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The Soapbox Derby Hit the Skids. Hey, Maybe There's a Movie in That!

Sponsors Dropped Out, Attendance Fell; Producer Corbin Bernsen Plays the Hero

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By TIMOTHY AEPPEL

AKRON, Ohio—The All-American Soapbox Derby has fallen on hard times.

In November, the organizer of the race, in which kids ride cars they build down a hill, was sued by its hometown bank, FirstMerit Corp. The bank was demanding repayment of two loans totaling \$623,000. The derby couldn't pay.



Watch a clip of "25 Hill," Corbin Bernsen's film in production about the All-American Soapbox Derby in Akron, Ohio. Video courtesy of Cherokee Productions.

That led to a bailout: The city of Akron guaranteed the debt of the nonprofit derby group. And the bank restructured the loan on favorable terms.

The uproar caught the eye of Corbin Bernsen, the actor best known for his portrayal of sleazy lawyer Arnie Becker in the 1980s TV series "LA Law." Now a director and producer with his own production company, Mr. Bernsen was inspired to write a script about a young boy who saves the derby after a bank calls its loan. The movie is now being filmed here in this former tire-making capital; part of the profits will go to the race organization.

The derby's problems have much to do with how the world has changed and how the 75-year-old race hasn't. The competition began in Dayton, Ohio, during the Depression, when children started racing homemade cars. The first "All-American Race" was held there in 1934. It moved to Akron a year later. Derby Downs, the group's track, was built by the federal Works Progress Administration.

Soapbox Derby Halts Downhill Slide



It's still a "gravity race," meaning no engines. The cars just roll down a hill. For safety, the course is designed so the cars don't go faster than about 35 mph. Since speed is largely determined by how far the cars roll, the track was shortened in 1971, from 1,175 feet to 953.75 feet. A sign at the starting line

Ford Drive one.

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Memorabilia and old soap box derby cars sat in the warehouse where derby car kits are produced at Derby Downs in Akron, Ohio.

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half a dozen countries.

But kids today are more likely to play video games than to tinker in the garage with power tools. And audiences have other distractions. The annual race, held in July, once drew crowds of more than 50,000; last year it attracted only 15,000 people paying \$5 at the gate.

The erosion of corporate support, however, has been crippling. In the heyday of the derby, in the 1960s, Chevrolet sponsored and promoted the race. Over the years, big corporate backers brought celebrities, including Ronald Reagan, Rock Hudson, Evel Knievel, and O.J. Simpson. The late actor Jimmy Stewart attended six times.

The derby lost its last major sponsor, Levi Strauss Co., in September 2007, as the recession was hit and companies of all types were slashing promotional spending. Levi Strauss says that was no reflection on the derby, just "changing budgets." That left the derby reliant on the income it gets from donations, selling the \$500 kits used to build cars and from licensing fees it charges other cities that have races.

The lack of a major sponsor willing to pay \$250,000 a year for the privilege, forced the derby deeper into debt. Even after slashing spending, it has an annual budget of about \$1.1 million.

"Corporations are looking for return on investment," says Roger Rydell, a public-relations executive at Akron's Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., a newcomer to the derby board who heads a new marketing committee. "It could be that the metrics associated with that return have become a little more mercenary than in the past."



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Ross Mantle for The Wall Street Journal

T.J. Hellmuth, left, with Corbin Bernsen on the set of '25 Hill' at Derby Downs in Akron, Ohio.

notes that fact. The fastest time ever logged on the hill was 27.10 seconds in 1974.

In one sense, the race has grown. Competitions in the 1960s typically had about 100 contestants; last year, there were 603 boys and girls—in three separate divisions, including a "masters" division open to racers up to 17 years old (and weighing up to 160 pounds.) Sanctioned local races are now held in 150 other cities and about

The race isn't in the clear yet. The city, as part of its bailout, pressed the group to replace most of its board with local business leaders who could help it modernize. And it still has to pay the debt. "We really need one large title sponsor—or five at \$50,000," says Jim Huntsman, the derby's chief executive. The group is toying with new ideas, including a possible tie-in with the Boy Scouts.

The derby's rich history and the prospect of a great family-oriented tradition falling by the wayside attracted Mr. Bernsen. "We could do this very Disney-esque," he says, "but we're doing it kind of dark."

The movie, "25 Hill," is about a young boy named Trey Caldwell whose father, a reservist, is killed in Afghanistan after the two have begun building a derby car. The script is full of real-life dilemmas: The boy gets the derby car for Christmas, but he had wanted a laptop. He eventually becomes obsessed with winning the big race and upholding its traditions. In the movie, Mr. Bernsen plays a fireman and past champion soapbox derby racer who steps in to help the boy build the car.

Then there's the bank. In the script, young Trey goes to Akron to confront the banker who has called the loan. The banker turns out to be a grandfatherly fellow who explains to the boy that the problem is a lack of sponsors.

For the record, FirstMerit declined to speak about the real-life issue. In a statement, the bank's chief executive, Paul Greig, said the bank was a "proud annual contributor to the derby

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for decades," and noted that the bank contributed \$50,000 to the current fund-raising effort being led by the local chamber of commerce on behalf of the derby.

Meanwhile, the effort to make the movie may also be helping to solve the current sponsorship problem: Mr. Bernsen has signed a deal with Geico, the auto insurance giant, to play the role of the sponsor that comes to the rescue in the film. And Geico has agreed to be a sponsor in real life. Says Ted Ward, Geico's marketing vice president: "Who doesn't like an all-American Soap Box Derby?"

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