of revving people up. And so, it’s like doing the triple jump: when you finally get to the part where you’re supposed to leap, you’ve missed the sand pad, and you end up going to the side and breaking your leg. That’s Ace in a nutshell.”

Fane drew inspiration for Ace's character from stories of Tavita's kindness. "I hope that comes across, kindness can win," he says. "It's about remembering to have fun and remembering that you don't have to be great, big and strong—you can be tiny and just as important to everything else."



Like most strong indigenous women, **Tavita's wife Ruth**, played by **Rachel House**, is a force of nature. "She's a matriarch and she's very supportive of her husband, her son Daru and the team," says House. "Tavita and Ruth are best friends, they champion each other, they're respectful and very accepting of each other's individuality."

"We're not portraying the real people exactly but more of a reference point, without paying any kind of disservice to American Samoa," House continues. "For example, the true-to-life Ruth is Samoan, but we made a conscientious decision to do a different version of her and have her be Māori who's lived in American Samoa for 30 years. Because this happens in Polynesian life, we're scattered all over the Pacific."

House also shares that there is a lot of truth that comes out in this film. "This isn't a savior film with this guy coming to save us, we're actually saving him."

Adds Waititi about House, "I've worked with Rachel for many years, she's an amazing actor, artist and now director and she's become a great partner to me. As with all my films with first time or young actors, she helped a lot with coaching Kaimana, as this was her first role. It felt right to have her with us especially as we were making a film set in Polynesia with mostly Polynesian cast and crew. She brings her usual unique energy, which is really grounding on set and on screen. And her character is really a grounding force in the film."



As the son of Tavita and Ruth, **Daru** has all the physical traits that *should* make him a standout soccer player. However his own personal style of playing usually results with him left sprawled on the pitch as his opponents effortlessly blows past him.

"I'm three-quarters Samoan, a quarter Tuvalu, but born and raised in New Zealand, South Auckland," shares **Beulah Koale**, who plays Daru. "Daru loves his dad, he loves his family but he's also very stubborn. He's that kid that knows his dad is the manager, so no matter how bad he plays, he'll always have a place. He could be a great soccer player, but he's always sliding and diving aimlessly, trying to take people out – and missing every time."

Daru is very observant, and he challenges Rongen because he doesn't want him to waste his dad's time, money and effort. "His dad works seven or six jobs, trying to fund this team, trying to fund this guy coming over," explains Koale. "And this guy's just dicking around, drinking, making us run laps and not teaching us any soccer. So him and Rongen don't have a great relationship [at the start]." All Daru wants is to protect his Dad and make him proud.



As the count down to whether history will be repeated in another soul-crushing defeat, all roads lead to the stadium and qualifying match against Tonga. No one had as much on the line than the **original goalie Nicky Salapu**, played by actor **Uli Latukefu**, an Australian-born of Tongan descent.

Salapu became notorious after American Samoa's devastating defeat against Australia and he cannot pass up the ultimate chance for redemption years later. Like most of the other cast members, Latukefu didn't meet the real-life person he was portraying.

"At the start of the movie, Nicky has left soccer completely – he doesn't want to have anything to do with soccer," says Latukefu. "And Jaiyah brings Thomas to the store, and he tries to lure him back to the team. He doesn't find that appealing until later on."

He continues, "My approach was always to do the best I can to honor who I'm playing. Watching the documentary, I learned that Nicky is a joyful, loving guy. He is passionate about soccer, his country and his family, which is something I relate to quite strongly. Hopefully he'll be proud, and I hope that he feels that, myself and the production did his legacy justice."



Jonah, the Striker, is played by **Chris Alosio**, who is full Samoan, born and raised in New Zealand. As a high-school student, he is the striker and the play-maker of the team. Alosio was inspired by a few characters: he's a composite of several people.

"He's kind of the only person with some athletic potential on the team," explains Alosio. "He's a kid who just loves the sport. He's the baby of the team and kind of learning from the older dudes. He doesn't really know his potential just yet."

For Jonah, because he's so young and hasn't seen much of the world, Rongen's arrival is the world coming at him and teaching him about what to do, what not to do. Alosio continues, "It's like that young guy who, when their uncle comes from overseas with all these stories, sees the world through that person."



