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Corbin Bernsen steers '25 Hill' to rescue soap box derby

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Enlarge Team Cherokee Productions

Corbin Bernsen directs and stars in the story of a man and a boy who bond over soapbox derby racing.

By Gary Strauss, USA TODAY

Corbin Bernsen's effort to prop up an American icon begins today in Akron, Ohio, when shooting begins on the soapbox-derby-themed movie 25 Hill.

Though low-tech racers lack luster in a digital age, 5,500 to 6,000 8- to 17-year-olds compete in 150 league-sponsored races, a number that has held constant for the past decade. "We're trying to show that the derby is alive and well," the former L.A. Lawstar says from Akron, which has hosted derby championships since kids slapped roller-skate wheels to wooden boxes in the 1930s.

Bernsen, who stars in and directs the film based on his script, says he was motivated by a USA TODAY report in September detailing the financial problems of the All-American Soap Box Derby league, which lacks big sponsors.

Bernsen has raised about \$500,000 to finance 25 Hill, most of it from the Akron community. "This has the potential for a theatrical release, even if the budget is pretty low," says Bernsen, 55. "But if it ends up on TV or DVD, as long as it rekindles interest, I'm happy."

The movie is named after a derby racing spot in Taft, Calif., home of Bernsen's mother, actress Jeanne Cooper. The film centers on 11-year-old Trey (Marley & Me's Nathan Gamble), who gets a derby kit for Christmas from his father, an Army reservist who dies in Afghanistan soon after.

Bernsen's character, Roy, is a 1970 derby champ grieving over the death of his firefighter son on 9/11. He and Trey forge a friendship, finish building the racer and, in the process, heal themselves and draw renewed national interest in derby racing.

"It sounds hokey, but we need a family-friendly experience to counter everything else going on in the world," Bernsen says.

The derby league, which licenses races in about 150 cities, gets 10% of 25 Hill's budget as a licensing fee and a smaller cut of future revenue. The non-profit organization nearly defaulted on \$623,000 in debt last fall after posting a \$400,000 loss in 2008.

In January, bankers agreed to renegotiate financing and allow payments to amortize over 15 years, says Jim Huntsman, chief executive of the International Soap Box Derby.

"Putting that behind us has added some stability. We're trying to restructure the organization and reinvent ourselves," Huntsman says. "But right now, we don't have enough race participants to interest sponsors, who've cut marketing budgets because of the recession."

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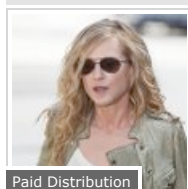
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Bernsen plans to film *25 Hill* in stages to accommodate his work schedule for *Psych*, his USA Network series. He's in Ohio for three weeks, then takes *25 Hill* to California in June before returning to Akron for July's championship scenes. "I love the process," says Bernsen, who is directing his fifth film. "But when filmmaking has another purpose, it's more complete."

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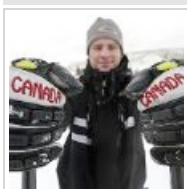
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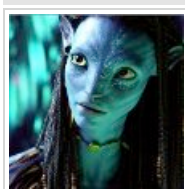
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