

SportsLetter Interviews

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Michael Apted

During his long and distinguished career, Michael Apted has directed Hollywood features, television movies, and documentaries. His versatility has enabled him to build a varied, rich resume: “Coal Miner’s Daughter” (starring Sissy Spacek in an Academy Award-winning performance); “Gorky Park;” “Gorillas in the Mist;” “The World Is Not Enough” (starring Pierce Brosnan as 007); three episodes of “Rome” on HBO; and, most recently, “Amazing Grace.”



Apted is perhaps best known for the remarkable, episodic “Up” series of documentary films. In 1963, while working as a researcher for Granada Television, Apted helped to round up a group of 14 seven-year-old British school children to answer a series of questions about their lives and dreams. Every seven years, the director has doggedly returned to interview the original group (at least those who’ve agreed to continue) in an ongoing conversation about life, love and social class. The most recent production, “49 Up,” was released in 2005.

In his latest documentary, “The Power of the Game,” Apted turns his attention to the sport of soccer. The film, which premiered at the Tribeca/ESPN Sports Film Festival last spring, follows six storylines that track the global phenomenon of soccer en route to the 2006 World Cup in Germany: “Sam’s Army” and the struggle to persuade Americans to embrace the sport, the “slave trade” in young African soccer players, the long-embedded racism associated with the sport in Europe, the challenges for South Africa as the nation prepares to host the 2010 World Cup, the repression that women face in Iran as told through the eyes of a female soccer journalist and the efforts of one former player to educate youth in Argentina.

“Football is the world’s game,” Apted notes at the beginning of the film. “It transcends borders, real and imagined.”

Currently, Apted is in pre-production for his next gig, directing the third installment of the “Chronicles of Narnia.” (He’s scheduled to start shooting in January; the film will be released in 2009). He was also just elected to his third term as president of the Directors Guild of America. He took time to speak with SportsLetter from his offices in Los Angeles.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Growing up in England, was soccer a big part of your life?

Michael Apted: Absolutely. It was genetic, really. My father was a football fan and passed it on to me. He took me to my first professional football game when I was seven.

SL: Which team did you go see?

MA: West Ham. We grew up in suburban East London, so that was our local team. My father had grown up there, during the First War, and he had supported them. So, it was passed on to me, and I passed it on to my sons and to my grandsons.

SL: Did you go every week during the season?

MA: No. When I was away at school, I used to go a bit, but not a lot. But it was an important part of my life, for me and my friends. I’ve still got some of those friends that I had in the ‘50s. We still go together — I’ve had season tickets there for about 30 years now. So, it covers generations.

SL: How much do you remember about the 1966 World Cup?

MA: A lot. That was the year I got married. It was a piece of bad planning because we were on our honeymoon while the World Cup was on. That didn’t stop from me watching some of it. But it meant that I was out of the country on the day we won it.

SL: West Ham had quite a good showing in '66, right?

MA: Three of them - [Martin] Peters, [Geoff] Hurst and Bobby Moore - were West Ham players. We scored all the goals [in the Finals against West Germany]: Hurst scored three and Peters one, and that was it.

SL: How did growing up around the game influence “Power of the Game”?

MA: It was a film I'd always wanted to make. I wanted to make some kind of paean to the game, some kind of love story for the game. I'd done a couple of things about soccer. When I was much younger, at Granada Television, I did a filmed play about Sunday morning football, but it was difficult to find a story that I really wanted to do. Putting the game on film — doing dramas about the game and finding actors who can actually play the sport — is tricky to do. And then this came along.

SL: How did working at Granada Television influence your work as a documentary filmmaker?

MA: Well, it was a huge influence on me. I happened to go there at a very good time. It was a real powerhouse in English television at the time I was there, very much ahead of the game with current affairs television documentaries. You just had the sense that you were in some very special place at that time. Of course, my early association with the “Up” films came out of that relationship.

Now, how it influenced my work: I suppose quite a lot because all the very best people were working there. On the whole, the BBC was in decline in the early '60s. Commercial television had started, and it was kind of crass — with quiz shows and stuff like that. Then Granada started, and we just kicked everybody's ass. I didn't know it at the time, but it just was a very heady place to be. For a period of maybe four or five years, everything we touched turned to gold.

