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## Apocalypto, Esq.

Out of the courtroom and in the wrestling ring, lawyer 'metes out justice' with a mask

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It's judgment day for "The Strangler" Diego Corleone. Strutting around the wrestling ring like a shirtless Alice Cooper across a concert stage, he flourishes his long, black leather jacket like a cape and wrings a rope between his hands. Only Corleone's eyes and teeth flash through his black face paint as he scowls and yells insults at the crowd.

As Corleone continues to threaten the jeering audience, the first notes of the "Imperial March" from "Star Wars" slowly blare via an electric organ on the sound system.

The masked hero is here.

"And his opponent, from some unknown part of the planet, weighing 230 pounds. He is the chosen closer of eternity — for positivity and justice! Here is," the announcer pauses dramatically, "Apocalypto!"

At the top of the ramp, a hooded man appears with his face still veiled in darkness. The organ gives way to an electric guitar as Darth Vader's theme goes heavy metal. The figure slowly raises his right arm and points directly at Corleone.

Without saying a word, Apocalypto menacingly marches to the edge of the ring, then stops.

He flings back his hood, revealing a dark-black metallic checkered mask with a wide, sparkly red, black and silver smile. His eyes are rimmed with red lightning and gleam with silver stars.



Attorney Thomas V. Benno, known in the wrestling ring as Apocalypto, stalks "The Strangler" Diego Corleone during their bout Feb. 22. Benno, 60, is co-owner of Fusion Wrestling, which offers family-friendly events that lack blood, extreme violence, obscenities or gratuitous sexual overtones at its arena inside a former J.C. Penney outlet in Villa Park. *Chandler West*

The audience of about 100 erupts into wild cheers.

It's the kind of reception that would be inappropriate for jurors in a courtroom.

But on Saturday afternoons, this ring is Thomas V. Benno's court. And he is the ultimate adjudicator.

Benno, 60, is an attorney on weekdays and Apocalypto on weekends.

Few wrestlers Benno's age can say they started wrestling in their late 50s. And while other attorneys play golf, Benno spends hours in the gym training, weaving storylines for Apocalypto and working to develop a local wrestling federation.

### In fighting shape

It started about four years ago when Benno attended a local

lucha libre fight — Mexican-style wrestling — at the suggestion of a friend.

Benno's daughter, Emma, loved the 2006 comedy "Nacho Libre" starring Jack Black as a luchador wrestler, so it seemed like a fun thing to do together.

Benno was hooked.

He started going to more lucha libre matches and became friends with Carlos Robles, the owner of the Gladiator Aztecs Lucha Libre International (GALLI) league. A few meetings later, Benno became an investor in GALLI, and in late 2012, the business partners created a spinoff league called Fusion Wrestling, a combination of Mexican- and American-style wrestling.

Fusion offers family-friendly

wrestling shows that lack blood, extreme violence, obscenities or gratuitous sexual overtones. Its arena is inside a former J.C. Penney outlet in a mall in Villa Park. The shows include local wrestlers and former professional wrestlers such as Steve Boz, who once wrestled at the highest level in the WWE.

In this theatrical, body-destroying sport, most wrestlers are in retirement by their mid-to-late 30s.

Benno initially thought he would stay on the sidelines. But the temptation was just too strong.

"My midlife crisis was to make a return to the wrestling ring," he said. "Everybody thought I was crazy."

Before his first fight, Benno

changed his diet and spent more than a year in intensive training with fellow wrestler and personal trainer Doug Simmons. A doctor monitored his health, and he lost nearly 50 pounds.

Now, Benno goes to the gym four days a week at 5 a.m. for a 2½-hour workout. Three afternoons a week, he meets Simmons at the ring to go over old moves, develop new ones and work on timing.

Benno does a combination of core and weight training, cardio and training exercises similar to dancers or competitive pair figure skaters.

Today, Benno will tell you that he feels better than he did at 30. He hopes his wrestling will encourage others over age 50 to push themselves physically and try something new.