Semu Filipo plays **Rambo**, the local policeman who gets recruited on the team. Back in the day, Rambo was amazing at soccer. He had a chance to go pro, but the Samoan food got a bit too much, and he kind of enjoyed that more.

"He's a big natured, big heart type of character, and team player," says Filipo. "This opportunity, in regards to being recruited by Thomas, is another chance for him to relive that dream of playing professional sport."

In his personal life, Filipo had played professional rugby in Australia but ultimately came back for his daughter's birth, and then just stayed home. "I didn't go back to chase that dream," explains Filipo. "That is a bit of a story with a lot of Pacific Islanders that have had their chance to go abroad and things haven't worked out – or they miss family too much, and yeah, they just live their life on the island."



In the role of **Smiley** is **Ioane Goodhue**, a Hawaiian who grew up speaking his own language and who has been in love with all Polynesian culture. “Smiley is all smiles, and he's wearing that loud and proud,” describes Goodhue. One of the quieter characters, Smiley remains the positive face that's always there waiting to do what needs to be done with a bright smile.

“He's a happy guy and embraces a lot of this new experience,” continues Goodhue. “As one of the original players who weren't so good, it's kind of cool to go through the transition and build up the team and become better. He's very excited to be a part of the team, of the whole process of playing for the World Cup, but also to travel, to be doing this on behalf of his country and just experience new places.”



Lehi Falepapalangi, of Tongan descent, plays the role of **Pisa, the new and current goalie of the American Samoa team**. After American Samoa lost 31 to Australia, the goalie of that team Nicky Salapu disappeared. “He kind of just fell off the face of the Earth,” Falepapalangi explains. They were looking for another goalie and didn't know who could play. “And so they all said a prayer, and then one day, Pisa found gloves. And he was bestowed the honor and glory of being the goalie.”

“Pisa is the most handsome out of the entire group. All the others players might disagree but he is the most athletic, the best looking, the most muscular, everything,” Falepapalangi jokes. “Everything I just said right there, total lie. Pisa, he's — I guess he's the fat guy on the team.”

Pisa is absolutely terrible at what he does. He does not know how to play goalie, but he tries his best. He puts his heart out onto the field and he does what he can. “He's there, always pushing, trying to give 110% every single time, even though his body might give out or cut short here and there,” he continues. “He contributes to the team as their scapegoat. They love having Pisa around because that means they don't have to work so hard.”



Hio Pelesasa plays the role of **Samson, the midfielder of the American Samoa soccer team**. Samson doesn't speak English at all – he speaks full Samoan. “This story is very significant to me,” explains Pelesasa, who grew up in Samoa. “It's a personal thing because I've grown up trying to be a sports' person, trying to make it and stuff. I was in the military years ago and I got injured. And at one point in my life, I was overweight. And I never gave up – I kept on going and kept telling myself that I will succeed.”

He continues, “The American Samoa team kept on going and never gave up – it's such a small island with limited equipment and they come through.

Seeing this story come to life, and being in a movie like this, it's really good that I can speak my language.”



Elisabeth Moss plays **Gail, Thomas's wife** who he is separated from in the film (though they were still together in real life at the time). They are both, in different ways, grieving the loss of their daughter – and Gail wants Thomas to find joy in life again.

“Gail has found a way to not let go of what happened, but to live her life,” shares Moss. “It's also why she and Thomas ultimately are not right for each other as husband and wife because of the different ways they handle life.”

She continues “Gail tries to support him in moving on, and while Thomas is using it to punish himself, she is not. She obviously knows him very well and they’re very close and good friends. She maybe gives him the little bit of a lift that he needs to get through.”

For the first time in his life, Rongen is forced to look in the mirror and face his problems head on, and Gail is the one to realize that the opportunity with the American Samoan Team is perfect.



Will Arnett is **Alex Magnussen, the Head of the American Soccer Federation** and current boyfriend of Gail. Magnussen is a nemesis of sorts to Rongen, he finds it amusing that Rongen was fired and sent to train the American Samoan team to earn his standing back. Arnett as Magnussen brings his great energy and comedic timing to the film and, through his exchanges with Rongen, you feel the undercurrent of him replacing Rongen in Gail’s life.