So, I came in the business at a very important time, in an environment which had very high expectations. It was much more than popular entertainment. It had visions way beyond just getting ratings. And, maybe

it compounded my serious attitude to the business. I was in it as a serious matter. I wasn't in it because I just wanted to do entertainment or do popular stuff. I always wanted to have people see my films, but I never just wanted to be popular for the sake of it. Had I been somewhere else — had I gone to the BBC — I might have been worn down by the bureaucracy.

The thing about being at Granada was that, not only was it high-powered but it was very, very small. So, you had to do everything. And, I did everything, from church services to rock-n-roll to soap operas. That gave me a sense of empowerment. That I've been able to carry on and have a double career — doing narrative work and non-fiction work — came entirely from the atmosphere at Granada.

SL: Has it been difficult for you to switch back and forth between doing features and documentaries?

MA: It's taken a lot of will to do it. It happened sort of naturally, but it took an effort. Not to sound like a pompous ass, it took a bit of vision and planning to do it.

It's easy not to do documentaries because they don't pay very much. You really have to want to do them. It's meant that I've had to organize my life well to accommodate both, to be able to do both, and to choose material that [enables me to] run with both.

But I've always liked the variety — the choice of material, the choice of different processes and working environments — doing studio movies or doing independent movies or documentaries.

SL: What's the biggest difference between directing features and documentaries?

MA: On one level, it's the same thing. You are, at the end of the day, telling a story. On the other level, and more importantly, it's using a whole different set of muscles. It's a whole different process.

Filmmaking is a constant learning process, and I find that one helps the other. The things you learn doing documentaries — how to handle

people, how to deal with the real world, how to think on your feet, how to create stuff as you go — are helpful in the stratified world of [feature] film production, where things are incredibly well organized. It gives you a chance to be a bit unconventional, to take a few chances. Likewise, the very structure of having to do a movie can help you control the chaos of doing a documentary. I just find it incredibly stimulating to do both.

I've thought about — and spoken a lot about — the effect of one on the other. Both have their pleasures and both have their frustrations. Whether that makes me kind of a magpie or whatever, I don't know. But I suppose it comes down to the fact that I don't write. Therefore, I'm dependent on the marketplace for narrative material. On the other hand, doing documentaries is, for me, more creative in the writing sense. You know, you do write documentaries. You don't sit with a blank page and write scenes, but the conceiving and the putting together of a documentary is very much a writing process. And, I get a creative buzz from doing that.

SL: Given the evolution of sports on television — with 24-hour coverage on ESPN and the like — how did that influence the way you approached filming “Power of the Game”?

MA: I was asked to make a film about the 2006 World Cup. I said that that was not a good idea on many fronts. One was, you'll never get the rights to do it. A second relates to your observation: the World Cup was going to be brilliantly done on television. You couldn't hope to equal that. To do a film which looks at a sporting event head-on, because of the high bar that television has created for the coverage of sport, makes it a non-starter. Then, after post-production and all, it would come out long after the event itself. The intriguing and great and awful thing about sport is that part of it stays in the mind forever and part of it is forgettable. Once the World Cup is over, you can't remember who finished third. It's gone.

So, you've really got to find other ways to do it, which is what I pitched to them: Using the World Cup as a kind of spine to the film, to have other stories and other characters coming off that, like spokes on a bicycle wheel. I pitched the idea of the notion that football is much more important than what went on on the field. It has all sorts of both good and bad aspects to it that were, of a large proportion, beyond the individual games,

individual players, individual teams.

SL: Who approached you about making the film?

MA: It was Ben Goldhirsh from Reason Pictures who approached me about doing a film about the World Cup. He was interested in doing documentaries and socially relevant films. He was the one I persuaded that we would have to take a different tack. And so, he put up the money first, to develop and research the thing. Then, we got Pathé interested in financing it, along with Ben's company. Then, National Geographic came in after we finished it. They saw it, I think, at the Tribeca Film Festival, and they responded very strongly to it. They came through with financing for PR and prints and stuff like that. [Editor's Note: National Geographic devoted the June 2006 edition of its magazine to soccer and the World Cup.]

SL: When did you start working on the film?

