

'Cobra Kai' never dies: Q&A with stars of Netflix series



Left: "Cobra Kai" features original "The Karate Kid" stars Ralph Macchio, left, as Daniel LaRusso, and William Zabka as Johnny Lawrence. (Cr. Curtis Bonds Baker/Netflix © 2020) • Middle: Samantha LaRusso (Mary Mouser) turns to Daniel to rediscover her strength. • Right: John Kreese (Martin Kove) is back on "Cobra Kai." (Courtesy of Netflix © 2020)

BY JOSHUA MALONI
GM/Managing Editor

Just like the three tenets scrolled across the dojo wall suggest, "Cobra Kai" struck first, struck hard, and showed no mercy when it debuted on Netflix in 2020.

The further adventures of Daniel LaRusso and Mr. Miyagi (in spirit) vs. Johnny Lawrence and John Kreese (in the flesh) shot to the top of the streamer — which was a remarkable feat, considering the series had a less-than-favorable start when it debuted on the less-than-successful YouTube Red in 2018. But with more people at home last summer — voluntary or otherwise — and sweatpants the new universal dress code, comfort was key. Television was a basic necessity, and nostalgia a treasured friend.

To that end — and like a knight in shining armor from a long time ago — "Cobra Kai" was the hero we were dreaming of. It provided all the feels for fans of John G. Avildsen's 1984 film and its Okinawa-set 1986 sequel, while also presenting a fresh take on the characters.

Picture it: The skinny kid from Reseda who shocked the karate world with his All Valley upset of the reigning and defending champ is now a husband and father of two, crane-kicking his way to the top of the suburban car dealership game. His beaten opponent, who also wed and had a child, is down and out, his only companion the Coors Banquet in the fridge and the boxed-up Sports Illustrated swimsuit

issues of yesteryear.

But now imagine this: In season one, Daniel LaRusso (Ralph Macchio) — sans the deceased Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita) — has become a little unlikable. No longer an underdog, Daniel-san has lost his luster. Instead, "The Karate Kid" we're rooting for is Johnny Lawrence (William Zabka) — Johnny Lawrence — the guy who tormented Daniel, broke Ali's (Elisabeth Shue) radio, and led a karate biker gang.

Johnny opts to reopen a Cobra Kai karate studio and — get this — trains bullied kids. Though miles from PC, Johnny starts to see there is a place for mercy — in karate, and in life.

Sensei Lawrence takes a particular shine to Miguel Diaz (Xolo Maridueña) who, despite the objections of his mother, Carmen (Vanessa Rubio), takes up karate, learns how to defend himself — and wins the heart of Daniel's daughter, Samantha (Mary Mouser).

At the same time, Johnny's estranged son, Robby (Tanner Buchanan), takes a job at LaRusso Luxury Motors. Though initially there to make trouble, he soon finds himself under Daniel's wing. Training alongside Sam in the Miyagi-Do technique, Robby finds self-discipline and abandons his delinquent tendencies.

When Robby's mom leaves town, Daniel and Amanda (Courtney Henggeler) welcome him into their home.

Daniel decides it's time to rid the world of Cobra Kai, and begins a

campaign to close down Johnny's chop-shop. The two old rivals become new enemies (sometimes frenemies), each trying to convince California youth theirs is the true karate.

Of course, in the season finale, Miguel and Robby find themselves in the finals of the All Valley Championship — competing in the same arena where their instructors sparred three decades earlier. This time around, however, it's Cobra Kai that gets the win.

Just as Johnny is starting to find his groove, his own master, John Kreese (Martin Kove), shows up. The root of all evil in "The Karate Kid" universe vows he's changed, but secretly spends season two trying to take back Cobra Kai. He turns Johnny's students against each other — and sets them at war with Sam, Robby and the Miyagi-Do students.

In the season finale, an all-out brawl breaks out at the high school. Kreese's top fighter — Tory (Peyton List) — makes a beeline for Sam, even going so far as to whip out a Wolverine-like claw. Robby and Miguel duke it out, too, but with dire consequences. As Miguel has Robby on the ground, he opts to show the mercy Johnny recently found.

