

## My uphill struggle to put Eddie the Eagle on film



Taron Egerton as Eddie Edwards in *Eddie the Eagle* Associated Press

Sean Macaulay

Published 1 minute ago

Last Thursday night the Odeon Leicester Square was besieged by screaming fans for the red-carpet premiere of *Eddie the Eagle*, the big-screen biopic of Britain's incurably eccentric ski jumper. The event in London was similar to most red-carpet events I've attended over the years — flashing cameras, glamorous stars — with one crucial difference. This time my name was on the poster, as screenwriter, so I got to walk the red carpet too and pose for photos with the film's two stars, Taron Egerton and Hugh Jackman.

It was a sweet moment of vindication for me and the film's original producer, Rupert Maconick. The project's 17-year journey to the big screen often required a blind faith and persistence to rival Eddie Edwards's journey to the 1988 Calgary Olympic Games. As the credits rolled, no one looked more surprised than my old boss at *The Sun*, Kelvin MacKenzie, who had wondered earlier if I was the guy selling ice creams that night. (Technically, a higher position than "writer" in the Hollywood hierarchy.)

Admittedly there were few indications of future Hollywood success when I started my career as a journalist in 1985. My theatrical high points were limited to undercover stories for *Punch*

and *The Sun*, where I dressed up, a little too convincingly, as a pot-bellied Essex yobbo, a 6ft banana, a Joan Collins-style transvestite and a taxi-cab rapist. It was the last hurrah of Fleet Street proper, a rogue's paradise of wicked wit — and I loved it. Yet my Don Draper diet of whisky sours, B&H and expense-account lunches eventually took its toll.

Moving to Los Angeles in 1995 wasn't just about inching closer to showbusiness, it was spiritual detox. I gave up smoking and I took up yoga. I swapped my Hermès ties for shorts and flip-flops. I read books such as *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron and *Owning Your Own Shadow* by Robert A Johnson. My iron-clad bravado and cynicism fell away, which was just as well. Any Brit settling in LA for the long haul soon discovers the default social mode is indiscriminate enthusiasm unaided by alcohol.

My first home was a studio flat in West Hollywood and, quite normally, every one of my neighbours was in the entertainment business. Talent manager, studio executive, screenwriter, director (“award-nominated director”, sorry), composer — for adult movies, but they all count — and a woman who delivered fried chicken to Kevin Costner. Whenever a “civilian” moved into the building, such as the former mercenary from Africa, it was a huge novelty, but even he eventually settled down with a pole dancer with an Screen Actors Guild card.

My transition from journalism to writing screenplays was slow and tortured, even though — and more likely because — I'd loved movies so much, ever since I was a kid. Thanks to a friend, I got to sit in on screenwriting lectures at UCLA and meet working pros whom I admired. However, it didn't help that my critical faculties were much more advanced than my creative abilities, especially after I began writing the LA Movie column for this paper.

There is of course a long line of critics who went on to become great film-makers: François Truffaut, Paul Schrader, Peter Bogdanovich — but that was no reassurance to me. After my first script got some interest around town, I'd go into meetings with producers, racking my brains to remember if I'd panned any of their films recently. I was a firm but fair critic, I like to think, but I definitely questioned the severity of my opinions when I got a surprisingly plaintive letter after writing that Steven Seagal had the acting range of a lentil. Not from the famously self-regarding star of *Under Siege*, I should add, but from the USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council.

Critic or not, I still had to master the two pivotal moments of any Hollywood pitch meeting: 1) When the executive leans back, arms folded behind head, and asks: “What's it about?” (Answer: Whatever it is, make it brief.) 2) When the executive leans forward and asks: “Yes, but what's it really about?” (Answer: Lean forward with intense seriousness and intone the single word “family”. Whatever the genre, whatever the premise, this answer never fails.)

Maconick had secured Edwards's life rights in 1999, thanks to a suggestion in a bar in Thailand. He hired a first writer, Simon Kelton, to write the *Eddie the Eagle* screenplay and when he left the project I was brought in, in 2002. Maconick and I clicked instantly because he was from the loveable-rogue school of producing — blunt, but fair. During the next 14 years we became genuine trench buddies, cemented by a shared love of Flashman novels.

