

The Bullwhip

Written by Anthony De Longis
Photos courtesy of Anthony De Longis

The Ultimate Flexible Weapon

The explosive, gunshot crack of a whip slicing through the air to strike or ensnare is something you never forget. I grew up on Westerns, and my love for the genre has never abated. Western films and television taught the timeless values of honor, integrity, responsibility for your actions and loyalty to friends. Western heroes said what they meant and their word was their bond. Two of my favorite heroes were Zorro and Lash La Rue. They brought a little extra style to the justice they dispensed as, like the long arm of the law, their whips sliced through the air to envelop the evildoers and drag them to their just rewards.

Little did I realize how those early entertainments would come full circle. I've been a professional actor, fight director, sword master, weapons specialist and teacher for over three decades. I've spent the last twenty years developing and performing my own distinctive methods for using the whip for film, television and in my martial arts studies. The whip is the ultimate flexible weapon, combining precision, power and virtually unlimited versatility in one explosive package.

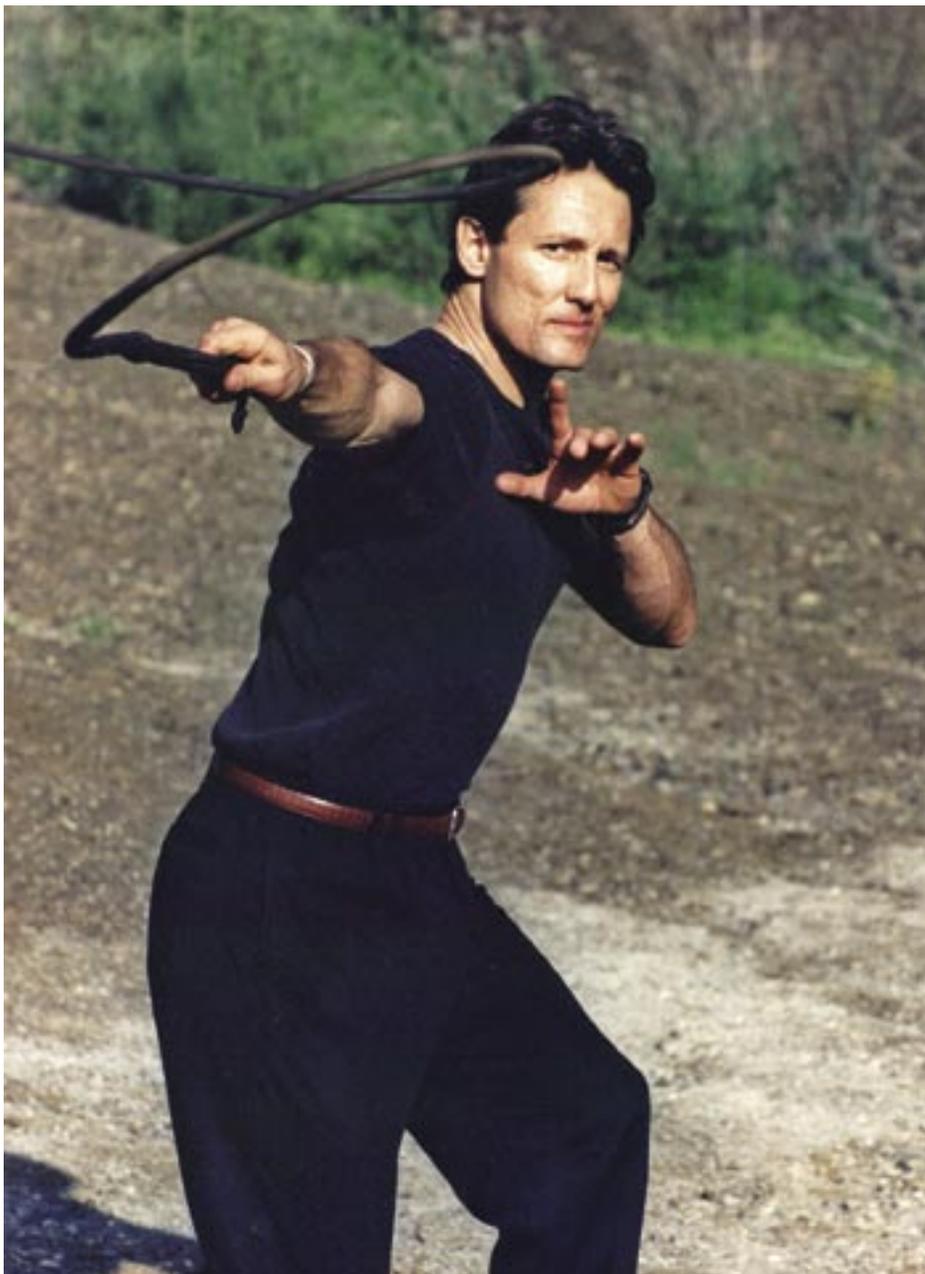
Hollywood has only begun to tap the potential this extraordinary tool can offer. Stunt coordinators who are looking for something truly different, stylish and devastatingly effective can have it all with the bullwhip. Westerns, historical period pieces and even modern action films can all benefit from the dynamic action a whip can offer.

