

The making of Eddie the Eagle



Hollywood scriptwriter *Sean Macaulay* on his 14-year odyssey to bring Britain's heroic Olympics failure to the big screen

On 26 February, *Eddie the Eagle*, starring Taron Egerton and Hugh Jackman, opened in the US, completing a 17-year journey from the time Eddie's movie rights were first optioned by a British producer called Rupert Maconick.

When I came aboard the project as screenwriter in 2002, little did I know it would take another 14 years to reach the big screen. But if you're going to write a never-say-die underdog sports story, it's only appropriate that the one thing you learn in the process is how not to give up.

I moved to Los Angeles in 1995 after a decade working in Fleet Street. I gave up a job at the *Mail on Sunday*, an Arsenal season ticket (West Stand Lower) and a cat called Pussy Galore. In return, I got palm trees, sunshine and the shock of my life. In Hollywood, if you're not in the entertainment business, you're nothing. You could be the finest heart surgeon in the land and *Variety* would still describe you as 'non-pro'.

My early years in LA were spent on journalistic assignments covering wacky Americana — tobacco spitting, competitive eating, low-end porn awards. ('Ron Jeremy, we meet again.') I road-tested padded underwear for men, complete with 'snap-in endowment pads', and tracked down vets who offered testicular implants for dogs with insecure owners.

The closest I got to showbiz success was doing gloriously off-road celebrity interviews. The novelist Harold Robbins greeted me in a wheelchair at 11 a.m. clutching a massive tumbler of whisky and ginger ale. He told me all about the gay sex he had in the navy and said the trick to longevity during lovemaking was to dip one's manhood into a balloon of brandy.

Long before email, I spent a train-wreck of an afternoon with Dudley Moore thanks to a blurred fax saying Mr Moore was promoting his new recording of the Greek Piano Concerto in A Minor. For 15 surreal minutes, the pint-sized star answered questions about hummus, pitta bread and Demis Roussos as if I were mad until I noticed his new CD cover actually said 'Grieg Piano Concerto'.

In 2000, I inched closer to showbusiness proper when I married my girlfriend, Caroline. ('Wife works as a producer for action-director John Woo, husband is non-pro.') Our honeymoon was a visit to Hawaii and the set of *Windtalkers*, a second world war drama Woo was directing. I squelched around the battlefield location while Nicolas Cage browsed yacht catalogues between takes.

My first attempts at writing screenplays were stilted and self-conscious, the reverse of journalism, which mostly felt like a lark. It didn't help that I had recently become the LA film critic for the *Times*, a job that requires the exact opposite qualities to dramatic writing. But I persevered and got a job adapting a

horror book for director John Irvin, a silver-haired Englishman of immense conviviality. I told him my Nicolas Cage story. He told me that between takes on *Raw Deal*, Arnold Schwarzenegger would compete with his musclebound sidekick, Sven, to see who could push the dolly cart down the tracks the furthest.

This job led me to Rupert Maconick, the producer who'd secured Eddie's life rights. He had a script from a previous writer, Simon Kelton, but wanted to bring me on board, so I leapt at the chance. Maconick loved to host huge parties. On any given night at his Bel Air mansion, you could bump into Oliver Stone or Geoffrey Rush. One night, I heard an agent plying actress Nicollette Sheridan, the title siren from *The Sure Thing*, with more praise than one would have thought humanly possible. 'A talent like yours only grows stronger,' he told her. 'You should have your own TV show.'

I laughed. He glared. Two years later she was on her way to a Golden Globe for *Desperate Housewives*.

My draft of *Eddie the Eagle* got set up at Sony Pictures Studios in 2004 without too much fuss, so I said to my wife: 'What's the big deal with the movie business? Just write something you love and the town will respond.' She said nothing.

The Sony executive on the project, Gareth Wigan, was a famously courtly Brit; he even laid out shortbread biscuits at our first meeting. It was all too easy. Executives were literally skipping down the corridor after getting the green light. Then the studio went on its annual corporate retreat. By 9.02 Monday morning we were in turnaround. 'We don't want to stand in your way,' was the phrase Gareth used.

So began the more familiar Hollywood experience of years of rejection and 'development hell'. One production company wanted Ricky Gervais to play Eddie. Another said it would only work if Eddie shed his glasses and won a gold medal.

I spent one very long summer trying to turn the script into a romantic comedy for a studio that clearly wanted *My Big Fat Olympic Wedding*.

I was off the project for three years while Steve Coogan took a crack at it. Then back on it. Except now the project had been 'exposed' and was considered old news. One executive slammed his hand on a desk and said: 'This thing is as dead as a dodo.' Even my closest friends wondered why I persisted with it. I had never skied. I wasn't an Olympic fanatic. I had never worn glasses or leg braces as a kid, like Eddie. I was simply (and inexplicably) captivated by the image of Eddie eternally trudging up endless steps amid swirling snow to try yet another jump.

And then, thanks to the internet, all was revealed. My earliest cinematic memory is of seeing a Disney film about a Native American boy cast out from his tribe. >



Taron Egerton as Eddie and Hugh Jackman as his trainer, Bronson Peary

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Defying his tormentors, he dresses in feathers and leaps off a cliff to certain doom only to transform into a real bird. To my six-old-year self this final leap was heart-stopping. And it remained a vivid but obscure memory until I discovered the last six minutes of the film had surfaced on YouTube. Fortified by a couple of drinks, I watched it and was unnerved by how well I remembered it. The same blue sky, the same scorched red cliff, the same death-defying leap of faith. The film was called *The Legend of the Boy and the Eagle*. Only then did I make the connection as the Freudian penny dropped.

This empowered me to do what I now call the ‘Fuck It Draft’, a final version of the script just for me, which I could then hand over to the universe with a sense of peace.

The universe didn’t reply. Not at first anyway. But I didn’t mind. I was proud of the draft and that was

enough. Then, in keeping with the mystic turn the project had taken, I woke up at 4 a.m. one Sunday in September 2014 for no good reason only to find an email had come through from director-producer Matthew Vaughn. It turned out Gareth Wigan had given him a copy of the script ten years ago and he’d always loved the project. I sent him the new draft and he called back the next day, saying he was going to make it. He is a true powerhouse and a maverick and six months later they were filming in Germany.

The day after filming was announced in the trades, I ran into the executive who’d banged the desk.

‘Congratulations, bro,’ he told me. ‘I always loved that project.’ •

Eddie the Eagle is released in the UK on 28 March.