MA: I started shooting it in 2005. The story that we started on, the main story that intrigued me, was the South Africa part — the fact that they have got the 2010 World Cup, which is a first for Africa and the first for any country in the developing world, and how closely football had been associated with the politics of the last 20 years in South Africa. It's a breathtaking story, and it's something that I'm trying to carry on up to 2010.

SL: How did you go about developing the other story lines of the film?

MA: We just had to seek them out. We searched a lot. We had a lot of people suggesting stories. The key was to find a variety of stories that gave people some sense of the complexity of the sport. It was kind of like putting a jigsaw together, which a lot of the documentaries I tend to do are. They're collages in a way, with different characters, different stories.

Also, there was a certain business determination. It was useful to find an American story and a story that involved the United Kingdom because we were largely going to shoot it in the English language. We wanted to find a European story that was affecting the World Cup, and then we wanted

to find an African story. We wanted to find an Asian story and a Middle Eastern story. Some we found, some we didn't. We could never find an Asian story.

A lot of it worked, and a lot of it didn't work. We were very disappointed that South Africa didn't qualify [for the 2006 World Cup]. That would have given us a more attractive presence in Germany. We were stuck filming the people from the 2010 organizing committee. They're very nice people, but it wasn't particularly sexy stuff. On the other hand, we were delighted when Iran qualified because we had a story about a female journalist from Iran.

It was a very frustrating film to make because my initial response — that you couldn't make a film about the World Cup because you couldn't get access — was true, even to us. A lot of the stories were shut off to us because we couldn't really get inside. We got on very well with FIFA, but they run the World Cup with an iron grip. They're incredibly protective of their territory.

SL: Were there story lines that you followed and then abandoned or that didn't make the film?

MA: Yes. Things would drop out. Stories we researched would fall apart. I suppose the big one that didn't materialize was China. We had hoped — but it didn't work out — that China might qualify [for the 2006 World Cup]. They could not be more passionate, and they were besides themselves when they didn't qualify. Also, we had a promise to have some access to David Beckham, to follow him around. That didn't happen, not through anybody's fault. It was just too much to ask.

SL: Before Germany, had you ever attended the World Cup?

MA: Well, I attended here [in Los Angeles] in '94. I'd seen a bit of it in England [in 1966]. It was a bizarre experience being in Germany. I probably saw less at that World Cup than at any World Cup in my lifetime. If I was at a game, I was filming, say, the American supporters. So, I had no idea what was going on on the field. I had to ask them.

SL: Regarding the segment in the film about South Africa, what does hosting World Cup 2010 mean for that country?

MA: It's monumental. I think it's bigger than the Beijing Olympics because it's a symbol for the emergence of South Africa as a first world country, whereas China is already very much established. It's important that the [African] continent pulls it off. If they mess it up, all the fears that Africa can't do anything will be true.

Also, it was a brilliant thing what these men and women did, turning the country around from apartheid into the beginnings of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-national democratic society. I mean, if you could look at the world in 1980 and see the Middle East, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, South Africa, American cities — and then ask, what one will turn around? No one would have said South Africa. A lot of the people running football in South Africa were part of Mandela's government. So, this event — this single moment — has become a kind of symbol for the success of this government. They care about it deeply. It matters deeply to them.

SL: Do you think South Africa can pull it off in 2010?

MA: I don't know. The real interesting dynamic is whether FIFA, as a multi-national corporation par excellence, will come in and take it over. They've invested so much prestige, good will, column inches into giving Africa the World Cup. These guys won't let it fail.

SL: So, you're going to follow this story through 2010?

MA: Yes, we are. All aspects of it, including the team. They've got to perform for 2010. It's unheard of for the host nation to be eliminated in the opening round. They don't want that unfortunate first.

I've got a ton of material already. I've shot huge amounts of film. We're still negotiating with FIFA, and we're talking with people like ESPN to help finance it.

SL: Back to "Power of the Game." You followed "Sam's Army" and the U.S. national team in Germany: Was their disappointing showing in 2006

difficult to work around as a filmmaker?

MA: I think, in a cynical way, it probably helped. It's a nasty thing to say, and I didn't wish them ill. But the fact that they didn't win a single game and that [head coach] Bruce [Arena] got the boot was dramatic in an ugly way. Had they done so-so, it would have been less dramatic.

