

Published September 1st, 2021

Gregory Cummins - From Miramonte athlete to Hollywood actor

By Jon Kingdon



Gregory Cummins

Are there more long shot career goals than to try and be a professional athlete or an accomplished actor? For Gregory Cummins, who was a top athlete at Miramonte, his first choice was to be a professional athlete and eventually becoming an actor.

In 1967, Cummins' first time on the stage was as a seventh-grader playing Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol" which he "found fun." Entering Miramonte, all his extracurricular activities were sports-oriented, for a love of the games and for financial reasons. "When my father contracted cancer, (eventually passing away at the age of 71 in 1992), my mother told me that I would need an athletic scholarship to be able to go to college, so I focused on academics and sports," Cummins said. "Our mom, Mary Calverese Cummins, was a saint and a supermom who opened Better Homes Realty in Orinda and I owe her everything. She kept the roof over our heads keeping us in such a great area and my younger

brothers and I learned the value of working hard and how to save money."

Cummins has maintained his contact with Miramonte: "I was so lucky to grow up in Orinda, right on the Moraga border. It was an incredible place. I am on our high school reunion committee and have always enjoyed hearing the stories of my classmates and how so many people have gone on to do so many amazing things."

Coached by Tom Strain at Miramonte, Cummins saw a lot of success on the football field and baseball diamond. In 1973, with Cummins playing safety and punting, the Matadors, with a roster of about 27 players, defeated a much larger Antioch team in the Turkey Bowl. "I was chosen the East Bay's first team punter due to my leg strength and the ability to make the coffin corner kicks," Cummins said. "This led to the University of California at Berkeley offering me an athletic scholarship."

In baseball, Cummins played shortstop, being named first team all-league three times earning scholarship offers from Pacific and San Jose State. The Oakland A's contacted Cummins, asking if they drafted him in the 10th round would he pass on college but that was not high enough in the draft for Cummins, so he went to Cal to punt for the football team and play baseball in the spring.

As a theater arts major, Cummins took classes in drama, acting, playwriting, lighting, set building and stage design: "I was firmly set on ultimately becoming an actor."

After punting for Cal his first two years, Cummins had a falling out with his coach for wanting to play baseball in the spring and transferred to the University of Hawaii where he was coached by Dick Tomey. "I led the nation in net punting, and I was acting a lot," Cummins said. "Coach Tomey was very supportive of my theatre arts major. He let me out of spring ball because I had the lead in 'As You Like It.'"

Despite punting for top numbers, circumstances worked against Cummins' goal to kick in the NFL. "In 1979, Green Bay ranked me as their top punter and offered me a contract but my agent urged me to hold out which I regret to this day," Cummins said. "The next year, I signed with the San Diego Chargers but right before training camp, I tore my thigh muscle from the knee to the hip which ended my dreams of an NFL career."

Needing only a few more credits, Cummins ultimately received his degree from Cal and entered the master's program in acting at UCLA. "That was the best decision of my life for acting," Cummins said. "That really gave me the tools that have led up to, at this point, a 36-year career. From that moment on, I saw myself as a professional and I soaked up every ounce of knowledge at UCLA so I could compete. I did what I did with sports - I put my nose to the grindstone, and I worked harder than anybody else, improving my skills. I don't believe I would have had my career had I not gotten that degree."

Cummins has acted in movies like "Batman Returns," "Cliffhanger" and "The Italian Job" while also appearing on TV shows like "Bosch," "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia," "Hunter," "Walker, Texas Ranger," "Diagnosis Murder," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Baywatch," and "Bones" among many others, appearing in over 90 different titles. "Right now, I have 12 different pictures of myself with different looks - European, Upper Class, Low Class, Russian, Red Neck, Neo Nazi, Cop and FBI photos and a casual picture with the open suit," Cummins said.

In school, all of Cummins training was for the theatre, which laid the foundation for his television and movie career. "They made me stretch myself and break my boundaries and play all these different types of characters which was different from the way I was in real life," Cummins said. "That's what gave me the ability to play a wide range of characters and to be able to use a wide range of accents. It's allowed me to just keep working."

