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TIFF Review: *Next Goal Wins* Director Taika Waititi Scores With a Very Funny Underdog Comedy

 By **Abe Friedtanzer** September 12, 2023  0



Next Goal Wins cast (Credit: Searchlight)

Who doesn't love a good sports comeback story? Theoretically, those who aren't particularly sports, and therefore it's necessary for such a film to feature engaging characters and plotlines that aren't exclusively about the gameplay. It should surprise no one that **Taika Waititi's** latest film, *Next Goal Wins*, absolutely fits that bill, chronicling a major soccer breakthrough by focusing on the people most involved in and impacted by it, not just what actually happened on the field.

Fidelity to the real events that inspired this film is far from key, as explained by Waititi himself at the start while wearing religious garb, pulling double duty as unofficial narrator and in a small role as the local preacher. The setting is American Samoa in 2014 when, a decade after a truly embarrassing shutout loss at the World Cup, the country's football team is injected with a potential infusion of hope. Temperamental coach Thomas Rongen (**Michael Fassbender**) arrives from America after being cut loose from his previous positions due to his temper, determined to whip this team into shape but not quite ready to take the time to understand the island culture first.

Next Goal Wins, which gets its title from the desired aim of scoring one single goal to avoid another shutout, is a film that chooses comedy every time. Though there are a few breakthrough moments where drama and true connection occur, they're followed almost immediately by a joke.

The best example of this, and one of the standout performers in the film, is **Oscar Kightley** as the president of FFAS, the Football Federation of American Samoa, who also works as the cameraman for a local news

program that documents well-known travelers to the island and runs the main restaurant. His comments and general energy are entirely hilarious, and his sense of optimism despite truly miserable statistics and prospects is endearing. **Rachel House** is also terrific in her few scenes as his supportive but realistic wife.

Fassbender is fun in the lead role. This is a film just as much about how the coach is the wrong fit for the team as he's ultimately right for them. Audiences shouldn't expect a warm hug like *Ted Lasso*, but instead something genuinely funny that sends up the spirit of a team that isn't used to anything but losing. While it's not as imaginative as some of Waititi's previous films, like *Eagle vs. Shark*, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, and *Jojo Rabbit*, this film does just what it needs to do, elevating an underdog story and turning it into a true piece of entertainment.

There is some seriousness grounding it all, and the film's best non-joke moments come when **Kaimana** is onscreen as Jaiyah, a member of the Samoan fa'afafine community. She presents as female and uses female pronouns but clarifies that, at least for the sake of the games, she is biologically male, and educates Rongen on how being non-binary is a long-accepted facet of American Samoan culture. His initial response is poor and best described as impatient rather than entirely intolerant, and though it takes him some time, it's good to see a gradual breakthrough on his part as Jaiyah consistently proves to be an asset to the team and capable of getting Rongen back on track when he starts to falter. Kaimana delivers a star turn that enhances the film, and she does so with a wittiness that matches Fassbender well.

It's entertaining to see the film's playful focus on American Samoa and the very intimate nature of the island where everyone works multiple jobs. The editing by **Nicholas Monsour** provides the film's nice and easy pace, which doesn't have the urgency or intensity often found in sports films but does make great use of cuts to dial up the humor. Those who are sports devotees may actually find that this film isn't as football-heavy as they would like, but there's a great deal of fun to be had in a film that should prove to be a wonderfully light, delightful experience for all.

Grade: B+

Next Goal Wins will be released by Searchlight Studios on Nov. 17.