

# The Art Of The

# Elegant Whip

## Let The Whip Do The Work

BY ANTHONY DE LONGIS

**T**he sound of a bullwhip slicing through the air to strike or envelop a selected target with its distinctive gunshot crack is something you never forget! It is especially satisfying when you are the one guiding and controlling this extraordinary device. I invite you to explore the mysteries of the whip and discover the growth in energy sensitivity and alignment awareness the whip can offer your own martial studies.

### A LITTLE HISTORY

The whip, in one form or another, is one of civilized man's oldest tools. Images dating back 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.

Although a controlled strike 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 team, stirring their spirits and urging them to work together as one. The same holds true today. Ask any rancher who has to move livestock 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 wide variety of rigorous, demanding jobs. The coach or buggy whip moved carriages and stages, the long and heavy thong whip of the "bull-

whacker" guided 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.

Australia is the world's last continuously functioning whip culture. Their 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 increases the distance from the working end of the whip and the body of the horse, which makes it far more efficient for mounted use. It also allows you to work both sides of the animal in single actions or multiple cracks with less danger of hitting or becoming entangled in your own mount's rear feet or tail.

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." In America, before the combustion engine replaced conventional horsepower, the best whips were 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.



## CONSTRUCTION

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. Terry wraps an inner braided core 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 which 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; you want something cheap and easy to replace.

With the help of my friend and riding partner, Colin Dangaard of the *Australian Stock Saddle Company*, I have designed a slightly longer handle for my own bullwhips. This makes the figures I throw easy and accurate from either a standing position, or while mounted atop a galloping horse. (In 1994, Colin and I created our mounted cavalry team, *The Light Horsemen*. We continue to perform at the gallop with bullwhips, cavalry sabres, lances and pistols.)

## HOW IT WORKS

Colin was a 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. The basic action is the same for both.

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 the energy introduced into it. Due to the continuous taper, momentum increases as the whip rolls out, forcing that energy into an increasingly smaller area. 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. 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! The whip was the first man-made tool to break the sound barrier. Literally, "faster than a speeding bullet," the tip of the whip travels over 700 miles per hour, delivering 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.

Initially the whip is intimidating and not without personal risk. Obviously, you do not want to hit anyone or anything by accident, especially yourself. Designed to respond to your every signal, it deserves respect and demands concentration.

## THE GRIP

The whip must connect seamlessly to the rest of your body. Training with the whip can guide your body to a richer understanding of any discipline requiring connected and fluid body movement. By heightening both sensitivity and awareness, it becomes the connective tissue to bind all the parts into a dynamic and cohesive whole. Remember, the whip is specifically constructed to magnify

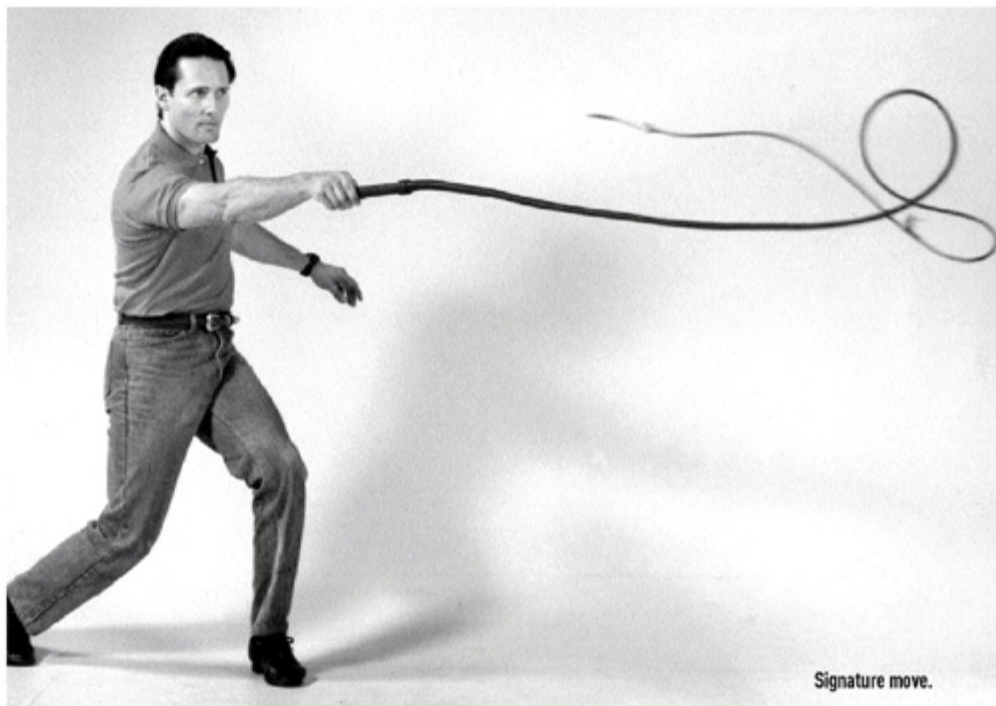
any and all energy introduced by the practitioner. Conflicting signals and unfocused energy produce alarmingly uncontrolled results. So, simplify, be specific and allow the whip to do the work. It can be a powerful ally or a painful adversary. (If you've ever trained with *nunchakus*, you know exactly what I mean.) The choice is yours.