Big mistake.

Robby gets up and kicks Miguel over a railing, sending him down several flights and onto the stairs, leaving him clinging to life.

Netflix released all 10 episodes of the third season on New Year's Day. The story picks up with Miguel para-

lyzed from the waist down. Sam is shell-shocked and scarred from her fight with Tory. Johnny has gone on a bender, and Daniel — at Amanda's request — has ceased teaching karate. Kreese, believing he has won, continues to teach his students to take no prisoners. Robby is on the lam, and believes he has no allies.

Desperate to find guidance — and save his dealership, which has taken a public relations hit since the school fight — Daniel travels back to Mr. Miyagi's home in Okinawa. There, he finds some familiar faces who help him regain his mojo, er, dojo, that is.

As part of a recent Netflix press junket, Maridueña, Mouser, Henggeler and Rubio shared thoughts on season three in a Zoom chat. An edited Q&A follows.

Q: When you shoot such an emotionally gripping, edge-of-your-seat season finale, you shoot it, but then you're done. You go home and you live your life, and however many months go by. And then you're asked to come right back. You're right back into that scene, right back into that character. What is the challenge in doing that, and what is the process?

•Mary Mouser: You know, I think that definitely is a really difficult aspect — especially with a show like this, where the actual connectability — the issues — are so far from our own realities. Such as, you know, karate dojos battling it out and having that be the biggest issue in the town. It's complicated, but at the same time it's very

simple because, walking back onto the set is usually what just brings it all back all of a sudden. I can have several months away from it, and then I walk back into the backyard of Mr. Miyagi's house and it's like, "Oh, I'm here again." And my brain goes straight back to where I was. It's a little surreal; I feel like I'm living a little bit in the past for half my year.

•Xolo Maridueña: Yeah, I guess for me, fortunately, I went from having a super, super-intense season finale to having to just sleep for a few episodes.

But I will say, that aside, I love stuff like that. I feel like playing a character who's always on top and always winning is fun or whatever, but having a character like Miguel, like Robby, like a lot of our characters on the show who have your victories and your failures, that's my favorite first episode. Although it might be hard to kind of get back into it when, in theory, no time has passed when you're watching it, it's definitely well worth it.

Q: I want to share some IMDb user ratings with you: "Wizard of Oz," 8; "Casablanca," 8.5; original "Star Wars," 8.6; "Get Out," 7.7; "Schitt's Creek," 8.5; "Cobra Kai," 8.7 — with the final two episodes 9 and 9.6. It's one thing for "Karate Kid" fans to be excited about the series, but when general user reaction is that high, what does that say about the quality of work you are putting forth?

•Xolo Maridueña: Yeah, I'd love to sit here and take all the credit, but really, I think, you know, it dwindles down to our creators, Josh (Heald), Jon (Hurwitz) and Hayden (Schlossberg). They definitely have the most heart when it comes to creating this series — and it shows; they are the biggest "Karate Kid" fans that I know. And really, I think, aside from that, the fact that they were able to get Ralph Macchio and William Zabka to reprise their roles for this 30-something years later down the line, I think just speaks for itself.

I'm excited. Obviously, hearing those numbers and stuff like that is always a joy; but really the biggest joy is getting to film with everyone and getting to actually make the stuff.

•Mary Mouser: It definitely feels validating (laughs). I think we've all been working our butts off, you know, to make this show as special as possible for however many viewers we may or may not have — and with no intention of doing it to achieve any such rating or fame or anything like that. But it's very exciting. For me, it feels very good — in my soul — to know that it's doing it. Like, the thing that I worked so hard to convey, or that we've all put our pieces into, actually worked. (That) people are really enjoying it to that level is crazy.

•Courtney Henggeler: I think the heart of our show, it shows in those ratings. I think, once again, the creators made the show because they had a sincere passion for "The Karate Kid" universe, and I think it shows. And I think if it was in anybody else's hands who didn't have the connection that these men have with "The Karate Kid" universe, I don't know if it would be a quarter of the success; because **SEE SERIES, continued on Page 7**

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