However many polite rejections or glimmers of false hope, we never stopped believing Eddie would make a great movie.

People always liked the project but usually said that no one makes movies like this any more. The director Kirk Jones got attached to the project for a few years and was incredibly helpful. Steve Coogan was attached for three years, which led to a sharp increase in sex jokes. The *Harry Potter* actor Rupert Grint was attached for two years, leading to a sharp decrease in sex jokes.

When the project was set up at Sony, we went on a location scout to Germany. I went up a 90m ski jump for the first (and last) time and my respect for Eddie's achievement increased no end. On and on I plodded, year after year, draft after draft, not unlike Eddie himself. I got married, had two children, stopped being a critic, started work on other film projects, joined the Writers' Guild, all the while pushing Eddie when Rupert and I had a chance, even when industry folk said the project was overexposed, like some Highgate Pond flasher.

Somewhere in this Sisyphean blur of unreturned phone calls my brother-in-law, Gordon Brown, became prime minister, which only highlighted my plight. The low point came in 2009 at a G20 dinner in Pittsburgh when President Obama went out of his way to show that the special relationship was still strong by holding my sister Sarah Brown's hand at the photocall. The most powerful man on the planet is squeezing my sister's hand and I can't get past the switchboard at the production company that made *Norbit*.

"You came for the growth and found out it was tumour," said one expat neighbour. Yet in some strange way the rejection worked for my writing of the script, helping it to evolve into something deeper and more heartfelt. The emotional core of the story emerged in the shape of Eddie's relationship with his burnout coach, Bronson Peary (played by Jackman) — two misfits trying to find their place in the world. One has all the courage and none of the talent. The other has all the talent but none of the courage. Ultimately, each one brings out the best in the other.

I did a final draft just for myself in 2013 and posted it up on the Black List, a matchmaking service for scripts and film-makers. I put away my copy of *The Artist's Way* and happily disowned my shadow, even though that final draft landed me a fantastic manager, Leslie Conliffe, who used to represent the real-life wiseguy Henry Hill, of *Goodfellas* fame. She actually sent me Hill's recipe for spaghetti sauce, aka "Sunday gravy", which he'd once tried to patent from a payphone in jail ("6-8 thinly sliced cloves of garlic — razor blade optional").

And then, just like *The Artist's Way* says, by letting go of the outcome, the Universe responded — in the shape of a phone call from the director and producer Matthew Vaughn. A Sunday morning viewing with his kids of *Cool Runnings*, the 1993 film about Jamaica's national bobsleigh team, had made him remember the project from when it was set up at Sony.

He turned out to be just the unstoppable wild-card impresario the project needed. I sent him the latest draft and within six months they were filming in Germany with exactly the director

(Dexter Fletcher) and stars he had in mind from our first phone call. Amazing.

The premiere screening was greeted with huge applause, none more so than when Eddie himself came on stage to take a bow. Even after three decades, his Olympic story still strikes a chord. Not least because it's so archetypal — the perennial underdog overcoming all obstacles to fulfil a childhood dream. Obviously, not a story I can relate to in any way . . .

### ***Eddie the Eagle* is out on March 25**

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

0 comments



**Janice Turner**

5 people listening

+ Follow

Post comment

**Newest** | Oldest | Most Recommended

Livefyre

© Times Newspapers Limited 2016 | Version 5.15.1.2(178783)

Registered in England No. 894646 Registered office:

1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF

[My Account](#) | [Editorial Complaints](#) | [RSS](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Display advertising](#) | [International print subscriptions](#) | [Encounters Dating](#) | [Sunday Times Wine Club](#) | [Privacy & Cookie Policy](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Contact us](#) | [iPhone](#) | [Android smartphone](#) | [Android tablet](#) | [Kindle](#) | [Kindle Fire](#) | [Place an announcement in The Times](#) | [Sunday Times Driving](#) | [The Times Bookshop](#) | [Times Tutorials](#) | [Times Currency Services](#) | [Times Print Gallery](#) | [Handpicked Collection](#)