I like to rest the large ball at the end of the handle in the palm of my hand, wrapping my fingers around the handle to form a pivoting "ball-and-socket" joint. My grip is firm and flexible yet relaxed.

Experiment by moving the handle around until you find what *feels* right for you. Feeling comfortable is the first step to the whip becoming a fluid and comfortable extension of your arm. If you grab it in your fist like a club, you will strangle the action and your whip will not perform effectively.

## YOU ARE DOING IT ALL WRONG!

You have to be either a little crazy or a big showoff if you want to become skillful with a whip. It is a commitment, and you have to mean it. The whip does not take well to dilettantes. Getting good takes time and *lots* of practice, (like most things that are worth learning).



Signature move.

The first time I saw a whip, I thought it was the most theatrical thing I had ever seen. I *had* to learn how to do that. But the cost of lessons was beyond my grasp; it would be another two years before I could start to make my dream a reality. I got my first whip in 1982. It was a crude affair, an eight plait cowhide whip with a swivel handle. However, it was good enough to make a beginning. In those days I was a full-fledged member of the mighty muscle make-it-crack crowd.

I have been a student of the Martial Arts since college. My first and longest field of study is fencing. I was blessed to work with one of the greatest teachers of the sword, Master Ralph Faulkner, "the Sword Master to the Stars," for over a dozen years. (I invite you to read my previous article entitled *Fencing, the Martial Art of the Western World*; which appeared in the first issue of *Martial Arts Insider*.) Years of training with Martial Arts great Guro Dan Inosanto followed. Eventually, I realized that I was ignoring one of the basic truths that both my instructors had tried to teach me: "*do less!*"

Forcing the whip to crack was counterproductive and a lot of





Set height, angle palm up



Palm vertical, form the loop

work. There had to be an easier more efficient way. I set out to find it. Before we go any further, I should confess: I fly in the face of conventional whip technique. I am self taught, or more accurately, the whip was the one who taught me how to work more effortlessly and efficiently. It was not until later that some people, sometimes quite vehemently, told me that what I was doing was all wrong. By then it was too late. My technique made sense to me, and more importantly, it worked—consistently and repeatedly under conditions both optimal and difficult. There are few places more unfavorable to accurately throw a whip than a crowded movie set interior; unless, it is an exterior location with the vagaries of wind, wet weather (rain, snow and mud) and unusual flora (forest, jungle and desert—all of which want to grab and tangle your whip). These are nonetheless the conditions under which I tested and refined my techniques. They always worked when I needed them most. They have stood the test of time for twenty years, both on the ground and on horseback, cutting targets and doing delicate work with a partner.

## ALIGNMENT IS THE KEY

I trained and choreographed Michelle Pfeiffer with the bullwhip for *Batman Returns*. 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 bullwhip, 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, then shoot it. Michelle credited my contribution to her character's arsenal on *Entertainment Tonight*: "Anthony was a great teacher. I can't imagine, I mean I really can't imagine Catwoman without the whip, and without Anthony's whip."

I wanted to create a style for Michelle that would reflect the complexity of her character; alluring, hypnotic and sensual, combining feline grace with the awesome striking power of a jungle cat. My long time friend and partner, director Ed Douglas, and I had been working on a style that would slow down the motion of the whip for the camera. We wanted to extend and prolong the *roll* so the audience could see and appreciate the beauty and 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. Ed and I spent many hours experimenting with and adjusting the technique. What we came up with was simplicity itself.

Pick up a whip by the handle and gravity will form the braided body into an oval or inverted "U" shape. Remember, the reason the whip works is due to the "acceleration of kinetic energy." When you throw a whip, it aligns with its own structure forming a loop. This helps the whip to run faster and ultimately crack. When the standard method of

gripping the handle is utilized, it is normal for this alignment to happen in the final half of the length of the whip.