ONE GOAL: TRAINING FOR A WIN

“*The Beautiful Game*” is a nickname given to soccer by one of its most renowned players, Pelé, and adapted by its legions of fans around the globe. So, it comes as no surprise that soccer is the world’s most popular sport, culminating every four years with the FIFA World Cup, the most watched sports competition globally.

Self-described “football nerds” producers Brett and Jamison set off for American Samoa scouting locations, in pursuit of reigniting their own love for the game. So what is it about football that transcends age, culture, race, religion and socio-economics? The resilience of the human spirit.

NEXT GOAL WINS reminds audiences that the essence of competition isn’t defined by what happens on the field, it’s all about relationships and lessons learned off the field.

“Steve and I actually met playing collegiate soccer and there was this kind of profound love of the game that we both had,” says producer Brett. “Later on, we directed football commercials, working with Barcelona and Manchester United.”

This made them especially well-equipped to collaborate with Waititi and DP Lachlan Milne in choreographing and composing shot lists for specific football sequences.

“They were the experts,” explains Waititi. “Along with our soccer advisors, they would help the team – who never really played soccer either – to train and get their skills up, and they gave us advice on how to shoot certain things, what the rules were.”

Just like the characters they are portraying, the cast’s training mirrored how the real players’ game and fitness levels evolved and improved under Thomas’s mentorship. To help get the actors game-fit and hone their skills, the filmmakers brought on Soccer Consultant Max Anton, an ex-professional player and current owner and men’s coach for the Paradise Soccer Club in Kailua, O’ahu.

“The practices at the beginning were important because they allowed us to really bond,” says Kaimana. “The training preparation was hard, but it was awesome too.”

Latukefu explains how he could relate to some of the overwhelming emotions that Nicky, the goalkeeper, must have been dealing with —the pressure when the stakes are so high, carrying the weight of representing his family as well as the nation.

“Training to be a goalkeeper specifically was a challenge, I mean, those guys are fearless!” shares Latukefu. “I knew it was going to be a tough one for me but you give it your best and just jump in.”

“Running into the stadium where there are hundreds of people, that scene was really special,” notes Beulah Koale. “Knowing that this really happened and imagining what they felt in real life.”

Together and in line with American Samoan tradition, the team also participates in a haka before each soccer match. The haka is a ceremonial Māori war dance or challenge usually performed in a group. It represents a display of a tribe's pride, strength and unity. Actions include the stomping of the foot, the protrusion of the tongue and rhythmic body slapping to accompany a loud chant. Although haka is a traditional dance form of the Māori people of New Zealand, the use of a haka by the All Blacks rugby team before matches has made it familiar worldwide, and various hakas have been adopted by sports teams outside New Zealand, particularly American football (soccer) teams in the United States.

FROM PAGO PAGO TO O’AHU, HAWAII: 2,500 MILES OF ANCESTRAL TIES

For numerous logistical reasons, shooting in American Samoa was not feasible, so instead production scouted Hawaii and found that the island of O’ahu had all the various design elements and locations needed to recreate the small Pacific island 2,500 miles to its south.

“It would be very difficult to shoot a film in American Samoa,” explains Waititi. “But we wanted a place that was as close to it as possible. And Hawaii – O’ahu in particular – has a lot of studio space and crews, so that just made sense.”

But more poignantly, O’ahu, an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, spoke to the viscerally deep ancestral ties that bind the Polynesian Triangle into one extended family.

“This film feels like my most personal to date,” shares Waititi. “Being in Hawaii, surrounded and embraced by this Hawaiian and Polynesian family was so familiar for me. I’ve lived on and off in Hawaii for many years; my second daughter was born there. There are deep personal ties for me and shooting there speaks to the larger Polynesian Pacific Island community as well.”

With a paradise of natural elements literally at their doorstep, including the bonus of consistent sunny weather throughout the 30-day shoot, cinematographer **Lachlan Milne** (*Minari*, *The Inspection*) could take advantage of using natural light to film in some of the most awe-inspiring locations around O’ahu.

