



# Football and Family

## *Bend It Like Beckham*

### Strikes Home

Directed by Gurinder Chadha

Fox Searchlight Films

PG-13

In the summer of 1999, when the Women's World Cup and the US Women's Soccer side were all the rage in North America, actor Jack Nicholson, attending a match, was asked if he liked Women's Soccer. His response - "Well, I like women."

I, too, was somewhat in the same frame of mind as Mr. Nicholson back in '99. Yes, I like women. In fact, I'm quite mad about them. Yes, I like soccer. In fact, I'm quite mad about the game, mad enough to own more Euro-footie jerseys than most Europeans. But women's soccer? My feeling? Too slow, doesn't have the speed and power of the men's game- or so I once thought in arrogant ignorance. With the success of the '99 Cup in the U.S., I quickly recognized the one similarity that makes the women's game as enjoyable as the men's- heart. When it comes to football, that's all that really matters. Soccer isn't some game of stats and strategies. It is a game of poetry- of cunning, risk, and dogged determination - all things that emerge not from gray matter, but from heart. One can say the same for film.

Hence comes *Bend It Like Beckham*, a fabulously realized film with no dearth of heart by director Gurinder Chadha, featuring a cracker of a performance from relative newcomer Parminder Nagra, with excellent service from Jonathon Rhys-Meyers and Keira Knightley. *BILB* has the pace and moves of a top-flight premiership match. The breathless, yet graceful clip of this film reminded me of a Liverpool-Arsenal match I saw on telly some 6 years ago - tense, end to end action with plenty of heart-stopping bounces off crossbar and post, and two incredibly clever goals that seemed to emerge from thin air.

As part of its excellent pacing, *BILB* is far from slack in the soundtrack department. Pop icons the Basement Jaxx and Mel C, move smoothly beside Indian popsters Baly Sagoo and Malkit Singh. The film's signature track is Curtis Mayfield's "Move on Up," a Utopic anthem for transcending class, race, and cultural restrictions -

*Move on up  
The peace you'll find  
Enter the steeple  
Of beautiful people  
Where there's only one kind*

Parminder Nagra plays Jess, a sweet shining teenage girl from a repressively traditional Sikh family living in the Hounslow section of London in the flightpath of Heathrow Airport. The repeated shots of jets launching over the family's home underline Jess' restlessness. She's a grounded bird desperate to fly. Jess' number one hero and inspiration in life is England/Manchester United Captain David Beckham, a player who possesses

two of the most wicked feet in football history, feet that can deftly bend a ball around a wall on a freekick, or curl a corner kick precisely at a teammate's head in the goal area - hence "Bend It".

As many astute reviewers of the film have pointed out, this film is not just about bending a freekick, it's about bending the rules. Jess wants to be a women's footballer. But her traditional Indian parents want her to learn to cook a full Punjabi meal and find a nice Indian husband. Poor girl has to sneak out just to practice with her women's team, the Hounslow Harriers.

But traditional Indians are not the only ones discouraging their girls from hitting the pitch. Jess' newfound friend, Jules (Knightley), who sets her up with the Harriers after witnessing some of Jess' splendid skill in a park pickup game against a group of men, also has her obstacles at home. Her father (Frank Harper, a paternal Mark Addy - the robust gentleman of *Full Monty*, *Thin Blue Line* fame - if there ever was) encourages her passion, but mom (Juliet Stevenson) would rather she sport a wonderbra and find a spiffy boyfriend to make grans instead. Her witty rejoinder "There's a reason Sporty Spice is the only Spice Girl without a boyfriend" has been quoted a million times as the film's touchstone line, but is just a slight example of the film's vibrant repartee. The scene drawing the similarities among Irish/English and Pakistani/Indian tensions is no doubt my fave.

Then there's Joe, the man with the opposite problem. Joe is the coach of the Harriers. Joe was never the most athletic kid in the world. Yet his father pushed him *and* pushed him to be a world class footballer. Unfortunately, this led to a career-ending knee injury, and even worse, a bum relationship with pops. He has a substantial scar on his leg to show for his misguided push toward his father's version of manliness. Jess has an analogous scar on her leg even larger than Joe's, sustained at the age of eight when she was burned while attempting a beans and toast recipe in the kitchen, a disastrous failure to complete what would be deemed by her family as the simplest feminine task.

Thus, the triad set, the film triangulates among these three characters like a swiftly advancing 4-4-2, with Jess and Jules as forwards and Joe serving into the box from the wing. But it appears that Joe favors Jess, much to the chagrin of Jules who has had an obvious crush on the man from the first time they met. This leads to the Hamburg showdown that launches the conflict of act two where Jules sees Joe and Jess in a near-kiss. This sends the three points of the triangle spinning apart, and sets up an hilarious subplot involving Jules' mom's mistaken belief about her daughter's and Jess' proclivities.

Outside the triangle, in the midfield, so to speak, we find other characters up against their own barriers in their quest for happiness. Jess' dad (Anupam Kher) was a star cricket player in Uganda who retired his bat and wickets after moving to London and encountering staunch racism from the local club. Jess' lifetime pal, Tony (Ameet Chana), the man everyone in the close knit Indian community assumes she will marry, confesses one day to Jess that he doesn't just like Beckham - but he *likes* Beckham. Jess' response - "But your Indian!"

In the backfield, sweeping the film, are a variety of cutouts that serve as contrast to Jess' ambition. The prime example is Jess' sister Pinky (Archie Panjabi). Pinky and her friends are sad fashion mag slags. They snap gum and sneer like stereotypical New York (or any other urban area) working-class girls and go way overboard in the tarting-up department. Pinky's wedding, its surging throng of Sikh traditionalists in a mating-ritual frenzy happily reinforcing the rigid cultural traditions, serves as the counter-backdrop to Jess' individualist urge to be her own woman.

I went into *BILB* expecting a *Gregory's Girl* redux. But whereas the girls in *Gregory* were objects of desire who were but a novelty on the pitch and elsewhere, *BILB* gives the women a choice to break the bonds of familial expectations and blaze a new path, and they pursue it with gusto.

Yes, it's formulaic, but it works well, indeed blending genres and sensibilities into new concoctions -screwball comedy, Wilderian wit, Capraesque triumph of the individual, a wee bit of Bollywood. It's all there and all very Hollywood- three act structure with the plot points hitting at the textbook's prescribed moment and the protagonist changing not just herself but her whole family and a few others in the end.

Yet formula, like everything else, when done well is a sight to behold. The cheek is not in the goal, but the build-up. A cross from the wing serving a header goal has been done a million times in soccer, but is still beautiful and just cause for celebration every time it happens- made all the more exciting by just how close it came to *not* going in or never happening at all. *Bend It Like Beckham* grazes the post, and dribbles in. It was as if the ball was willed into the net, a goal that deserves multiple replays. But again, the fun was getting there, the pretty moves, the nutmegs, and takeaway tackles, the numerous well-orchestrated advances that ended in missed passes or crossbar thuds. When all the work finally pays off, no matter how pedestrian the strike, it's still one-nil.

BJR

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