

Making 'Bend It' believable

Hit film's stars studied Brazilian technique to prepare for on-field shooting.

Simon Clifford was having doubts.

As the coach and choreographer of the soccer sequences in the hit British film "Bend It Like Beckham," Clifford needed to make stars Parminder Nagra and Keira Knightley — and other actresses — look like pros. Or something close.

And he couldn't help but be disheartened as a two-month training camp began shortly before the summer 2001 shoot.

"Mindy, the main girl," he said, meaning Nagra, who portrays Jess Bhamra, an Anglo-Indian teen whose passion for soccer upsets her traditional family. "I was pulling my hair out," he continued. "I didn't know what I'd let myself

into. I didn't think I'd be able to do it."

Nagra, 26, had virtually no athletic background. She wasn't a soccer fan, had never played the sport, paid attention only when the World Cup came around every four years. On the field, she was clueless.

"At first look," Clifford said, "I felt like crying."

Credit that the action in "Bend It Like Beckham" looks pretty good, at least by cinematic standards, goes to a Brazilian training method that — with Clifford as high priest — has begun making an impact in Britain. It's Futebol de Salao, a precursor to futsal that encourages strong individual technique, and Brazilian stars — from Ronaldo and Rivaldo to Zico and Juninho — swear by it.

Clifford, whose academies have spread internationally (reaching California this year), taught the film's stars some basic tricks to make them seem, on camera, more gifted

than they are.

Preparations and filming were grueling. Nagra, who hurt her foot kicking the ball improperly, pushed herself because she "didn't want a stunt double used." Knightley ended up with two black eyes from heading mishaps. Small victories built confidence.

By the end of the shoot, the "Hounslow Harriers" were ready to play for real. They sought to make their game against a German team — a turning point in the plot — into a real game and played on after director Gurinder Chadha called, "Cut."

Knightley, Clifford said, took to the sport quickly. When filming ended, she and Nagra "were holding their own with the Fulham Ladies, the QPR Ladies" who served as soccer extras.

Nagra has benefited greatly from her association with "Bend It." She won a FIFA Presidential Award last year and was signed for a role next season on NBC's "ER."

And she became a soccer fan. She describes an introduction to Mia Hamm as "like meeting one of Olympian gods of football" and says she was "gobsmacked" while comparing FIFA awards with Rivaldo.

"I now understand the passion people have for football," she said. "I realize the discipline that goes into it, the working as a team, the skill involved and how you have to be an athlete and an acrobat and dancer almost at the same time."

— Scott French

"Bend It Like Beckham" leads Parminder Nagra (second from left) and Keira Knightley (second from right) meet American stars Tiffeny Milbrett (left) and Mia Hamm (right) before a WUSA clash.



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