Waititi’s longtime collaborator, Academy Award® winning Production Designer **Ra Vincent** (*Jojo Rabbit*, *Thor: Ragnarok*) explains how Hawaii was a seamless transition, not only in terms of the practical sets and visual story elements needed but also the tangible shared history and culture that connects and defines the Polynesian Triangle.

“We would’ve loved the opportunity to shoot in Pago Pago but because of technical issues and availability of crew and so forth, Hawaii was a really perfect match,” explains Vincent. “Taika’s inclination is to shoot in places that are a little unpredictable – being outdoors, being at the mercy of the clouds, the weather and what nature is doing, adds a layer of spontaneity to the performance you wouldn’t normally get in a studio.”

For the finale, the team found the Waipi’o Soccer Complex just outside of Honolulu – they wanted a bigger, more elaborate stadium feeling and the complex has about 12 fields and is the largest stadium. They settled on it because of its World Cup qualifying grass.

“You’d be surprised how important grass can be,” says Vincent. “With a FIFA-qualifying pitch quality lawn, there’s a whole bunch of different stringent international rules to adhere by and we had to do a very thorough search of Hawaii to find the right kind of pitch to perform this finale on.”

Concludes Fassbender, “It was a fantastic, beautiful place, great people – and there’s a large American Samoan culture there as well.”

THE WARDROBE OF AMERICAN SAMOA

A commonality in all indigenous cultures is the role of identity and ancestral lineage and how those cultural affirmations are represented in the traditional elements of dress, music and art.

For Costume Designer **Miyako Bellizzi** (*Uncut Gems, Good Time*), researching and resourcing the traditional fabrics of American Samoa was a labor of love but also very reflective and indicative of indigenous communities where the most valuable resource is the local people on the ground.

“What’s been really exciting is incorporating traditional pieces and learning about them through the people on this film,” shares Bellizzi. “A lot of the people that we cast would come in with things that they wear and also show me photos of their families back home in America Samoa – that was super helpful.”

“I first worked with Miyako on another project back in 2019. I always admired her work, particularly in the Safdie Bros.’ *Good Time*, and the authentic, contemporary feel she brings so it has a real street like feel,” says Waititi. She was a great addition to this team as a Japanese-Italian-American – she knew a lot about Polynesian culture. She really goes above and beyond. She scoured the island and consulted a lot of locals.”

Adds Bellizzi, “We found this shirtmaker, Tanoa, who’s Samoan, and he was able to help because his mom owns a fabric store in Samoa. It’s been a crazy process, meeting one person that leads you to another that gets you a contact about finding earrings for instance from someone that lives in Samoa that can ship them to you. We wanted it all to be authentic.”

“She did a fantastic job, especially in terms of representation,” continues Waititi. “I didn’t want anyone in the film to be represented in a way that felt inauthentic or like it was “showing off” Polynesian design, traditional costume and culture. It had to feel real and contemporary and authentic to the people on the islands today.”

For the indigenous cast who travelled across an ocean to be a part of *NEXT GOAL WINS* and its inspirational message of our collective humanness, the impact and significance of the theatrical re-imaging will stretch and endure far beyond the 2,500 miles separating O’ahu from Pago Pago.

“It’s community and family – that’s what island life is all about, those are our core values,” says Alosio. “There’s an old Māori proverb where it asks, ‘What is the most important thing in the world?’ And they say, ‘He Tangata,’ which means that it’s ‘the people.’ It’s about the village and the collective. It’s home. That’s the thing I love about the Islands —it’s like the motherland, you always know you are part of something bigger than yourself.”

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

TAIKA WAITITI (*Directed By, Screenplay By*)

Taika Waititi is an Academy Award® and GRAMMY®-winning, Emmy®-nominated writer, director, actor and producer. Most recently, Waititi directed and co-wrote the highly anticipated film *Thor: Love and Thunder* now streaming on Disney+. His film *Jojo Rabbit* received six Oscar® nominations, including Best Picture, and earned him an Oscar® for Best Adapted Screenplay. The film, which was released by Searchlight Pictures, was also nominated for a Golden Globe® for Best Motion Picture Musical or Comedy and won a GRAMMY for Best Compilation Soundtrack for Visual Media, among other accolades. Previously, Waititi directed the critically-acclaimed blockbuster *Thor: Ragnarok* for Disney, as well as the beloved indie films *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, *What We Do In The Shadows*, *Boy*, and the Oscar®-nominated short film *Two Cars, One Night*. He also executive produced through Piki Films, his production company with Carthew Neal, *The Breaker Upperers*, *Baby Done*, and the first Indigenous Canadian/New Zealand co-production, *Night Raiders*, which premiered at the 2021 Berlin International Film Festival.