A Little History

The whip is one of civilized man's oldest and most versatile tools. It is also his first supersonic weapon, but more on that later. Images dating back to 3000 BC, in both the

Chinese and Egyptian cultures, illustrate whips being used to help man control and motivate a variety of animals—both wild and domestic. We know that although a

controlled strike of the whip could be applied when necessary, it was rarely used. The explosive "crack" of the whip was sufficient to herd the cattle or drive a working



Anthony's rolling style carves a "Z" for Zorro.



Anthony whip training his horse Latigo in the ocean at Pismo Beach.

team, stirring their spirits and urging them to work together as one.

Whips of different styles, construction and materials have developed over the centuries in almost every culture to suit the specialized demands of a wide variety of rigorous, demanding jobs. In Europe and America, the coach or buggy whip moved elegant carriages and overland stages, the long and heavy thong of the “bullwhacker” guided mule trains and the pioneers’ oxen across the prairies, and the short dog quirt still drives sled teams in the frozen wastes. These are but a few of the form-to-function variations in the evolution of specialty whips.

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Australia is the world’s last continuously functioning whip culture. Australian cowboys or *ringers* refined this ancient tool to meet the all-weather rigors of a tough job. Fast, light and very powerful, the stock whip is the tool of choice for working cattle and horses in the land “down under.”

How It Works

When the whip is thrown, energy travels through the arm and fingers into the handle and out the tip of the whip. Due to the whip’s continuous, tapered construction, momentum increases as the whip rolls out, forcing that energy into an increasingly smaller area. A good whip multiplies all the

energy introduced into it, so you must be very specific and selective or the whip will give you an ungentle reminder and attitude adjustment. (A word of warning: you can’t outrun the pain, so I suggest you avoid it.) This accelerating circle of energy concentrates at the end of the cracker, and produces a sonic explosion when the tip of the whip “hairpins.” The speed of sound is approximately 1,088 feet per second. The whip can achieve velocities up to 1,400 feet per second! Literally “faster than a speeding bullet,” the tip of the whip travels over 750 miles per hour, delivering a powerful blow to anything it impacts, easily cutting through flesh and even breaking bones.

Initially the whip is intimidating and not without risk. You don’t want to hit anyone or anything by accident, especially yourself. Designed to respond to your every signal, the whip deserves respect and demands concentration. But you don’t have to be afraid, just rigorous in your practice and performance, especially when surrounded by the chaos of a movie set.

Alignment Is the Key

Most whip artists focus on throwing the tip of the whip. It’s hard and fast and it produces a big bang. I have a different agenda, especially for film or stage work. First, I want to use as little effort as possible, so I stay absolutely relaxed. Next, I want to slow the motion of the whip so the camera can catch the action and the audience can better appreciate the story the whip is telling. The whip, like good dialogue, becomes a tool to articulate and reveal the character being created. Finally, because I am always working with a partner, and usually around a lot of people in tight quarters, I want a safety protocol that I *know* I can count on.

My long-time friend and partner, director Ed Douglas, and I had been working on a style that would slow the motion of the whip for an audience. Yanking the whip across frame just to produce a big noise no longer satisfied us. What we came up with was simplicity itself. We discovered that if we turned our palm downward, the body of the whip curled *outside* of the hand and body, and *formed a loop on top of the handle* instead of hanging underneath it in the traditional manner. By employing this simple adjustment, the critical alignment loop formed much earlier in the throw and the whip required much less effort to crack because it could use its own structural alignment to produce the energy more efficiently. Water runs down hill. Why force



Training Andalusian stallion “Chico” for *The Queen of Swords*.

water uphill just to have it run back down that same hill?

With our method, the whip always travels along parallel lines or “railroad tracks” outside your hand and body. This is the key to *never* hitting yourself, your surroundings or your partner, a simple but effective safety protocol. Efficiency, safety and consistency—those are the advantages to our system. It was not until later that some people, often quite vehemently, told me that I was doing it all wrong. Too late. The technique made sense to me, and it worked under conditions both optimal and extreme. And it works just as dependably for the actors and stunt performers I coach.

