

## SPORTS SPECIAL

# Ex-boxer tells cautionary tale

### Geneva native Ciancaglini talks to Batavia High group about effects of concussions

By Nate Rider

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BATAVIA — Throughout his eight years as a professional boxer, Ray Ciancaglini was never knocked out, not to mention never knocked to the canvas.

A native of Geneva, Ciancaglini was an aspiring and heralded middleweight fighter with the promise of a highly successful career and even a title belt.

Yet that all quickly changed over 40 years ago.

And now — despite being in the physical condition to possibly still go a few rounds in the ring, even at age 62 — Ciancaglini struggles with the most mundane of everyday tasks.

He can remember the blow to the head at a fight in Buffalo at the age of 16 — a right hook to the back of the head — but on bad days he can't remember the names of lifelong friends.

He can recall the blow to the head a week later in Syracuse — the one he feels altered his entire life — but he will struggle to tie his shoes.

He can remember all of the symptoms — the headaches, the fog and the fatigue — and how he fought through and he even remembers the fact that he didn't even recall that he had lost the fight in Syracuse until a reporter questioned him after the bout.

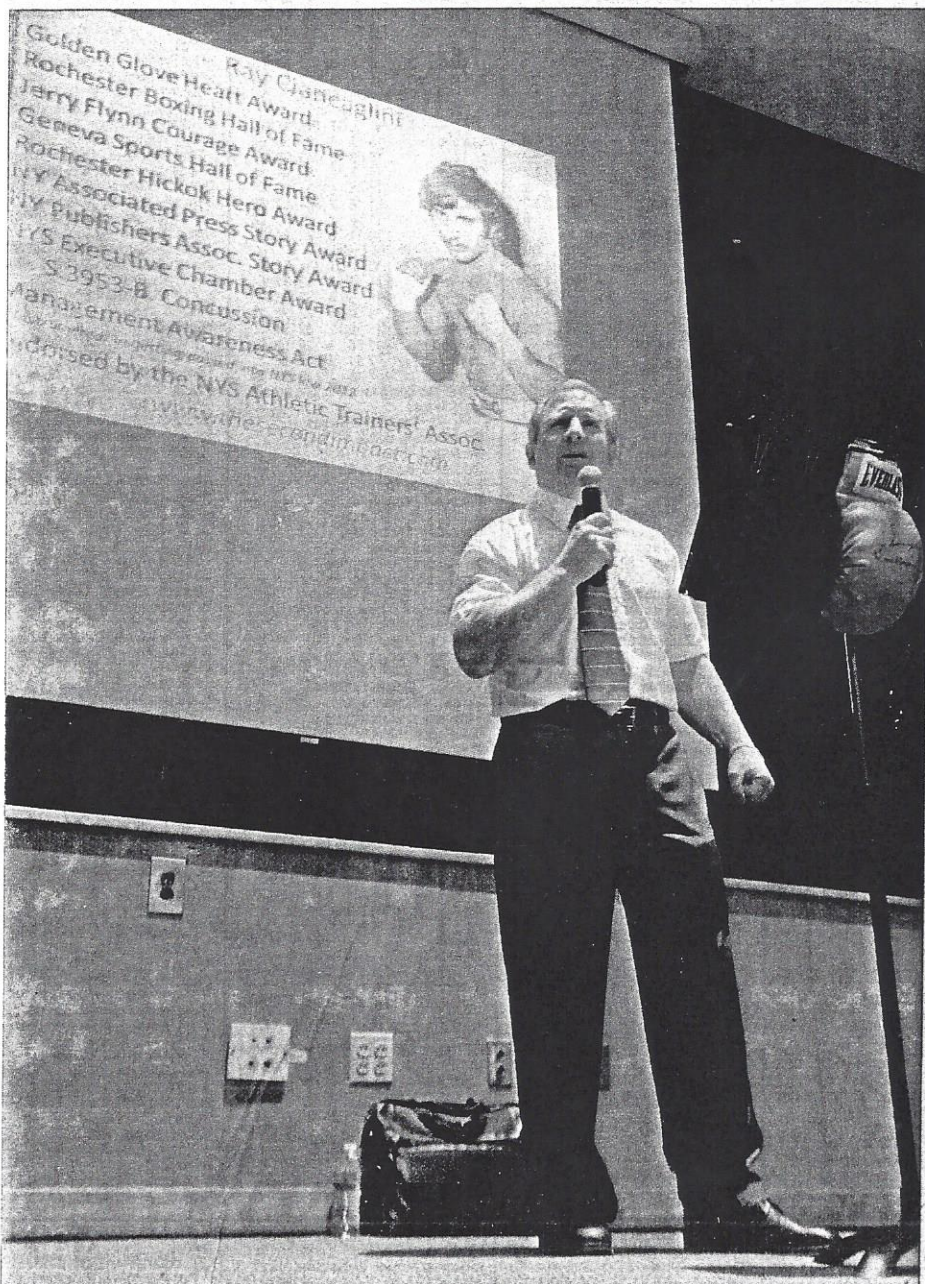
Boxing was his life. He thought it was his future.