"I think this shows if you have the proper diet, you have the proper genes and really work at something, that you can do it," he said. "And I'm having a great time."

#### **The jock philosopher**

As a kid growing up in Boston during the golden age of wrestling, Benno became fascinated with the sport. His father was a construction general contractor and often hired wrestlers who also worked as tradesmen.

It was through those connections that Benno met the famous wrestler Walter "Killer" Kowalski, who had an engineering degree and regularly reached out to youth to encourage them to stay in school.

Benno wrestled in high school and later became president of Kowalski's fan club. He followed his mentor's advice and went to college, where he joined Colgate University's wrestling team and played on the third-string developmental squad for the football team.

"I was the jock philosophy major," he said.

After college, Benno started a doctoral degree in political philosophy but didn't finish it. He returned to Boston to train with Kowalski and wrestled in an independent league in the Northeast for a few years in the early 1980s.

When Benno moved to Chicago, he worked as a federal officer for the Treasury Department handling investigations. He later worked as a private investigator specializing in personal-injury cases and did some investigations with Joseph A. Power Jr. of Power, Rogers &



Smith P.C.

Benno was one of the investigators for Power in a case involving the deaths of six of Scott and Janet Willis' children, who were killed after a taillight assembly fell off a semitrailer and damaged the family's van, igniting it into flames.

The case led to a \$100 million settlement, and the truck driver was later connected to the license-for-bribes scandal involving former Gov. George Ryan, who previously served as secretary of state.

#### **Seeking justice**

Wearing a brown tweed suit jacket, Benno walks across the courtroom and leans over to talk to his opposing counsel. As he puts on a deep red tie speckled with muted gold fleurs-de-lis, Benno, who still has a Boston accent, asks the attorney to "be easy with him on cross," referring to his client, Mike Neri, whose second language is English.

Benno, a 1998 graduate of The John Marshall Law School, now handles personal-injury, criminal defense, family law, immigration, contract and tax issues. On this day, he's representing Neri in a breach-of-contract dispute at Cook County Circuit Court's Rolling Meadows courthouse.

Once the trial begins, Benno slowly strides across the courtroom.

He raises his arm and motions back and forth between the judge, plaintiff and Neri, turning

his head and making eye contact with each person as if they were musicians in an invisible orchestra he's conducting. He uses his arms to illustrate the length of plumbing pipes, the depth of pipes underground and inspection reports.

The case ends with Cook County Circuit Judge Sandra Tristano ruling against Neri, but she cuts about \$2,000 from the \$10,800 judgment because she determined the plaintiff bore some responsibility. Benno plans to appeal.

In the courtroom, each step and gesture is deliberate as Benno makes his case to the judge.

It's no different than the calculated moves Apocalypto makes in the wrestling ring.

"It really is about getting justice and protecting the little guy. That's what Apocalypto does, and that's what I try to do in court," Benno said. "It's like Shakespeare said, 'Life is but a stage and men mere actors.' That's a lot more true than people realize."

Prior to a match, Benno goes over the flow of the fight with his opponent. There's initial shouting and shoving, then a gradual progression that sets up various moves in a complicated choreography.

Benno's finishing move is a choke slam he calls "laid to rest," where he picks up his opponent by the throat with one hand, holds him in the air for a few seconds, then slams him down on

his back.

It is preceded by Apocalypto pointing to the sky to draw "powers from up above" and putting on a gray glove with a red letter "A" stitched on it. When the audience sees the "eternity glove" and the lift happening, Apocalypto shouts "laid," and fans respond with "to rest!"

Just like a professional stunt artist's work, all the wrestling moves are choreographed. But the physical impact and risk for serious injury is still real. Wrestlers are trained in how to take hits, give hits and land properly so they don't injure opponents or themselves.

"It's not like memorizing a series of moves and then doing them. That's not it," Benno said. "It's fluid, and you respond to the crowd. And then in most good matches, both opponents improvise as they go."