Ed and I started by holding the whip in the "usual" way. We discovered that if we then turned our palms until they faced downward, the body of the whip curled *outside* of our hands, forming the loop on top of the handle instead of hanging underneath it. By employing this simple adjustment, we were able to form the critical alignment loop much earlier in the throw. The whip required much less energy to produce the crack because it could take advantage of its own structural alignment to produce energy sooner and more efficiently.

Also, by forming the loop earlier, the whip could roll along itself almost its entire length to produce even more energy without any additional effort. Consider for a moment; water runs down hill. Why push water up hill so that it can run back down that same hill? That's the simple advantage to our system. Ease efficiency and consistency.

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

I have a different agenda when I throw the whip, especially for film or stage work. I want to use as little effort as I can, so I stay as relaxed as possible. Because I am always working with a partner, and usually around a lot of people in tight quarters, I need a safety protocol that I know I can count on. Finally, I want to extend the motion and slow down the action of the whip so that the audience can appreciate the story I am telling. The whip, like good prose, becomes a tool to articulate and reveal the character I am 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 of any target I select. 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 with this method. I also like the fact that I 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. I know the technique will work, and work every time.

You be the judge. Explore both methods and see which works best for you.

## GETTING STARTED

The first exercise is to observe how a whip runs out. The universal mistake made by beginners is to snap the whip like a wet towel in order to achieve that all-satisfying noise. Flicking the wrist and arm will produce a powerful buildup of energy, but it directs that same





Palm down, launch the loop.



The rolling diagonal.

force right back into your own face. **DO NOT DO THIS, EVER!** Learn to extend the whip to its fullest length before allowing it to crack. This keeps you safe and significantly increases your visual dynamic.

## EXERCISE #1

A safety protocol is important before proceeding. Start by drawing two parallel lines on the ground. I call these the "railroad tracks." They create a safety wall between your body and the exploding tip of the whip. Align the whip behind you but on the outside of the track from where you are standing. The whip is now behind and beside you. This relationship is the "secret" to *never hitting yourself!* You and the whip move in separate but parallel universes. Your body is never lined up between the whip and its intended target.

Place the knee closest to your side of the track on the ground, pointing your chest and hips at your chosen target. The whip is stretched out behind you on its own side of the track—aimed in the direction of its intended flight. It is vital that you always chose a target, real or imagined, to give direction and focus to your throw.

Your palm is facing up and the ball of the handle rests easily in your hand. In a smooth gentle motion roll the palm forward and down. Align the whip so that it follows the handle, rolling along itself to full extension while remaining on its own side of the track.

Your palm is now turned down with the whip stretched in front of you. Reverse the process by rolling the palm up to face the sky and watch the whip roll along itself until it is again stretched behind you at its full length. Remember to follow the handle. Be warned, this is not easy!

The challenge is to align the whip on its vertical axis so that it rolls as precisely along its own length as possible. Experiment using as little energy as possible and notice how it accelerates the entire length of the whip. It is trying to crack for you. Feel how it *wants* to do all the work. *Let it!*

Aligning the whip so that it rolls on itself guarantees the most efficient build up and focus of energy, producing dependable accuracy and consistent performance. This develops confidence and promotes a sensitivity to the *feel* of the whip. There is a second important benefit to allowing the whip to do the work for you. Aligning the whip along its own length with every throw keeps the exploding tip as far away from you as possible.

## IT'S ALWAYS PILOT ERROR

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. Your message must be simple and 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 is always happy to give you an attitude adjustment.

Safety goggles and heavy protective clothing are an excellent precaution when you begin. They are useful tools to give you the confidence to experiment and discover what the whip is all about and how it feels as it moves around your body. If you pay attention, you will find the whip is a subtle and generous teacher.

Practice to develop the feeling that the whip is a natural extension of your wrist and arm. Both must be as loose and flexible as the whip itself. Roll and reach to the tip of the whip each time.

This exercise contains the essence of *why the whip cracks*. Practice it before every session and return to the exercise when you have problems. It is a reminder to both the mind and the body of what it is you are trying to accomplish.

## EXERCISE #2

Stand inside your railroad tracks, facing your intended target. Stretch the whip behind and beside you on its own side of the track. Start swinging the whip in an easy underhand circle with the palm facing upwards.

