

Sports

FIFA 'mafia' depicted in new Amazon Prime satire

Amazon to make Premier League matches free-to-air

LOS ANGELES: Fans yearning for the return of professional soccer have spent months rewatching classic matches, obsessing over "contact training" schedules and adopting teams from far-flung leagues that play in empty stadiums. Amazon Prime's new series "El Presidente," out Friday, provides a much-needed football fix - but its witheringly satirical take on the 2015 "Fifagate" corruption scandal may leave supporters questioning whether the return of the beautiful game is a good thing after all.

"It was crazy what was going on, no?" said series creator and writer Armando Bo. "Not just FIFA... the corruption scandal was so huge, the FBI wanted to show they were the good guys... Everyone wanted to be part of it. So many hands on this super huge business." The \$150 million bribery scandal that rocked the football world with the arrests of dozens of soccer executives - many of them Latin American - culminated in the downfall of FIFA boss Sepp Blatter.

"El Presidente" tells the story through the eyes of Sergio Jadue, a young Chilean who improbably rose from the front office of a humble local club to the vice presidency of CONMEBOL, South American football's governing body. Filmed mainly in Spanish with subtitles, its depiction of a naive but ambitious character getting swept up in an international criminal world of bribery, fraud and even violence is reminiscent of Netflix's hit drama "Narcos." "I guess it's different, football and drugs - for me, the big challenge was there's not so much blood," joked Bo, who won an Oscar for co-writing 2014's black comedy "Birdman." "This kind of mafia is more difficult. In 'Narcos,' you can just kill everyone and that's it. It's real. Here, people didn't die - not too many."

Amazon will hope "El Presidente" - co-produced by Gaumont, the same French firm behind "Narcos" - enjoys the same global appeal as that show. Hopping between countries and following a US undercover agent who tracked Jadue and his co-conspirators, the series is "really local but also really meaningful in every country," said Bo. "And it's an era when subtitles are allowed, no?" added the Argentine. "We are seeing international content in the American market, after 'Narcos,' after 'Parasite,' even 'Roma.' "We are seeing that stories need to be told in the language that is more natural, more real, more credible."

Behind the curtain

A soccer fan who adores Lionel Messi, Bo admits it can be painful to look behind the curtain at the greed and corruption rampant in the world's most popular sport. The show is narrated from beyond the grave by Julio Grondona, the real-life veteran Argentine soccer boss. Grondona's character highlights the vast contrast between fans' unadulterated passion for "the World Cup people see" and the true "business World Cup" - an unrivalled cash machine for those pulling the strings.

Glamorous events like the Brazil 2014 World Cup and Chile's historic Copa America victory on home soil the following year take a back seat to grubby TV rights deals. But at a time when the world is locked down, the success of shows like Michael Jordan documentary "The Last Dance" demonstrates a pent-up appetite for the stories behind famous past sporting dramas, Bo said. "We are experiencing now so many things that we need to question about ourselves as a society," he added. "But I'm a big sports fan, and when it's back, I will be there watching for sure." — AFP

Porto suffer shock defeat as Primeira Liga returns

PORTO: Leaders Porto suffered a shock 2-1 defeat at Famalicao as Portugal's Primeira Liga became the latest league to return to action following the coronavirus stoppage on Wednesday. An embarrassing mistake by Porto goalkeeper Agustin Marchesin three minutes after halftime gifted Famalicao the lead. The Argentine sent an attempted clearance straight to Fabio Martins who rolled the ball into an empty net from the edge of the penalty area.

Jesus Corona fired Porto level in the 74th minute but the hosts regained the lead four minutes later when Pedro Goncalves left fly from 25 metres and his shot found a gap between Marchesin and the near post. Porto also had a lucky escape in the first half when Pepe appeared to trip an opponent in the penalty area but then also fell over and the referee waved play on. All matches are being played behind closed doors but videos posted on media websites showed an estimated 200 Porto fans gathering behind barriers outside the stadium, singing and waving flags. Most were wearing masks but they did not appear to be respecting social distancing guidelines.

Porto top the table with 60 points but could lose the lead when arch-rivals Benfica, who are one point behind, host Tondela on Thursday. Earlier, a spectacular, swerving 30-metre shot from Lucas Fernandes gave Portimonense a 1-0 win over Gil Vicente in the match which got the competition under way. "Football without the



VILA NOVA DE FAMILICAO: FC Porto's Colombian forward Luis Diaz jumps for the ball during the Portuguese league football match FC Famalicao against FC Porto at the Municipal Stadium in Vila Nova de Famalicao yesterday. — AFP

public in the stands is very strange, it seemed like a pre-season game," said Portimonense coach Paulo Sergio. His opposite number, Vitor Oliveira, agreed. "We need the fans," he said. "Looking at what is happening elsewhere, where things are opening up, I think that football can have some fans, maybe 20% or 30% of the stadium capacity. Football without the public is not football." — Reuters

What next for Premier League's 'Project Restart'?

LONDON: The Premier League's return is just two weeks away but there are plenty of details for the 20 clubs in the English top-flight to work out before competitive action resumes on June 17. AFP Sport looks at what is on the agenda at the latest in a series of meetings between the clubs yesterday.

What happens?

There have been squabbles over how final league standings should be decided if the season cannot be completed but clubs need a contingency arrangement if a spike in coronavirus cases wrecks their plans. Most of the teams in the bottom half of the table are reportedly pushing for relegation to be scrapped if the season is not completed on the field. That still seems highly unlikely, with the English Football Association and English Football League both insisting on promotion and relegation throughout the pyramid. A points-per-game formula is the most likely option and is part of the reason why the restart will begin with two matches on June 17, to ensure every side has played the same number of games.

Fixture list

Once the two outstanding games - Manchester City v Arsenal and Aston Villa v Sheffield United - have been played, all 20 sides will have nine games remaining. No dates for other matches have yet been released, but fixtures are expected to continue from where they left off in

March and be crammed into just five weeks ahead of the FA Cup final on August 1.

Substitutes and squad sizes

A long lay-off, little time together in contact training and a grueling schedule mean players' bodies will be pushed to the limits. In an attempt to minimize injuries and fatigue, world governing body FIFA has allowed leagues to temporarily change their rules to allow five substitutes. Chelsea have also reportedly proposed increasing the number of substitutes available from seven to nine. However, critics have suggested those changes will simply play into the hands of the bigger clubs with deeper squads.

Neutral venues

Premier League clubs appear to have won their battle to have games played in their own grounds rather than on neutral sites. However, the UK's national lead for football policing confirmed last week that a "small number" of fixtures will take place at neutral venues. That is likely to include any match that could see Liverpool crowned champions for the first time in 30 years, to try and avoid crowds gathering at Anfield. Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp is unconcerned by playing at neutral venues, with results from four rounds of Germany's Bundesliga showing no advantage for home sides in a closed-doors environment. — AFP