

Precious movie team aiming for the stars

By KELLY ANDREW - The Dominion Post | Saturday, 17 May 2008

LIGHTWEIGHT: Precious McKenzie lifted boxer Muhammad Ali when they met in London in 1974 - when he weighed 54 kilograms and Ali weighed 98kg. Now his life is the subject of a new film.



The Kiwi team behind a film on the life of weightlifter Precious McKenzie are eyeing up director Lee Tamahori and actor Sir Anthony Hopkins for the project.

Tauranga's Lance Morcan and his son James have written a screenplay about their friend McKenzie, who left South Africa in 1964, represented Britain in three Olympic Games, and later emigrated to New Zealand.

The script was sent last week to Tamahori, a Kiwi with a successful career in Hollywood after making his name with *Once Were Warriors*.

An American producer representative is seeking backers at the Cannes Film Festival, which began this week, and there are plans for McKenzie - aged 71 and now in Britain on business - to join him there for talks.

Mr Morcan said he hoped Precious would begin shooting on location in South Africa by early November with a top director and a budget of about NZ\$13 million. Casting the lead role was proving a big challenge, however.

"They need to be African-looking, preferably with a South African accent, very short and very strong and fit."

South African Desmond Dube (*Hotel Rwanda*) and Guy Torry (*American History X*) had expressed interest in the role.

From Britain, McKenzie said he was thrilled.

"They usually make movies about you when you're dead and gone but this time it looks like somebody's appreciating my life while I'm still here."

He would have loved his favourite actor, Cuba Gooding Jnr, to play him in the film, but Mr Morcan said Gooding was too tall to play the weightlifter, who stands at less than 1.5 metres.

Hopkins would be asked to play the role of a South African weightlifting federation head, and Will Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, has been suggested for the role of McKenzie's wife, Elizabeth.

Mr Morcan said McKenzie's story had universal appeal because people loved an underdog.

"We believe it's a story that deserves to be told. It's not a weightlifting story, it's a human drama of one guy overcoming the odds."

McKenzie was born in Durban in 1936 and grew up in foster homes after his father was killed hunting crocodiles. He wanted to be a circus acrobat but during training developed a love of weightlifting.

He could not compete for South Africa because of apartheid so moved to England, where he was British power- lifting champion 10 times.

After emigrating to New Zealand, he won his fourth gold medal at the 1978 Commonwealth Games in Canada.

He now runs his own business as a back-injury-prevention consultant.