Waititi is also executive producer of Billy Luther's film *Frybread Face and Me*, which premiered at SXSW 2023. Previously, Waititi was seen in Shawn Levy's *Free Guy* from 20th Century Studios, alongside Ryan Reynolds, Jodie Comer, and Joe Keery.

For television, Waititi is in post-production on Hulu's 'Interior Chinatown', for which he directed the pilot and also executive produced, as well as 'Time Bandits' for Apple TV+ and season two of the HBO Max fan-favorite period comedy, 'Our Flag Means Death', in which he stars as "Blackbeard" and serves as executive producer. The latter two shows are expected to release this year.

Also for the small screen, Waititi is the co-creator and executive producer of the Indigenous American teen comedy 'Reservation Dogs' for FX, for which he co-wrote the first episode with co-creator Sterlin Harjo. The series, now renewed for a third season, has been well-received, winning the 2021 Gotham Award for Short-Form Breakthrough Series and the 2022 Independent Spirit Award for Best New Scripted Series, as well as earning nominations for last year's Critic's Choice Awards, Golden Globe Awards®, and Writers Guild of America Awards. Additionally, Waititi directed the season one finale of THE MANDALORIAN for Disney+, in which he also voices "IG-11," and serves as executive producer on the critically-acclaimed TV adaptation of *What We Do In The Shadows*, for which he's directed several episodes.

LACHLAN MILNE (*Director of Photography*)

Lachlan Milne is an Australian cinematographer. NEXT GOAL WINS marks his second collaboration with Taika Waititi, who he worked with previously on HUNT FOR THE WILDERPEOPLE. Lachlan has also shot some of the most memorable A24 films in the past few years such as MINARI with Lee Isaac Chung and THE INSPECTION with Elegance Bratton.

Other features include MONSTER PROBLEMS directed by Michael Matthews and LITTLE MONSTERS directed by Abe Forsythe. In television, he recently worked with Alma Har'el on "Lady in the Lake" for Apple TV+ and worked on "Stranger Things" Seasons 3 and 4.

RA VINCENT (*Production Designer*)

After finishing Art school, Ra Vincent trained under his father as a sculptor and scenic artist on small New Zealand film and television projects. As a contemporary Maori artist his public sculpture can be seen around Wellington and parts of New Zealand marking significant heritage sites introducing people to the history of the land.

It wasn't until his role as sculptor on the LORD OF THE RINGS Trilogy that he discovered the process of big budget film making with an international film community and with that an opportunity to broaden his skill base.

Vincent worked as Set Decorator on THE HOBBIT, AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY, which earned him an Oscar nomination in 2012, his Set Decoration paintings are included in the Margaret Herrick Academy Library.

A collaboration in 2013 with New Zealand Directors Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi on the comedy WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS would take Vincent into Production Design. He has continued designing film projects such as, THOR RAGNAROK and TV projects including 'The Letter for the King', 'Wellington Paranormal', 'Our Flag Means Death', 'Time Bandits' and 'What We Do In The Shadows' for the US market.

He was nominated for an Oscar for a second time for his work on Taika Waititi's JOJO RABBIT.

MICHAEL GIACCHINO (*Music Composed by*)

Composer and Director **Michael Giacchino** has film score credits that feature some of the most popular and acclaimed projects in recent history, including *The Incredibles*, *Coco*, *Jojo Rabbit*, *Ratatouille*, *Star Trek*, *Jurassic World*, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, *War for the Planet of the Apes* and *The Batman*. Giacchino's 2009 score for the Pixar hit *Up* earned him an Oscar®, a Golden Globe®, the BAFTA, the Broadcast Film Critics' Choice Award and two GRAMMY® Awards. After almost twenty years of film scoring, Giacchino directed the very first Marvel special presentation, *Werewolf By Night* in 2022.