"Son, you have to deal with it to get to the next level," said an old-time boxing friend of Ciancaglini when he questioned him about his symptoms. "Headaches are a part of the game. You have all the ability to get to the top. You have to be able to dish it out and take it too in this sport."

He wanted to be a middleweight champion; it wasn't intentionally bad advice, they simply didn't know any better.

There are now good days and bad days; he will recall quotes that famous boxers uttered to him over 40 years ago, but his hands will tremble uncontrollably and he needs to have his prepared speech color-coded and perfectly laid out for fear of losing his place.

Now, because of what he terms as the second impact, Ciancaglini now is battling the consequences of post-concussion syndrome; more specifically, he is fighting Parkinson's Syndrome and Dementia Pugilistica — also known as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy.



Mark Gutman/Daily News

**TALE OF THE TAPE:** Former boxer Ray Ciancaglini tells about the effects concussions have had on his life while speaking Thursday night at Batavia High School.

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“My only regret as a boxer is that I didn’t defeat my toughest opponent and that opponent was a concussion,” said Ciancaglini.

And Ciancaglini was at Batavia High School Thursday night to tell his story of a life after untreated concussions and how he has overcome a life of difficulty in hopes of showing young athletes the severity of concussions.

Ciancaglini continued to pursue boxing for four more years following those life-altering blows and fought for the final time in 1972.

“My goal is to educate athletes on the life-altering mistakes that I made in the hope that no one will suffer the same fate as me,” he said. “My problems could have been avoided if I had known the consequences of ignoring the symptoms of a concussion. Don’t ignore them like I did.”

