

Actor Bernsen enjoying ride of derby movie project: Akron Beacon Journal

By Rich Heldenfels, Beacon Journal staff writer

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Corbin Bernsen after crossing the finish line at Derby Downs Friday. The actor has written a screenplay with a story line involving the All-American Soap Box Derby and is in town to scout out the location for filming. (Karen Schiely/Akron Beacon Journal)

Actor-producer-director Corbin Bernsen stood gleefully at the bottom of the hill at Derby Downs minutes after having ridden down in an All-American Soap Box Derby racer.

"It's unbelievable," he said. "No, you're not going 8,000 miles an hour but it's pure. Simple. It's clean. It's just a real thrill. And you know what's funny? . . . It actually sustains. I'm still smiling. It's not like it's over and then it's OK, get me to my next computer thing. . . . As much as I want to go back up there, I wish my littlest son were here. I wish all my sons were here right now. They would have the biggest smiles on their face."

The words poured from the voluble Bernsen, whose credits include *L.A. Law*, *Major League* and *Psych*. He was feeling something firsthand that is familiar to the generations of racers who have passed through Akron, or dreamed of getting there.

It is something Bernsen sensed was important when he read a story about the derby's financial woes in *USA Today*. And the story led him to write, in a rapid six weeks, a derby-themed screenplay. He hopes to get \$750,000 to \$1 million in financing for the production (with Bernsen directing and acting) in 2010.

The basic story involves a boy who is building a derby car with his Army reservist father, only his father is called up and dies in Afghanistan. The boy then connects with a man whose firefighter son died in 9/11, and who has an old connection to the derby.

Together, they are on the verge of making it to Akron, but "the derby's in trouble," Bernsen said. "I don't want to do a historical movie, I want to do 'the derby's in trouble,' 'cause that's a great story."

So the film becomes about not only rescuing these two people but also saving the derby itself.

Many exteriors would be shot in California, but the interior scenes and, of course, the race itself would be shot in Akron, possibly next March or April.

"I want this to be a very Akron project," he said, with local investors. "I know the economy's tough, but it's a big town, right?"

The derby would benefit from a license fee paid by the film company, and from the publicity.

"I think things like the derby, things that are simple, things that involve family — I think it could be very popular again," he said.

"It might need an update. I was telling the guys, hey, maybe it needs a track that's five miles long going down a hill that looks like a bobsled [run] . . . Everything needs facelifts now and then. But [with] the basic essence of it and how you do it and family and all that. . . . If you lose this thing, it's another brick. Will it collapse us? No. But five or six of 'em will."

For the movie, a lot of things still need to fall into place, from getting money to fitting the film into Bernsen's schedule, which includes working on *Psych* from April to October. (If not done by then, he hopes a series hiatus will fall at a good time for a trip back to Akron.)

Still, he visited derby headquarters Friday to talk to officials about how to make the movie possible, and to see for himself what he had only read about up until then. One surprise: That the track was not downtown, an impression Bernsen had gotten from the sight of the Rubber Bowl in the background of derby photographs.

Video camera in hand (recording for a possible documentary to accompany the movie), wearing a red derby jacket over his plain black jersey to cut the November morning chill, Bernsen walked on the track and inspected champion racing vehicles stored in a garage.

He peppered people with questions: When did racers start using standard kits? Are the floor boards of the racers the same in all divisions? Do the kids ever wear goggles? Why isn't the starting line at the top of the hill?

"This is so cool," he said more than once. Bernsen is 55, married to actress Amanda Pays (their 21st wedding anniversary was Thursday), with four sons ages 11 to 20. But on this day, even as he was talking business, he also was a 10-year-old boy living a dream.

In a way, the dream began in June 2008 when his father, producer Harry Bernsen, died. Harry and Corbin's mother, daytime TV actress Jeanne Cooper, were long divorced, but Corbin said: "We had a pretty good family situation even though my parents were apart. We all did stuff together."

After his father died, Corbin said: "I started on this new journey of more faith and family. . . . I was sitting in my office with this velvet bag with his ashes, and I had to say, 'OK, where is he?' . . .

"I had faith, I believed in God, I didn't see the world as random," he said. But he felt the acquisition of wealth took away life's simplicity, and "within that simplicity is our spirituality."

He still works in a variety of genres, and was stopping in Akron before heading to Cincinnati for HorrorHound Weekend, where he planned to promote a thriller he directed and starred in called *Dead Air*. But he has also been looking more closely at uplifting projects like *25 Hill* (the derby

film) and *Rust*, a family film shot earlier this year in Kipling, Saskatchewan (population: 1,100), and financed by the community. For more information, go to <http://www.rustmovie.com>.

He got the same kind of feeling from *25 Hill* (named after a racing hill in his mother's hometown) as he did from *Rust*. Things, he said, seem to be presenting themselves to him.

"The screenplay spewed out of me, like food poisoning," he said. "I couldn't stop it. . . . And then all these opportunities. Even looking for sponsorship, which I know the derby wants, I got on a plane the other day to Phoenix, and I had a little SIGG water bottle with me, and a guy . . . says, 'I'm the president of [bottle maker] SIGG USA.' "

SIGG supports some nonprofit efforts, Bernsen said, and they may be talking more about helping the derby.

"It's all been pretty cool," he said.

And simple, in a way. Because just as Bernsen sees a simple life as a good path to spirituality, he keeps seeing that simplicity in actions like a derby race.

"Even what it is, is simple: four wheels and a piece of wood rolling down a hill, to every kid's delight," he said. "I don't care how many computers they have, to every kid's delight. . . . If we lose things like that — if we lose NASA, as expensive as that is — if we lose those things that are us and the spirit of what we are and . . . family coming together, then we really do start to get into trouble."

<http://www.ohio.com/news/70661862.html>