

GUNS & GEAR



THE BULLWHIP A Cowboy Classic

By Anthony "Whipsnake" De Longis, SASS #3000

I grew up on Westerns and my love for the genre has never abated. Western films and television shows delivered much more than just superb entertainment. Anthony Quinn said, "It is the classical form for people with dreams." They taught "cowboy" truths and timeless values. Honor, integrity, responsibility for your actions, loyalty to a friend. Our heroes said what they meant, and their word was their bond. Not a bad code to live by. I am reminded of this rich legacy every time I don my period duds, grab my shootin' irons, and join friends, old and new, at any SASS or CMSA event. These "dated" values are inherent in our sport and embodied by "the Spirit of the Game."

Two of my favorite western characters were Zorro and Lash La Rue. They brought a little extra style to the justice they dispensed. I was entranced by the sight and sound of their bullwhips slicing through the air



By rolling the whip above the handle, I know the whip always passes above or outside any target I've selected. It will pass beyond my partner, crack harmlessly then return to gently envelop the limb or torso, its energy expended harmlessly.

to disarm the bad guy with a crack like thunder. The whip, like the long arm of the law, enveloped the evil doer in its coils and dragged him to his just rewards. I wanted a whip so I could be just like them. My parents thought I was nuts and bought me a Davy Crockett outfit instead. Fortunately, good dreams don't die, there are just more twists in the trail.

I got my first whip in 1982. It was a crude affair but good enough to get started. In 1994, several thousand cracks and a few upgrades to my whip arsenal later, my mate, Colin "Taipan," Dangaard, SASS #6379, and I created our mounted performance team, "The Light Horsemen." We wanted to honor his great uncle Jack who survived the charge at Beersheba in 1917 and have a bit of fun while supporting our favorite sport, Cowboy Action Shooting™. We've performed at END of TRAIL ever since with bullwhips, cavalry sabres, and lances. This year we're joined by Dr. Mary, "Cajun Fire," Gallien, SASS #22314.

A Little Whip History

The whip, in one form or another, is one of civilized man's oldest tools. Pictures dating to 3000 BC in both the Chinese and Egyptian cultures illustrate whips helping man control and motivate a variety of animals, both wild and domestic. It is the first man-made object to break the sound barrier. Although a controlled strike could be applied when necessary, it was rarely used. The explosive "crack" of the whip was sufficient to herd stock or drive a working team, stirring their spirits and urging them to work together as one. The same holds true today. Ask



We discovered that if we turned our palm downward, the whip curled outside of our hand and formed a loop on top of the handle instead of hanging beneath it. The critical alignment loop was formed much earlier in the throw. The whip could roll along itself almost its entire length producing more energy with much less effort.

any rancher who has to move stock with a minimum of manpower. A man with a whip can do four times the work with half the effort.

Whips of different styles, construction, and materials developed in almost every culture to suit the specialized demands of a variety of rigorous jobs. In America, the long heavy thong of the "bullwhacker" urged the pioneer's oxen across vast frontiers to the promise of a new life. The coach whip guided stage teams and mule trains filled with goods. Towns became cities and buggy whips drove the carts and carriages. Dog quirts still exhort sled teams across the frozen wastes of Alaska. These are but a few of the form-to-function variations in the evolution of specialty whips to help man perform his chores more

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efficiently and with less effort.

Since the internal combustion engine eclipsed conventional horsepower, the whip has lost much of its prominence as an everyday working tool. Travel to Australia and you get some idea of the role the whip once played in this country. Australia is the world's last continuously functioning whip culture. The demand for a durable, consistently high quality product makes Australian whips arguably the best in the world. Australian cowboys, called "Ringers" or "Jackaroos" refined this ancient tool to meet the all weather rigors of a tough job. The Australian stock whip, or "horseman's whip," attaches the braided body of the whip to a long handle by means of a swivel leather knot. The longer handle gives the horseman more distance from the body of the animal and improves efficiency when mounted. Fast, light, and very powerful, the stock whip is the tool of choice for the man working cattle and horses in the land "down under."

I've designed a slightly longer handle for my own bullwhips that makes the figures I throw easy and accurate from the ground and when mounted atop a galloping horse. My riding partner and whip supplier, Colin Dangaard of the Australian Stock Saddle Company, was a former "Ringer" in his native Queensland and favored a stock whip while chasing

bulls from horseback. I prefer a bullwhip with its unbroken connection from handle to tip, but the basic action is the same for both.

Whip Construction

The best American whips used to be made from deer hide. The strength and durability of the skins allowed the master craftsman to cut his strips of hide very thin. This meant the braided body of the whip could be significantly tighter and the action of the finished whip faster and much more precise. Kangaroo has similar qualities of toughness and durability and the best whips are made from the hides of these animals.

For its superb balance, ease in handling and the beauty of its action, I favor a twelve plait Australian bullwhip constructed by master craftsman Terry Jacka, of Queensland, Australia. An inner braided core is wrapped with a smoothing bolster of thin leather. Twelve individual strands attach at the handle and follow a spiral path around the inner layers, tapering progressively to an attached single strand of leather called the "fall." This whip inside-of-a-whip construction allows internal stretch and compression without damage during the considerable stresses that occur during the action of every throw. Attached to the end of the fall is the "cracker." This is where the greatest stress and wear occurs and you want something cheap and easy to replace.