Giacchino studied filmmaking at the School of Visual Arts in NYC. After college, he landed a marketing job at Disney and began studies in music composition, first at Juilliard, and then at UCLA. He moved from marketing to producing in the newly formed Disney Interactive Division where he had the opportunity to write music for video games.

After moving to DreamWorks Interactive, he was asked to score the temp track for the video game adaptation of *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*. Subsequently, Steven Spielberg hired him as the composer and it became the first PlayStation game to have a live orchestral score, recorded with members of the Seattle Symphony. Giacchino went on to score numerous video games including Spielberg's Medal of Honor series. Giacchino's work in video games sparked the interest of J.J. Abrams, and thus began their long-standing relationship that would lead to scores for the hit television series 'Alias' and 'Lost', and the feature films *Mission Impossible III*, the three *Star Trek* films, and *Super 8*.

Additional projects include collaborations with Disney Imagineering on music for Space Mountain, Star Tours (with John Williams), the Ratatouille ride in Disneyland Paris, and the Incredicoaster on Pixar Pier at California

Adventure. His music can be heard in concert halls internationally with all three Star Trek films, Ratatouille, Jurassic World, Up and Coco being performed live-to-picture with a full orchestra.

In June 2018, Giacchino premiered his first work for symphony orchestra, *Voyage*, Commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra and the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra, the piece celebrates the 60th anniversary of the founding of NASA. In July 2019, a third movement, *Advent*, was added for the 50th Anniversary of the Moon Landing.

In 2019, Giacchino's first LP of original music, *Travelogue Vol 1*, featuring his Nouvelle Modernica orchestra, described as a story in song, was released on Mondo Records. The holiday song *Christmas Number One*, written with Elyssa Samsel and Kate Anderson was recorded and performed by UK based band Itchy Teeth, and released as a specialty single with Death Waltz Records.

Werewolf By Night marked Giacchino's feature directing debut after having helmed the Star Trek short *Ephraim and Dot*, and his own comedy short, *Monster Challenge*.

Upcoming projects include J.A. Bayona's *Society of the Snow*.

Giacchino sits on the advisory board of Education Through Music Los Angeles.

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

KAIMANA (*Jaiyah*)

Kaimana is what locals of Hawai‘i like to call a “mixed plate”, a typical mashup of many different ethnicities: she is of Samoan-Hawaiian-Maori-Tongan-Tahitian-Japanese-Irish-Scottish-English descent. But for simplicity’s sake, she usually just says “Polynesian”.

Kaimana was born as what is known in Samoan as *fa’afafine*—*fakafefine* in Tongan, *whakawahine* in Maori, and *māhū* in Hawaiian and Tahitian—an anciently respected gender liminal or “third-gendered” individual recognized traditionally as embodying both male and female gender traits, revered for their specific roles as healers, teachers, mediators, spiritual guides, keepers of the arts, guardians of culture and tradition, and fierce protectors and caretakers of their families.

Kaimana was raised predominantly in her cherished island home of Hawai‘i on the island of O‘ahu, which is also home to the ancient roots of her most direct matrilineal line, of which she is deeply proud. As a child, she spent a small handful of years living in and around California and Utah as well.

Prior to making her acting debut in Taika Waititi’s *NEXT GOAL WINS*, Kaimana was living true to her nature as a free-spirit galavanting across the globe. Making her way throughout not only the States, but Europe, the Middle East, South America, the Pacific and Asia too. Having nine siblings spread out across the country—all of whom have been her best friends since childhood—has given her that much more of a reason to always be traveling.

DAVID FANE (*Ace*)

Proud Samoan New Zealander David Fane, ONZM, is one of Aotearoa’s most versatile actors, well known for the eclectic characters he has created across his prolific career on stage and screen. First appearing in the early 90s on sketch comedy shows *Skitz* and *Telly Laughs*, Fane went on to become a regular on large and small screens in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Pretty quickly, he realised it’s always best to work with people you like, so teamed up with some of his best mates to found theatre company, *The Naked Samoans*. Their particular brand of cutting-edge satire found an instant audience and has endured over 20 years to produce numerous sell out stage shows, 2 feature films, *Sione’s Wedding* (released in U.S. as *Samoan Wedding*) 1 and 2, and the beloved and award winning, animated series, *Bro’town*, for which Fane co-wrote and voiced multiple iconic characters.

