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Heartwarming Soccer Story Kicks Off Hollywood Fight

By KATE KELLY
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Early on Jan. 21, Hollywood producer Scott Rudin sent up an urgent flare to his top deputy. He had just read a heartwarming New York Times story about a group of refugee kids playing soccer in Clarkston, Ga., and was desperate to win the movie rights.

Four days later, though, Mr. Rudin was bellyaching in a snarky email to top studio executives at **Sony Corp.** and **Walt Disney Co.** about a frenzied auction that had ensued, in which he was one of the losers despite an impassioned pitch and big-money bid. On a list of "some things I learned yesterday," Mr. Rudin included this as lesson No. 4: "When someone says 'we want to look you in the eye,'" what they really mean is that "'we want to look Benjamin Franklin in the eye' -- many, many times."

"Scott Rudin makes a lot of money," says the refugees' soccer coach, Luma Mufleh. "This is nothing to him. In the large scheme of things, what we could do with half a million dollars is a lot."

How one of filmmaking's wiliest players went from wooing a journalist and a small-town soccer coach to venting his frustration toward them all over Hollywood shows how sticky things sometimes get when real people are sucked into the entertainment-industry vortex.



A story in the New York Times about a group of young refugees playing soccer in Georgia set off a fierce bidding war in Hollywood.

The article's author, Warren St. John and his subject, Ms. Mufleh, told studio executives they were taken aback by the interest the story had generated and wanted any resultant film project to do the right thing for the kids involved. "I think I have an obligation to the kids in the community to tell their story," says Ms. Mufleh. But the flood of interest generated by the article "was just kind of surreal."

She wasn't the only one who thought so. When the project went to **General Electric Co.**'s Universal Pictures for an upfront payment of \$2 million, plus a promised future payment of \$1 million, some felt the buyers and the sellers had been caught up in a hype machine.

Dealmakers say bruised feelings can be an unfortunate outcome of a case

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like this. "At the end of the day, as a seller, you want your buyers to be happy," says Jeremy Zimmer, a director of United Talent Agency, which represents Mr. St. John and Ms. Mufleh, "but only one person gets it. So you know, you enter into these things with excitement, and trepidation."

Ms. Mufleh and her soccer players represent the rare tale that managed to transfix a wide swath of filmmakers the moment they read it. The article told the story of a Jordan-born coach who has brought together refugee children, from war-torn places like Liberia and Kosovo, on a team called "the Fugees." Because the mayor of Clarkston had restricted the team's use of a local field, the kids had been left without a permanent place to play.

Dozens of Hollywood writers, producers, and executives immediately saw big-screen potential. Producer Scott Stuber was heading into a photography exhibition in Santa Monica, Calif., when he first read the story a little after 8 a.m. He and his colleagues quickly began emailing each other and their counterparts at Universal, where Mr. Stuber's company has a production deal, about the possibilities for a movie. "The phones started burning up," he recalls, "and then by noon or so ... we were all worked up and excited, as was the whole industry."

In Park City, Utah, where he was attending the Sundance Film Festival, Scott Rudin Productions president Mark Roybal, who'd been awakened early by the call from his boss in New York, was busy cobbling together an offer. Mr. Rudin, a mercurial producer who worked on the movie "The Hours" as well as the current release "Notes on a Scandal," has a production deal with Disney. A movie about the trials and tribulations of refugee kids on a soccer team seemed like a perfect fit for the family-oriented studio.

So that evening, Mr. Roybal fired off an email to the agents from UTA, Mr. St. John's representative, and International Creative Management Inc., which represents the Times. "Today's article is probably one of the best pieces of journalism we have read in years," wrote the executive, adding, "It deserves all the inevitable acclaim and accolades it will certainly accrue." For a three-year lock on the rights to the article and the life story of the key figures -- which he hoped included the coach and the kids -- Mr. Roybal offered a total of \$1.25 million, plus a possible cut of the eventual movie's box-office revenue.

Executives at Columbia Pictures, a Sony Pictures label, were also working fast. The company's two production presidents had conversed about the Times story over email during the day, and the studio's chairman, Amy Pascal, had told them to start bidding. Their initial offer, presented late Sunday: a total of about \$1.3 million, a hair above where Mr. Rudin had opened the auction, according to someone with knowledge of the figures.

Shortly thereafter, Universal lobbed in a formal offer, teamed with the production companies Stuber/Parent, which had produced "The Break-Up," and the Kennedy/Marshall Company, which made "The Bourne Identity." DreamWorks SKG, a **Viacom** Inc. unit, was also in the mix, offering \$500,000 for story rights and \$500,000 earmarked for scholarships and soccer equipment for the kids; the studio would offer another \$250,000 to the kids if the movie got made.

Mr. St. John was at home in New York when the inquiries started pouring in. A Birmingham, Ala.,

native, he had come across the coach through a tip from a reader of his first book, an account of football fan culture called "Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer," that was published in 2004. Ms. Mufleh agreed to tell her story, and last summer he'd made a deal to write a book version of it, now due to be published in 2008. Early last week, UTA made a deal to represent Ms. Mufleh in the sale of her "life-story" rights, effectively making her and Mr. St. John a package deal, along with the rights to the Times article itself.

As the week wore on, the bidding escalated. Sony had joined with Mark Gordon, who produces the television series "Grey's Anatomy," and Will Smith, one of Hollywood's most bankable actors and the head of a production company. The star of Sony's current release "The Pursuit of Happyness," based on a true story about a former homeless man and his struggles as a single father, Mr. Smith was eager to call Ms. Mufleh and kick around some ideas as a producer. But the coach was turned off by the idea because she feared having the story overly glamorized by the Hollywood establishment. So Mr. Smith backed off. "Why would Will Smith want to talk to me?" says Ms. Mufleh on reflection. A spokeswoman for the actor said he couldn't be reached for comment.

One concern among the bidders: How to deal with the kids themselves. Although Ms. Mufleh's experiences were at the heart of the story, a movie that got specific about individual children would require their life-story rights as well -- rights that weren't on offer by UTA. According to a person familiar with the matter, DreamWorks, for example, backed out when it was told that its offer -- with money earmarked specifically for the soccer players -- wasn't structured correctly. Ms. Mufleh wanted the children in the movie to be generic, DreamWorks executives were told, rather than based on the actual kids.

Ms. Mufleh confirms that she wanted to make a movie with generic kids, in order to avoid the divisiveness that buying the life rights to just a few true stories could create.

Ultimately, with an upfront offer of \$2.25 million against a total of \$3 million, Sony had the highest bid, say people who were involved with the process. But the brass ring went to Universal, which in addition to a compelling financial offer had a couple of other inducements, including a no-strings charitable donation and a seasoned female producer, Kathleen Kennedy, who had produced "Schindler's List," among other films. Late Tuesday, that studio was told it had won the deal, and in a show of goodwill, UTA donated part of its 10% commission to the kids.

A spokeswoman for the Times confirmed that the newspaper had sold the story adaptation rights to Universal and that it would be splitting the proceeds with the coach and the reporter, with a significant portion also going to a foundation that assists Clarkston's refugee community.

Ms. Mufleh says she plans to put most of her cut of the total \$3 million payment into a foundation she established for the kids. Given that a number of equipment drives have been launched for her players since the Times article ran, she adds, the most immediate need is for a permanent soccer field and a physical space for the kids to study in. "I never thought it would get up to \$2 million," Ms. Mufleh says. "But it's kind of humbling to think people think that our story is worth that much. To me it says they're going to make it, and tell it right."

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