‘Humanising Saudi football’: Netflix show paves way for World Cup

AFP- A new Netflix series on Saudi football features packed stadiums and top-flight talent, but whether it can curb criticism of Riyadh’s bid to host World Cup 2034 is an open question.
The six-episode “Saudi Pro League: Kickoff” debuted just three weeks before the FIFA Congress is set to formally approve Saudi Arabia – the sole candidate – as host of the quadrennial spectacle.

The vote on Wednesday will be a crowning moment for de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s use of sport to amass influence and improve the Gulf kingdom’s global image.

Football has been at the heart of that effort, and the Netflix series depicts how the Saudi Pro League has been transformed by the arrival of global stars like Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar and Karim Benzema – all of whom get ample screen time.

The show also seeks to highlight what one commentator describes as Saudi Arabia’s “historic passion for football” – clubs founded nearly a century ago, and rivalries dating back nearly that long.

In one scene, 17-year-old Saudi Talal Haji, a forward for Ittihad, walks with a friend through the old city of Jeddah.

Wearing a thobe, the white robes donned by Saudi men, he reflects on how the country is changing.

“I am very proud of how my future looks,” he says, predicting he will play in the World Cup on his home soil a decade from now.

“The main accomplishment of the series is that it’s kind of humanising Saudi football,” said Danyel Reiche of Georgetown University in Qatar, who researches the intersection of politics and sport in the region.

“Because so far, I think people all over the globe, they were just thinking about dollar signs.”

— ‘Mission to change perceptions’ —

Politics gets little air-time in the series.

Prince Mohammed appears only once, presenting a trophy to Neymar’s Al Hilal after their victory against Ronaldo’s Al Nassr in the King’s Cup tournament.

Ronaldo tells the camera his Saudi sojourn is purely about football.

“I am not here to win money or whatever they want to say. I am here to win,” he says.

But the foreign stars “are not just on a football mission”, Reiche said.

“They are on a general mission to normalise Saudi in international affairs and to change perceptions of the country.”

Along with signing football legends to the Pro League, Saudi Arabia has hosted elite tennis tournaments, world heavyweight boxing matches and Formula One races.

Each event has drawn allegations of “sportswashing” -– or using sport to distract from human rights abuses, such as the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi or the jailing of dissidents.

Prince Mohammed has brushed aside these complaints, telling Fox News last year that he would “continue doing

sportswashing” if it would grow the Saudi economy.

The criticism is likely to persist, assuming the World Cup bid gets a green light.

“The series is unlikely to change any minds among entrenched critics of Saudi Arabia who view the kingdom’s moves through the lens of sportswashing, but may be intended more at a general audience who are curious as to why the country is bidding to host the World Cup,” said Kristian Coates Ulrichsen of Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Saudi government officials did not respond to AFP’s request for comment on the series.

The Saudi Pro League though said it had facilitated access to the clubs and players but the story itself was crafted by Netflix, which retained full editorial control over the series.

— Ups and downs —

Officials and managers interviewed in the show seem focused primarily on helping the Pro League through any growing pains.

“The influence of foreign players in the league has both positive and negative impacts,” says Abdulrahman Ghareeb, a Saudi winger for Al Nassr who spends time on the bench once the newcomers start arriving.

Crowd numbers are an issue, despite frequent shots of flag-waving fans filling Saudi stadiums.

Average attendance for the 2023-24 season was 8,158, according to Transfermarkt, down from 9,701 in 2022-23, when Ronaldo arrived.

Some star recruits have also had a difficult transition to football in Saudi Arabia, where games are often played late at night due to the intense heat.

Former Liverpool player Jordan Henderson left Al Ettifaq for Ajax after just six months, something the Netflix series notes but does not explain.

Ballon d’Or winner Karim Benzema took time to settle at Al-Ittihad, and Neymar was sidelined for nearly a year with a left knee injury.

The unexpected absence of some foreign players has allowed Saudis to shine.

“I’ve made it my goal that any Saudi player can play ahead of a foreign star,” says Feras al-Brikan, a striker for Al-Ahli.

“The focal point of the team should be a Saudi player. Why should they be foreign?”

Many involved in Saudi Arabia’s sports-heavy makeover realise it is a long-term project.

“In football, it’s not how it starts. It’s how it ends,” said Al Hilal’s Portuguese manager Jorge Jesus.

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