As much as Cummins enjoyed performing on stage, he opted to pursue roles in television and the movies: "I was very happy acting on stage. Unfortunately, three quarters of the shows on Broadway and throughout the nation are musicals. I could sing but I wasn't a great singer. I love the theatre but moving

into TV and film was the only way I could make a living."

To build up his resume, Cummins took the roles where he could find them. "I started out appearing in about eight or nine non-union films that were advertised locally," Cummins said. "In my first film, 'Hack-o-Lantern,' I wasn't paid but I began creating a demo reel with that and the other films like 'Dead End City,' 'Deadly Addiction' and 'Action USA' to show what I could do and how versatile I was. My first union film was 'W.B., Blue and the Bean' with David Hasselhoff and Linda Blair. After that, I got myself an agent and then I started working my way up."

Cummins' almost chameleonlike ability to play so many roles evolved from his academic training in Shakespearean, Greek, French Restoration, classical theatre and comedies. "I would create a character through parts of myself, partly through things that have happened in my life and in my personality, taking pieces of myself when I would play a bad guy threatening to kill somebody. Everything changes by what I'm thinking inside, and it just comes out differently once I would find the character and that's just the way it works for me."

At 6'4", Cummins was not what casting directors were looking for in the lead's sidekick. "They don't want the star to look small," Cummins said. "I realized that I had to grow out my hair and beard to start playing bad guys. It's okay for the bad guys to be taller because the star of the show can overcome you and it means something."

When called upon to play a Colombian drug lord, Cummins, who is fluent in Spanish, learned to speak with a Colombian accent. When up for a role as a Montreal hockey player, he went right to the source: "I called an operator in Montreal and explained that I was an actor auditioning for a part of someone who speaks with a French-Canadian accent, and I got her to repeat some sentences that I recorded to learn the vocal sounds and accents. You do anything you can do to give yourself an edge."

Cummins had the look of the bad guys down so well it became a daily thing for him to be pulled over by a policeman on his way to work. "With my long hair down to the shoulders, the goatee down to the jawline, looking like a biker, redneck or psycho killer, I would seem familiar to them," Cummins said. "I kept my license right on the dashboard and would then laugh and pull out my portfolio and show my head shots."

Cummins just finished up a seven-year run with the show "Bosch," playing the role of Detective "Crate" Moore on Amazon that was met with universal praise. After playing so many bad guys and extreme characters, Cummins found the role came naturally to him. "The role of Crate is closer to the way I am in real life than in any other role I ever played," Cummins said. "I don't even feel like I'm acting on the show."

Cummins' partner on "Bosch" was another "actor's actor," Troy Evans who plays Detective "Barrell" Johnson and the pairing was a natural. "We're both seasoned actors that have worked for a long time and it just clicked right off the bat and that increased the more we worked with each other," Cummins said. "We did the first scene in front of everyone and the whole crew cracked up and was applauding and Titus Welliver (Bosch) yelled out 'Spinoff.'"

Though Cummins did miss out on an NFL career, he has the medical profile of a professional athlete, amassing numerous injuries, after often performing his own stunts. "With the head whipping, falling back over tables, taking the impact, and slamming against things, you do it enough times, you get a lot of impact injuries," Cummins said. "Looking at an X-ray taken of my back, the doctor told me that he had never seen so much scar tissue from the top of the neck to the bottom lumbar of the spine on one person."

Cummins is currently looking for his next role but is also preparing for his post-acting career, having written a couple of screenplays. "I plan on making my own film," Cummins said. "I'll pull some of the really talented people that I worked with over the years to do the filming, cinematography, editing and sound. I've learned over time what you need to have a film that's going to be successful. My goal is to make a quality product that means something to me."

What does it take to be a successful actor? For Cummins, it's three things: 1/3 talent, 1/3 fortitude and 1/3 being a nice person. Lacking any of the three and you likely won't make it. The talent must be developed. Not being a nice person can cost an actor roles no matter how talented they might be. The fortitude is necessary due to the number of unsuccessful auditions you go to.

"You can't beat yourself up when you don't get the role," Cummins said. "You just have to work hard and think positively. That's what a winner does - overcoming obstacles."



Gregory Cummins at Miramonte Photos provided

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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