I trained and choreographed Michelle Pfeiffer with the bullwhip for her role as Catwoman in *Batman Returns*. As you might well imagine, there are few places more unfavorable to accurately throwing a whip than a crowded movie set interior. We wanted to create a new style for Michelle that would reflect the complexity of her character: alluring, hypnotic and sensual,



Coaching Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman on the rooftops.

combining the feline grace of a jungle cat with its danger and awesome striking power.

Michelle performed all of her own whip action, including wrapping Christopher Walken around the neck on her first day of work. She developed an impressive array of skills with the whip, taming “The Bat” with both chair and whip, capturing the Ice Princess and battling Batman on rooftops and in the Penguin’s lair. Michelle’s dedication and practice allowed us to walk onto the set, choreograph on the spot, rehearse the action once for camera, then shoot it without cuts or inserts. These same techniques are also deadly accurate and devastatingly effective when applied in combat.

Combative Applications

The whip is a devastatingly effective *long range* projectile weapon, which allows you to attack or disarm an opponent far beyond his kicking and punching range. The speed of the whip allows it to slice through exposed flesh

like a knife. Strikes can be thrown from any angle, singly or in multiple combinations of diagonal, vertical and horizontal attacks delivered from either side of the body. Underhand, overhead, sidearm and backhand throws can be unleashed in baffling combinations that are impossible to predict or defend against. With a whip, you can fend off a number of adversaries, keeping them out of range and allowing you time to formulate effective countermeasures to reduce their numbers. It is also possible to envelop the limbs of an opponent from this extended distance, wrapping the end around the arm or throat and yanking him off balance. Similarly, a wrap around the knees or ankles can bind the legs together, making it easy to pull your adversary to the ground. Slashing an adversary’s leg through heavy clothing or capturing his supporting leg during an attempted kick is also extremely effective.

During my whip demo at the Cold Steel Challenge this year, I dressed my assistants, Sifu James Houston and sword instructor, Jason Heck—both very experienced fighters—in thick leather padding, body armor and motorcycle helmets so that I could fully illustrate the whip’s actual speed and true power. We showed the audience of martial artists and skeptics how diverse, illusive and effective the whip can be with applications at all ranges—long, medium and close up



Practicing double whips on the set of *Into the West*.



Anthony severs a flower from Dr. Mary De Longis's hands during their Light Horseman show.

and personal. Sifu James, an *aiji-jitsu* expert, took some terrific throws from a variety of different wraps and envelopments that I applied to counter both his kicking and punching attacks. I also armed both men with knives and had them try as hard as they could to get to me from opposite directions. They had no chance. We made believers out of the entire audience.

For *mid-range techniques*, a simple flip of the wrist allows you to halve the whip and produce blows similar to swinging a doubled rope or length of hose with the added

advantage of an open loop to easily ensnare neck, limbs or torso at will. Slashes, parries and deflections with this shortened length can supplement kicks, knees, elbows and other techniques as you close the distance to throw your opponent or apply an improvised garrote.

At *close range* the handle of the whip works like a baton, allowing you to parry, deflect and administer strikes. Punches can be intercepted to "defang the snake" in mid-flight. The end of the handle is readily utilized to thrust or stab. The weighted handle can also

be thrown like a mace or spear and pulled back after contact, the recoil being easily re-directed to envelop the legs and yank your opponent off his feet before delivering a crushing blow to your chosen target of opportunity. If the grip is further shortened, the result is a short, fast, flexible blackjack. The whip then performs like a *nunchaku*, lashing out with brutal power and returning to a position of rest under your arm in preparation for the next assault.

Any martial art you've studied will find powerful voice and action through the whip. If you know Filipino Kali, Karate or Kung Fu or even Western fencing and boxing, the whip can be applied to your current knowledge to show you new ways to employ your skills. If you listen, the whip will whisper its secrets. The whip taught me, it can do the same for you. My methods are well documented in Tom Meadows' excellent new book *The Filipino Fighting Whip* from Paladin Press. Tom's own highly effective combat whip techniques are included as well. I highly recommend the book.

Of course, everything combative that I've described can be recreated safely by a skilled stunt coordinator, his team and an experienced whip master. We're in the business of creating exciting illusions. The whip is a powerfully expressive tool. Let's make magic. 



Anthony's signature whip roll.



Anthony De Longis recently performed the climactic fight with Jet Li in Fearless, staged flashback action for Walter Scott in Second-hand Lions and was co-stunt coordinator for The Queen of Swords. He trained the whip fighters for The Rundown and Underworld and both Angelica Huston and Ellen Barkin with the whip for Buffalo Girls and Wild Bill. Anthony also co-starred twice on Highlander, The Series.

For more information visit www.delongis.com. Anthony can also be reached through Joni's Stunt Service or directly at 818-422-8664.