SL: Why do you think soccer hasn't caught fire here?

MA: I think on one level it's kind of simple. It's not a television sport, and there's no room for it to be a television sport. Americans are saturated with television sports that are done brilliantly and they're saturated with a certain kind of presentation. All American sports — baseball, basketball, the NFL — stop and start, and football doesn't stop and start.

Also, there's a huge disconnect between the fact that kids love to play football — and that it's a healthy sport for kids to play — and that there's no money in the game here really, unless you're David Beckham. So, there's no reason, if you're a great athlete as a kid, to do it.

I've always been pessimistic that soccer will ever take that real leap here. It's had sporadic moments, during the 1970s, when Pele, [Franz] Beckenbauer, [George] Best, and Carlos Alberto came along. And, of course, now with Beckham, if he ever gets fit. But I don't think it's got any chance of being in any way comparable to the three major sports. It's not part of the culture of the country.

SL: How do you think Beckham will influence soccer in America?

MA: He's a great player, and he's very charismatic. I think you couldn't have gotten anyone better to do this. Whether it's a good decision for him is another matter.

SL: Will you go see Beckham play here?

MA: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

SL: Does America need to win the World Cup to validate soccer in the U.S.?

MA: No, but they never will. Not in my lifetime. I think they're caught in the horns of an impossible dilemma: the only way to build the great American team is to have your people play in the very best leagues in Europe. But that means that your best players aren't playing here, so the local support will diminish and the MLS will become increasingly mediocre.

I think the game will get to a certain level. It's a very popular immigrant sport here in Los Angeles, New York, and elsewhere. So, it has its place. But I don't think it's ever going to be a major sport. It doesn't matter in the way that football matters everywhere else in the world.

SL: In "Power of the Game," you followed a female reporter from Iran - Mahin Gorji - and her attempts to cover the national team. How did you find that story?

MA: We found an Iranian woman filmmaker who lives in San Francisco and goes back and forth to Iran. She found Mahin and a couple of other stories. She found a very interesting woman who's the goalkeeper on the women's national team whose father had been the goalkeeper with the men's national team. But they wanted a ton of money to be in the film. It was a pity because I had wanted to do a generational story — fathers and sons — and these two goalkeepers, father and daughter, seemed like a gift. Anyway, from her research Mahin emerged. Again, FIFA helped us by getting Mahin a work permit to get out of Iran, come to Germany, and have access to the games. It helped us that Iran qualified, so she had something to do.

SL: Did you run into any difficulties covering that story?

MA: Well, yes. I couldn't film [scenes in Iran] because men aren't allowed to watch women play. So, we had to hire an all-women crew to do it. I did all the stuff with Mahin in Germany.

SL: Was Mahin persecuted for her comments in the film?

MA: She left the country soon after we finished the film. She relocated to the Czech Republic, so we'll never know whether there was any implication. But we had quite a sticky time making sure that we didn't

damage anybody. I had to cut some stuff out on the advice of our contact in Iran. It was a story I was pleased with because it grew and delivered. It was one of the stories that we overcame our difficulties.

SL: Do you think that soccer will have an impact on women's rights in Iran?

MA: Yes, I think so because football is so huge in the region. That great story two weeks ago, when Iraq won the Asian Cup, shows that.

SL: In the segment of the film concerning Argentina, you focused on the efforts of former professional player, Fabian Ferraro, who's helping at-risk, poor youth in part through soccer. Did you come away convinced that this program would work?

MA: I think so. I was very impressed with Fabian, with the place and the way they conducted themselves. These are people with real vision, who are serious about it and delivered it. This story seemed as strong a case that I could find for the power of sport and social empowerment.

SL: The segment concerning Senegal also involved former players helping to build a school for youth. How was this different from the Argentine story?

MA: It was similar but different. With [midfielder] Patrick Vieira, he set the whole thing up to run like a military academy. It's incredibly well-organized. But he's only interested in recruiting people who are potentially terrific footballers, and he wants to look after the people that make it, whereas with Fabian and the Argentines, that was a secondary point. It was the other way around of doing it. They took a social issue and then implanted football on it. It grew more out of the community.

SL: How does the "slave trade" of young footballers in Africa work?

