

ACTION ATTRACTION

Movie, TV star Chuck Norris' soft-spoken characters appeal to a new generation of fans

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If you thought you were done with Chuck Norris, think again.

He's not done with you.

The roundhouse-kicking, justice-seeking, iron-jawed martial arts movie icon is back. This sequel has nothing to do with the silver screen - or even his own efforts, really - but somehow a new generation has latched onto Norris as a pop-culture hero.

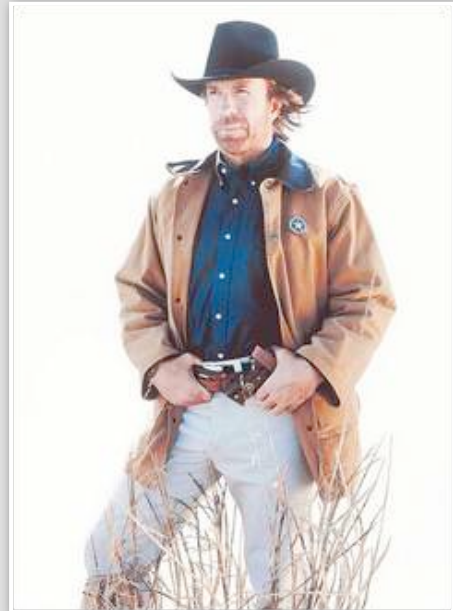
Web sites have popped up with thousands of over-the-top "Chuck Norris Facts." (Example: Chuck Norris is suing NBC, claiming Law and Order are trademarked names for his left and right legs.)

Late night jokester Conan O'Brien has made a running gag of showing clips from Walker, Texas Ranger, the weekly exercise in butt-whipping that lasted eight years on television.

The renaissance knows no bounds. In Hungary last month, news reports indicated Norris was the leading vote-getter in a contest to name a major new bridge in Budapest. (Voting ends Friday.)

Teenagers who are too young to remember the actor's Delta Force days go gaga for the guy.

Troy Sheehan, 18, loves the bearded action hero so much he was voted "Most Likely to Become Chuck Norris" last year at Sylvania Southview High School.



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"People try to rip on him, but I'm a big fan," Mr. Sheehan said. "I think he's a great actor."

CHUCK NORRIS 'FACTS'

Here are five of Chuck Norris' favorite "facts" about himself, according to his publicist, Jeff Duclos.

- When the Boogeyman goes to sleep every night, he checks his closet for Chuck Norris.
- There is no theory of evolution, just a list of animals Chuck Norris allows to live.
- Outer space exists because it's afraid to be on the same planet with Chuck Norris.
- Chuck Norris doesn't read books. He stares them down until he gets the information he wants.
- Chuck Norris does not sleep. He waits.

So great that Mr. Sheehan, who is now a freshman at Penn State, likes to watch Walker as much as he can.

"I watch it about two hours a day," he said. "It's amazing. It's on about six hours a day."

For those who thought Norris, 66, had been missing in action since, well, the Missing in Action movies of the '80s, there's the obvious question: Why him? Why now?

One theory is the all-American, justice-seeking character Norris consistently plays connects with a generation of youths who tend to be conservative and don't have a sense of entitlement.

"He works for what he does and he never backs down. He never takes the low road. I think that is appealing to a lot of people," said Dyrk Ashton, assistant professor of film at the University of Toledo. "It's easy to see Norris just as the characters in his films because nobody knows anything about his real life."

O'Brien, then, might be referencing this in an ironic way when he

shows clips on his show.

"It's not mean, but it is a commentary of doubt on our sort of gung ho, macho, militaristic culture," said Montana Miller, assistant professor in the department of popular culture at Bowling Green State University.

Norris certainly didn't see this coming. His publicist, Jeff Duclos, said the movie star finds it flattering but a little overwhelming.

"It's still one of those things where you scratch your head and don't know quite what to make of it," he said in a phone interview from Los Angeles.

His best guess is that it's because Norris has been in the public eye for so long and in so many different capacities - movie star, TV actor, world champion martial artist, infomercial pitchman, and even author.

"He's just never been out of the public eye. Those films and those television shows are constantly airing somewhere," he said.

Maybe it helped, then, that Norris had a fun cameo role in 2004's comedy Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story. And that in Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby, the main character names his kids "Walker" and "Texas Ranger."

Whatever Norris has, his rival action heroes just ... don't.

Mr. Ashton has his theories about why.

Steven Seagal? Too "hippy dippy."

Arnold Schwarzenegger? Jean-Claude Van Damme? Too foreign.

Sylvester Stallone? The Rambo series "smacks of Reaganism, foreign domination, and white male superiority."

Evan Feldstein, 18, of Sylvania Township, said he doesn't watch any of those other guys.

"It's either Chuck or nothing for me."

Mr. Feldstein, now a freshman at the University of Miami in Florida, tunes in to reruns of Walker just about every night and remembers lots of people in high school enjoying the outrageous Norris "facts."

"In the Southview theater department, we had a book of all the Chuck Norris facts," he said. "Before every show we would read two or three selected facts just to pump us up."

Many of those facts probably showed up on Ian Spector's Web site. The college student from Long Island started what he said is the original site of Chuck Norris facts (www.4q.cc) about a year ago as a follow-up to one he made for Vin Diesel.

To his surprise, it became a huge hit after several months, attracting 125 million hits in total and plenty of copycats. He has 5,000 facts in his database and at least tens of thousands of others that people have submitted.

(The top-rated fact one recent day: Norris' calendar goes straight from March 31 to April 2; no one fools Norris.)

Mr. Spector can't explain why his site is so popular, but does that matter as long as it makes you an international star?

"For Chuck Norris' birthday, I got a call from a Polish TV station asking me to talk about the whole thing," Mr. Spector said. "It was the Number Two keyword searched in Poland around April. Number One was bird flu. Number Two was Chuck Norris."

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Troy Sheehan, a Sylvania Southview High School graduate, imitates Chuck Norris in a photo taken last school year for the school's student newspaper. He was voted 'Most Likely to Be Chuck Norris' at the school.