Focus on beginning the energy of the circle from the center of your back, letting it reach to the very tip of the cracker. Do not just twirl your wrist. Use just enough energy to keep the whip gently taut and stretched to its maximum length. If you go too fast you will never develop any finesse. If you go too slow you won't be sending your message the entire length of the whip and it will fall onto your head. Experiment, and develop a feel for the gentle tug that comes when you *guide* instead of force the circle. A simple analogy is a "telephone" line stretched between two cans. The line must remain taut or your message doesn't get through.

Put the whip down and stand, facing forward, inside the parallel lines of your railroad tracks. Let your throwing hand swing in a gentle pendulum motion up and down. The palm faces up as you rise from belt to just behind your head, then turns down as you reach forward and allow the pendulum to drop again.

If you visualize your throwing shoulder leaning against a clock's face, your arm would rise to 9:00 and bend at the elbow through 1:00 to align the whip behind you, outside of the tracks and parallel to the ground. The tug of gravity signals it's time to reverse your direction by stretching the arm forward through the 9:00 position. This will roll the whip along itself level with your chest—it will crack due to *form*, not *effort*. Follow the handle. Practice this several times concentrating on developing a smooth connected rhythm.

Note that this is the identical movement to the forward roll you executed along the ground in exercise one. You are now aligning the whip to roll along its length while in the air. Otherwise, it is exactly the same! When you align the whip and allow it to roll along its vertical length, it will always crack.

This first figure is called the "Gypsy" or "Circus" Crack. It contains the essential form and structure of every other whip crack. Aim at



your target by aligning the whip before your throw. Reach towards your target and allow the whip to roll along itself. Now let's separate individual elements that make up these basic figures. The gypsy is made up of both an *underhand* and an *overhand*. These may be executed individually.

By tilting the plane of the imaginary clock, the gypsy moves from a vertical pattern to a diagonal or even a horizontal flow. Notice this is a simple modification of the same basics you have just learned.

Underhand, overhead, forward toss, backward vertical—similarly, the diagonal and the horizontal can be broken down into separate moves and recombined for different situations or applications.

## THE APPLICATIONS

Strikes can be thrown from virtually any angle, singly or in combinations of diagonal, vertical and horizontal attacks delivered from either side of the body. Various combinations of an "X" pattern are a good place to begin. Underhand, overhead, sidearm and backhand throws can be put together in dazzling combinations to develop flow, sensitivity and accuracy.

The whip is extremely effective as a *long range* projectile weapon, allowing you to attack or disarm an opponent far beyond his kicking and punching range. You can fend off a number of adversaries, keeping them out of range and allowing you time to formulate effective countermeasures to reduce their number. It is also possible to envelop various limbs of the 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. Capturing the supporting leg during the opponent's kick is also effective.

Halving the whip produces an action similar to swinging a doubled rope or length of hose. This allows you to penetrate into a *mid-range*

or kicking distance. Slashes, parries and deflections with the shortened length can supplement kicks and other techniques as you close the gap. Once inside his guard, the whip can wrap a limb to initiate a throw or become an improvised garrote.

At *close range* the handle of the whip works like a baton or kali stick to parry, deflect and strike. The end of the handle is readily utilized to thrust or stab like the butt or *punyo* of a kali stick. The weighted end can also be thrown like a baseball or spear and pulled back after contact, the recoil being easily absorbed by directing the whip to swing in either a vertical or horizontal arc. If the grip is further trimmed, the result is a short, fast flexible weapon with a weighted end like a blackjack. The whip can then perform like a nunchaku, lashing out with crushing power and returning to a position of rest under your arm in preparation for the next attack.

Hopefully, this will whet your appetite. As always my goal is to help you become your own teacher by developing sensitivity to the dialogue between you and your partner, in this case the whip. When you listen, the whip will whisper its secrets. The whip taught me, it'll do the same for you. ☺

Anthony De Longis has over twenty-seven years of professional experience as an actor, Fight Director, teacher and Weapons Master for feature films, television and the stage. Most recently he was the Fight Coordinator and Sword Master for the action television series, *The Queen of Swords*. He has taught, choreographed and performed with some of Hollywood's top film stars, including Anjelica Huston, Patrick Swayze, Tom Cruise, Adrian Paul, David Carradine, Dolph Lundgren and Charlton Heston. Visit his website at [www.delongis.com](http://www.delongis.com) for information about published articles, behind the scenes journals and teaching videos including: "Rapier for the Stage & Screen," "Broadsword for the Stage & Screen", "Whip Cracking With the Masters" and his latest video, "La Verdadera Destreza," the art and science of Spanish swordplay.

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