MA: The real story is, Africa has proven itself over the last couple of decades to be able to produce great players, like Patrick Vieira. So, the big European clubs love to recruit and poach these players. They pay pretty much nothing for them. If the guys make it, great. If they don't,

they get tossed off. For a lot of players, there is no protection at all, and they wind up abandoned on the streets. It's a scandal, and it's as good a definition of slavery as anything I can think of.

SL: What can the African nations do to prevent this?

MA: In a way, they have to do what Patrick and the Senegalese are doing. They have to make sure that their players get proper legal protection. They're a huge national asset, and the game is improving there. I suspect an African team is more likely to win the World Cup than an American team. Again, maybe not in my lifetime.

SL: It sounds very similar to the baseball situation in the Dominican Republic.

MA: Yeah, it is. It's just more sinister because there's more exploitation. The business end has gotten ruthless. I mean, kids now have agents when they're nine-years-old.

SL: In the film, you also examine how racism permeates the sport. How is it that one sport can be so empowering and yet also so racist?

MA: Clearly, there's a very dark side to the sport. A lot of it has to do with the DNA of the game. In South America and Europe, unlike America, football is traditionally a working-class game. Although it's changed some, that's its roots: working men having some drinks and going to the game. That's part of the excitement — there's always been violence and alcoholism attached to the game. Then, racism reared its head in the U.K. in the '70s and '80s, with the neo-Nazis in European countries, and so football became a carrier of that.

It's now become middle-class, of course, but those things die hard. Football still attracts this element who go to the games for the drinking and for the violence.

SL: Did you see much racism in Germany during the World Cup?

MA: No, because this huge network of German police really did keep

racism down. The World Cup was incredibly well-organized. Much more brilliant than the football was the way it was done. I suppose, for cinematic purposes, that was bad news for me.

SL: Was it difficult to weave the six different narratives into one cohesive film?

MA: I'm not sure it works. I don't know whether it was too big an idea or whether I got enough really good stuff. It's somewhat painful because I don't know if it falls in the category of, be careful what you wish for. I'd always wanted to make this film. Maybe it's not actually possible to make the sort of film you want to make because it's so complicated and so varied in its demands. I look at it and I tend to look at its shortcomings more than its successes. Then again, I do that with all my films.

SL: How do you see the future of soccer?

MA: Endless. Bottomless. It's terrifying. I mean, the World Cup is monumental; countries just stop when it's on. And, the amount of money being put into the Premiership is just huge. The TV ratings are huge, attendance is huge, the advertising is huge. It's just incredibly satisfying entertainment. Now, the long-term question is, is all this going to destroy the local game? The other thing is, football is finally coming to Asia, to Southeast Asia, to India and Pakistan. In China, it's almost virgin territory. So, there's room to grow the sport.

SL: What are the plans for releasing "Power of the Game"?

MA: Frankly, we haven't had much success getting it into cinemas, although we're still trying to get distribution for it. I'm sure it'll find a good market on television and on DVD.

SL: Do you have any favorite sports documentaries?

MA: One of the great sports documentaries was "Tokyo Olympiad," from [Kon] Ichikawa, about the 1964 Tokyo Games, which was breathtaking. It was the first time we saw the power of film and sport — with the slow-motion shots and with [Abebe] Bikila winning the marathon.

One of the great American films was “Hoop Dreams.” I know the people who did it very well, and before it came out, [filmmaker] Peter Gilbert came to me and said, “We’ve got this film that’s very long. Would you have a look at it?” So, I did. And, I thought it was just awesome. I think it’s one of the best films ever made about being black in America.

SL: How about Leni Riefenstahl’s “Olympia”?

MA: To me, it wasn’t the cinematic revolution that Ichikawa’s film was. It didn’t have that true insight into sport, and its politics were so transparent.

SL: And, finally, why hasn’t anybody produced that great, defining soccer film?

MA: I just think football doesn’t work on film. “Bend It Like Beckham” and “Gregory’s Girl” were terrific, but they had nothing to do with football. The football is incidental. The game has to flow. The game doesn’t stop and start. So, to make a football match the center of your film doesn’t work.

Actually, I don’t think many sporting films in America work. Boxing works, pool works. God spare us from more baseball films or American football films.