Apocalypto is a dark, mysterious character who rarely speaks. He is neither good nor bad and is a "protector" akin to Batman, Benno said. He drew inspiration for the character from a variety of sources, including WWE star The Undertaker, the Bible and Darth Vader from "Star Wars."

"I read the Bible a lot, and I've always been fascinated by Revelation and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," he said.

Since a large portion of their audience is children ages 6 to 13,



**Thomas V. Benno (left) psyches himself up backstage before his wrestling match Feb. 22 as he sits with referee Doug Simmons, who also doubles as Benno's trainer, and wrestler Nick Cutler. Benno is a lawyer who handles personal-injury, criminal defense, family law, immigration, contract and tax issues.** *Chandler West*

Benno's 11-year-old daughter, Emma, has become his "creative assistant" and "mini-consultant," Benno said.

She provides feedback on the characters and has helped some of the other wrestlers too, telling them when something is too scary, not scary enough and, in other cases, downright hokey.

"I helped him pick the (theme) song and design the outfit. My mom made it," she said. "He did the rest."

The attorney side of Benno also inspired Apocalypso. He became a lawyer because he wanted to help people, coinciding with Apocalypso's goal to "mete out justice."

Benno takes on many pro bono cases, including immigration and deportation cases for the Consulate General of Mexico in Chicago.

Bryan J. O'Connor of

O'Connor Law Group LLC, which handles plaintiff personal-injury and workers' compensation cases, has known Benno for 30 years. O'Connor said he has a unique, outgoing personality that draws people in.

Benno is of counsel to the law firm and often assists during the investigation stages of cases.

He "is not embarrassed to take chances," O'Connor said.

When they work on cases together, Benno usually handles contact with clients because people love talking to him.

Even with his big personality and a persona like Apocalypso, O'Connor said, Benno is humble, down to earth and goes out of his way to help people.

When O'Connor's wife was ill with cancer in 2011 and the office was shorthanded, Benno stepped in and covered some cases.

"He took phone calls, did all of

this work and never asked for a dime," O'Connor said.

Simmons, the trainer, said Benno has a "big heart." When Simmons didn't have a car, Benno would pick him up and drop him off after workouts.

Benno has also financially helped one wrestler who was about to be evicted from his home, and he is known to take a wrestler out for a meal if he has no money for food.

It's rare to meet an owner of a wrestling company that genuinely cares about each wrestler the way Benno does, Simmons said.

"In the wrestling business, a lot of guys are living off a dream. They'll put all of their money into it," Simmons said. "Tom has helped many of them with their needs."

Mentoring young wrestlers and providing them with advice

and support like a father is one of Benno's favorite things about his extracurricular activity.

"God has a reason for me to be here," Benno said.

#### **Back in the ring**

"Send him to eternity, Apocalypso," someone in the crowd yells.

The audience that attends Fusion wrestling matches is an eclectic mix of blue- and white-collar adults and families with children.

It's as diverse as the wrestlers themselves, whose day jobs range from a doctor, critical-care nurse, logistics and computer systems operator to a restaurateur, detective and federal agent. Among the local leagues, Benno doesn't know of any other attorneys who wrestle.

Benno's wife, Terri, who is a CPA, is still in disbelief about her husband's fan base, which includes some of her clients.

Though not a fan of wrestling — she called it "stupid" — she said it's good for Benno physically and mentally. He and Emma have also developed a camaraderie thanks to the sport.

Just when the crowd thinks Corleone is done, the villain surprises Apocalypso by smacking him in the face with his rope. Using foreign objects in the ring is cheating, and Corleone knows it. So does the crowd, which boos him as Apocalypso lays on the ground.

He doesn't get up — and the referee reluctantly gives the win to Corleone, who does a victory lap and runs backstage.

Apocalypso rises to his feet.

"Strangler! Where is he?"

Apocalypso says in a deep, gravely growl.

"You think you're the man?"

Next time. March 29. No disqualifications, no stipulations — or the loser is carried out on a stretcher."

With that, Apocalypso hops over the ring ropes, grabs his cloak and heads up the ramp.

The grudge match resumes another day.