Some of Fane’s other film roles include the hit comedy, *Tongan Ninja*, and Samoan-themed horror film, *The Tattooist*, for which he received best supporting actor nomination at the NZ Film & Television awards. Fane has previously worked with Taika Waititi on award-winning comedy feature, *Eagle vs Shark*, and two seasons of the HBO Max run-away piratical hit, *Our Flag Means Death*. Fane’s other well-known TV roles include *The Strip*, *Outrageous Fortune*, *800 Words*, *Fresh Eggs* and Australian series *The Messenger*.

In 2016, Fane received Creative New Zealand’s Pacific Arts Senior Artist award and in 2023 he was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to the performing arts.

RACHEL HOUSE (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Mutunga) *(Ruth)*

Rachel House (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Mutunga) is one of New Zealand's most highly regarded actors. She has had a long and celebrated career both locally and internationally, traversing stage, television and film.

Most recently, House can be seen in the Apple TV series' FOUNDATION and soon-to-released TIME BANDITS, the HBO Max series OUR FLAG MEANS DEATH 2 and the Netflix series' HEARTBREAK HIGH and COWBOY BEBOP.

Highlights of her career include feature films MOANA, THOR: RAGNAROK, BOY, HUNT FOR THE WILDERPEOPLE, PENGUIN BLOOM, COUSINS, and recently released MILLIE LIES LOW, GOING GOING, NEXT GOAL WINS and THE PORTABLE DOOR. She is also a celebrated voice artist having starred in SHERWOOD, THE LION GUARD, UNDERGROUND UGLIES, AMPHIBIA, and recently released PRINCESS AND PONY, 100% WOLF and KOALA MAN.

As an acting coach she has worked alongside Jane Campion for TOP OF THE LAKE and THE POWER OF THE DOG; and with Taika Waititi on BOY, HUNT FOR THE WILDERPEOPLE and JOJO RABBIT.

House has just finished directing her debut feature film THE MOUNTAIN. Prior to this, House studied at Prague Film School, where she won 'Best Director' and the audience award for her two short films. She is an award-winning theatre director, most notably for the Te Reo Māori version of TROILUS AND CRESSIDA performed at the Globe Theatre in London. She has also directed commercials for ASB with Curious Films, and Auckland Transport with Adrenalin. The road safety "Yeah, nah" commercials aimed specifically at young Māori (which she also wrote) went viral garnering over a million hits.

In recognition of her significant contributions to the film and television industry, House has been awarded an Arts Laureate, NZ Order of Merit, 'Mana Wahine' from WIFT and Te Waipuna a Rangi (Matariki Awards) as an actor and director.

SEMU FILIPO *(Rambo)*

Semu Filipo, of Samoan and Tokelauan descent, graduated from Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School in 2004 with a Bachelor of Performing Arts in Acting. His career took off immediately as he collaborated with renowned theatre companies across New Zealand, such as Downstage in Wellington, Silo in Auckland, The Court in Dunedin, Auckland's Pop-Up Globe Theatre where he showcased his talents in successive seasons of Othello and Much Ado About Nothing and most recently Auckland Theatre Company's Things That Matter.

Filipo has also worked on many well-known New Zealand series, including Orange Roughies, Harry, Kura and Shortland Street. In 2021, Filipo landed his first big international role in the highly successful series Young Rock for NBC America based on the early life of The Rock. This was followed by the NZFC feature The Justice for Bunny King, featuring New Zealand's lead actor Thomasin McKenzie.

LEHI FALEPAPALANGI *(Pisa)*

Lehi Falepapalangi is a proud Tongan actor. He is best known for his roles in the hit TV shows 'Doogie Kamealoha' (Disney +) and the new High School Musical The Series on (Disney+). He has also been featured on The Naked Director (Netflix), Future Man (Hulu), Hawaii Five-O (CBS), and Legendary Locations (Travel Channel).

Falepapalangi is married to his beautiful wife, and long time best friend Kristal Hong. He is also a professional Emcee/Host and began his career at the Polynesian Cultural Center.

###