Mechanics of the Throw

One of the pleasures of the whip is also one of its greatest frustrations. The whip always does exactly what you tell it to do. If it's not doing what you want it to do, it's always pilot error. Your message must be simple and



I have tremendous accuracy and confidence and can use as much or as little power as I choose. The system works from every angle including verticals, diagonals, and horizontals. I can throw the whip on either side of my body, with either hand or both, and I know the technique will work every time.

uncluttered or the whip will not respond in the desired manner. If you are impatient and quick-tempered, the whip will urge you to modify your behavior with frequent and painful reminders. It's always happy to give you an attitude adjustment. If you listen, the whip will whisper its secrets.

When the whip is thrown, the energy travels through the arm and fingers into the handle and out the tip of the whip. A good whip multiplies all energy introduced to it. Momentum

increases as the whip rolls out, forcing that energy into an increasingly smaller area due to the continuous tapering construction. This accelerating buildup is concentrated at the end of the cracker and produces a sonic explosion when the tip of the whip "hairpins." This process is called "the acceleration of kinetic energy."

The speed of sound is approximately 1,088 feet per second at sea level. The whip "cracks" because the accumulated energy concentrated in the tip has exceeded the speed of sound, often achieving velocities up to 1,400 feet per second. Literally, "faster than a speeding bullet," the tip of the whip travels over 700 miles per hour and can deliver a powerful blow to anything it impacts, easily cutting through flesh and even breaking bones. There is an inherent responsibility in the use of such force. Obviously, you don't want to hit anything by accident, especially yourself. Designed to respond and magnify your every signal, it deserves respect and demands concentration.

A Simple Discovery

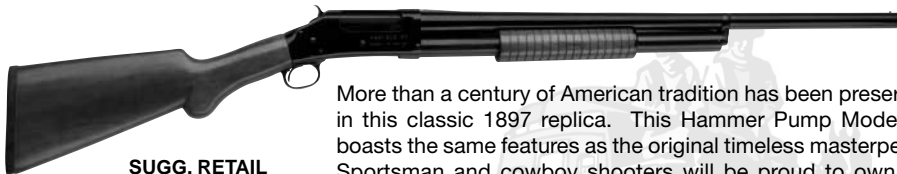
Pick up the whip by its handle and gravity will form the braided body into an oval or inverted "U" shape. Remember, the whip works due to the "acceleration of kinetic energy." When you throw a whip, it aligns with its own structure and forms a loop. This helps the whip to run faster until it ultimately cracks. Usually this alignment doesn't happen until the last half of the whip because of this standard

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method of holding utilized by most practitioners.

My first martial art was fencing. I was blessed to study with one of the truly great teachers of the sword, Maestro Ralph Faulkner, "the Sword Master to the Stars," for over a dozen years. Years of training with another martial arts great, Guro Dan Inosanto, followed. When I began whip cracking, I was a full-fledged member of the "crank-it-hard and make-it-loud" crowd. I soon realized I was ignoring one of the basic truths both teachers had tried to impart. DO LESS! Muscling the whip and forcing it to crack was way too much work.

I fly in the face of conventional whip technique. I'm self-taught, or more accurately, the whip itself taught me how to work more effortlessly and efficiently. My long time friend and directing partner, Ed Douglas, and I had been working on a style that would extend and prolong the action so the audience could better appreciate the elegance of the whip as well as the skill of the practitioner. Yanking the whip across frame just to produce a big noise no longer satisfied us. What we came up with is simplicity itself.

We discovered that if we turned our palm downward, the whip curled outside of our hand and formed a loop on top of the handle instead of hanging beneath it. The critical alignment loop was formed much earlier in the throw. The whip could roll along itself almost its entire length producing more energy with much less effort. Consider for a moment. Water runs down hill. Why push water up hill so it can run back down that same hill? That's the simple advantage to our system. Ease, efficiency, and consistency.

Here's another way to think about it. Most whip artists focus on throwing the tip of the whip. It's hard and fast, and it produces a big bang. They want speed and they want accuracy, and the standard throw gives them both. They get the loud noise, and they cut their targets with great power and gusto. When I throw the whip, especially for film or stage work I want

to stay as relaxed as possible. Because I'm usually working with a partner, usually around a lot of people in tight quarters, I need a safety protocol upon which I know I can count. Finally, I want to slow down the action of the whip so the audience can appreciate the story I'm telling. The whip becomes a tool to reveal aspects of the character I'm playing.

In the rolling style I've developed, we play "follow the handle," instead of "throw the tip." The tip will arrive on target eventually anyway. By rolling the whip above the handle, I know the whip always passes above or outside any target I've selected. It will pass beyond my partner, crack harmlessly then return to gently envelop the limb or torso, its energy expended harmlessly. I have tremendous accuracy and confidence and can use as much or as little power as I choose. The system works from every angle including verticals, diagonals, and horizontals. I can throw the whip on either side of my body, with either hand or both, and I know the technique will work every time.

You be the judge. Explore both methods and see what works best for you. You want to add something challenging and fun to your Old West arsenal? Try the bullwhip!

If you'd like a little help, check out our step-by-step teaching video entitled "Whip Cracking With The Masters, Vol. 1." For details, check out my web site at www.delongis.com.

(Anthony "Whipsnake" De Longis, SASS & CMSA #3000 has been a member of SASS since 1993. He was Sword Master for the new film *SECOND HAND LIONS* with Robert Duvall and Michael Caine and Whip Master for *HELLDORADO*, starring "The Rock." He whip trained and choreographed Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman and Anjelica Huston and Ellen Barkin for *BUFFALO GIRLS & WILD BILL*. He was Coordinator and Sword and Whip Master for the action series, *THE QUEEN OF SWORDS*, and has guest starred on numerous television shows including *STAR TREK-VOYAGER* and *HIGHLANDER: the Series*.)

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