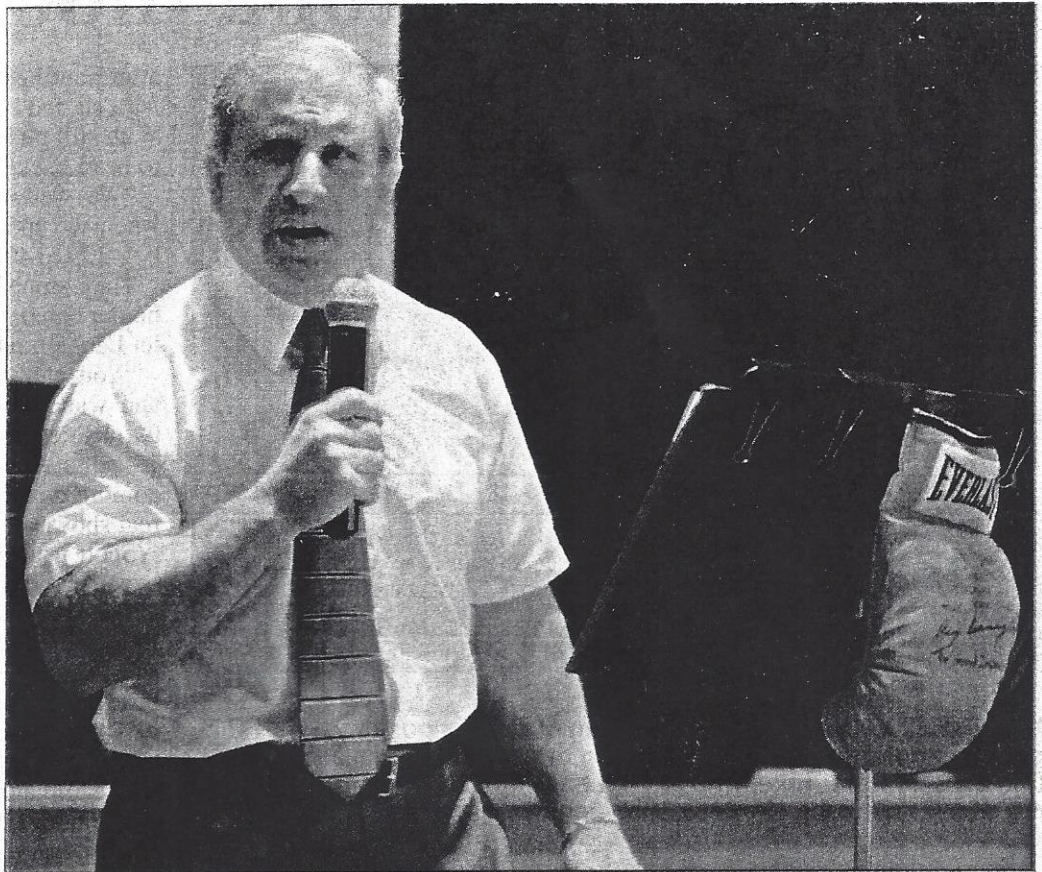
And then he struggled to get out of high school only a short time after being a well-behaved honor student. He wanted to be a physical education teacher but he failed out of college because he had trouble concentrating and failed to remember anything he was taught.

He went from working construction to a job at Eastman Kodak, but he couldn’t hold either job because of his symptoms.

At the young age of 44, Ciancaglini was diagnosed with permanent brain damage and Parkinson’s, which forced him to retire from work.

“The most important message that I want you to take away from here today, is that I understand all too well the mindset of athletes, the determination and desire can sometimes overwhelm common sense and logic,” Ciancaglini said.

But now the member of the Rochester Boxing Hall



Mark Gutman/Daily News

## **STRONG WORDS: Former boxer Ray Ciancaglini tells about the effects concussions have had on him in Thursday night’s talk at Batavia High School.**

of Fame is on a crusade to teach anyone who will listen — from young athletes, to coaches, to parents — the effects of the second impact, the experience of receiving a second concussion to a brain that has yet to properly heal from a first.

That is what happened to Ciancaglini over 40 years ago in Western New York and now he is making it his life’s passion to help as many as he can to not make the same mistakes that he has.

“I challenged a concussion and I got beat,” Ciancaglini said.

He was 31-9-4 as a professional fighter — 13 of those wins by knockout — but it was the fight he won in June of 2011 that he credits as the biggest of his life.

That was when the New York State Legislature signed a brain trauma bill into a law — known as the Concussion Management

Awareness Act — that was worked on by Ciancaglini and state Senator Mike Nozzolio that would help coaches, parents, trainers and teachers to identify traumatic injuries to the brain and prevent athletes from further compounding those injuries by returning to action too soon.

Now Ciancaglini — who founded a nationally renowned Concussion Awareness website — speaks at high schools, colleges, universities, NFL camps and youth leagues across the northeast, which is the furthest his illness will allow him to travel.

“I can’t stress enough, always be a good role model,” said Ciancaglini. “Remember, your actions can affect impressionable young athletes. Never underestimate the powers of peer pressure.”

And though he struggles with headaches every day

and will oftentimes forget something he just said, the polite and gracious Ciancaglini has devoted his life to helping others make the right choices, rather than the wrong ones he made.

“No one understood that a concussion is an invisible injury,” he said. “There are no crutches, no swelling, no stitches or any other visible signs of injury.”

He doesn’t want to scare anyone and he continues to be an avid supporter of sports — he would even pursue a boxing career again if given the chance to do it all over; he simply wants you to know.

“This is what it’s like for me living with a permanent brain injury,” said Ciancaglini. “My life now consists of not what I want to do but what I am capable of doing.”

And despite it all he appears to be doing rather well.