

SPORTS



Ray Ciancaglino talks with a student-athlete after his presentation about head injuries at Jamestown Community College on Thursday night.
P-J photo by Scott Kindberg

Ex-Boxer Reinforces Need For Addressing Concussions Promptly

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Ray Ciancaglino is always in a hurry.

He can't help it.

To him, time is of the essence.

"People always ask, 'Ray, what's your hurry?' I tell them, 'Because I don't know what tomorrow brings.'"

Sadly, in many ways, he does.

On his bad days, Ciancaglino struggles to form complete thoughts, has a hard time writing his own name and struggles to recognize lifelong friends. Symptoms also manifest as a decline in mental ability, depression, Parkinson's-like tremors and lack of coordination.

That's the battle the former middleweight boxer is regularly confronted with as he struggles with Dementia Pugilistica after receiving multiple blows to the head. Now, at age 62, it is Ciancaglino's mission to raise awareness, offer support and encourage young people to be honest with care givers instead of playing through a head injury.

"A lot of my good friends have gone before me with the same condition," he said after giving a speech to student-athletes at Jamestown Community College on Thursday night. "They were doing all right for a while and then all of a sudden (they had) a slide. I'm aware of this and I want to make sure I can get everything in, because you expect a slide."

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To that end, Ciancaglini and his wife, Patti, travel near and far, to high schools and colleges, to tell his story — free of charge.

"People say, 'Do you want to come tomorrow or next month?' and I tell them, 'I'll be there tomorrow,'" Ciancaglini said. "This message is so important. I know that it will sink in. ... They're going to remember the 'poster boy,' who is the grim reminder of what can happen."

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When Ciancaglini was 16 years old, he had "everything going for me." He was well-behaved, an honor student and he had a bright future in the ring. But in the third round of a match at Memorial Auditorium in Buffalo, Ciancaglini took a right hook to the back of his head. Although he wasn't knocked down, he found himself temporarily dazed and his vision became blurred.

"The crowd noise went from loud to muffled and back to loud," he recalled. "I'd never experienced that feeling before. I fought through it and won a unanimous decision."

Not wanting to miss out on his next opportunity, Ciancaglini resumed training for a fight a week later at the Syracuse War Memorial.

"I should have got medical attention, but I didn't think it was serious," he said. "Little did I know that it was the start of my troubles."

By the time his fight in Syracuse was over, Ciancaglini had had his "bell rung," had vomited in a bucket in his corner of the ring between the first and second rounds and ultimately lost the bout.

"I was in such a daze that I didn't even realize I'd lost until a sportswriter interviewed me after the fight in the dressing room," he said.

"My life changed."

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Clinically, it's called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy. It's also known as Pugilistic Parkinson's Syndrome, Boxer's Syndrome or Punch-Drunk Syndrome. In the 1960s, no one knew any of that. So while Ciancaglini's behavior changed, headaches persisted and he was in danger of flunking out of school, he thought that it was all only temporary and "would go away."

"During training sessions I asked a couple of old-time boxers for advice," Ciancaglini said. "One of them said, 'Son, headaches are part of this game. You have to deal with them to get to the next level. ... Gut it up and, if not, this game is not for you.' ... Don't get me wrong, the oldtimers were not intentionally giving me bad advice, they just didn't know any better at the time."

In an effort to combat his physical prob-

lems, Ciancaglini began to self-medicate to "hurry the process along," but ultimately the head injury took its toll and after a lay-off of several months, he hung up the gloves.

But his physical woes were only really beginning.

He struggled to finish high school, he flunked out in his first semester at college and after a 14-year career at Eastman Kodak, he developed hand tremors and his memory suffered.

"My co-workers covered for me until it became a safety issue," Ciancaglini said.

After an evaluation at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, he was diagnosed with permanent brain damage caused by untreated concussions related to boxing.

"I've had a headache every day since I was 16," Ciancaglini said. "... I threw a whole career away for the sake of not missing one fight. What a foolish mistake. I challenged the concussion and I got beat. It cost me my quality of life. ... If I had to do it over, I'd pursue a boxing career, absolutely. The only thing I'd do differently is I would immediately get medical attention for any symptoms of injury that my body was warning me to address."

That was why more than 100 JCC student-athletes filled a portion of the bleachers at the campus gymnasium — to learn the importance of addressing a concussion correctly and promptly.

"We can talk to these kids all day long," JCC athletic trainer Aimee Brunelle said, "but to have Ray come in and share his personal experiences, that's what resonates the most with our athletes. Ray's message is so much stronger."

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When his talk was over, Ciancaglini stayed to interact with the student-athletes, pose for photographs and sign autographs. As he did so, he mentioned that he and his wife will be making appearances at Canisius College and SUNY Cortland in the very near future.

"I would walk 100 miles barefoot because it means that much," he said. "You don't have to worry about the money, because it's my way of giving back. I don't want money getting in the way of getting this message out, because of budgetary (issues)."

JCC athletic director Keith Martin believe Ciancaglini's message has been heard, loud and clear.

"With him coming here and sharing his story, this is for the (student-athletes') future," Martin said. "This is not for today. This is for our future educators and future coaches and what these kids are going to be. If they take the smallest thing from it and it can help them, help a friend or help a family, we've done our job."

"Tonight was very special because that man had a special message."

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