

the big two

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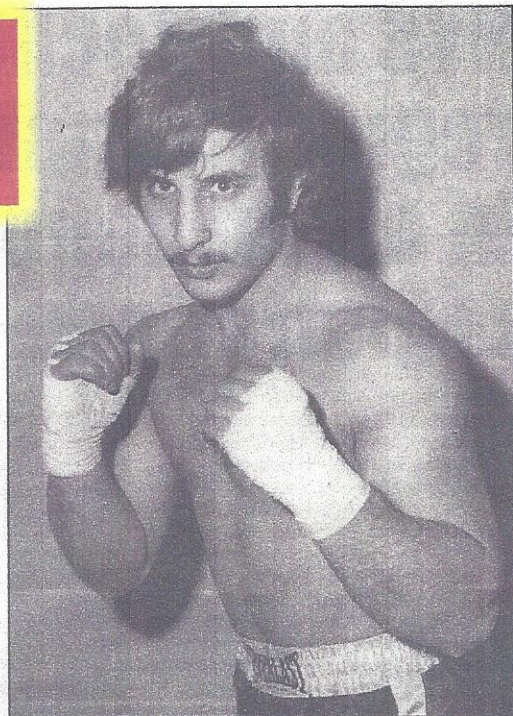
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CONCUSSION SEASON *IS ON*

Back to school means a high incidence of sport-related traumatic brain injuries, predominantly concussions. Boxer Ray Ciancaglini shares his own experience with concussion hoping other people can avoid his mistakes

CONCUSSION



Ray Ciancaglini in his boxing days.

Boxer Ray Ciancaglini's main mission is to share his own experience so other people can avoid his mistakes

By Jessica Spies

When Ray Ciancaglini retired from boxing due to continued headaches and slower reflexes, he wanted to become a physical education teacher.

Once he entered college, he faced the same issues that he did while boxing and left after his first semester.

When he couldn't be a teacher in the classroom, Ciancaglini didn't let that stop him. Despite the challenges he continues to face, Ciancaglini, 63, has become a physical education teacher in his own right, forming the nonprofit organization The Second Impact. As part of The Second Impact's efforts, Ciancaglini, of Romulus, travels to schools and organizations in New York, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts to speak about the dangers of not properly addressing a concussion.

Ciancaglini, who typically has two to three speaking engagements a week, has spoken to crowds from 100 to over 2,000 athletes. But the size of the crowd doesn't intimidate him. The bigger crowds are "just like a fight," he said.

Ciancaglini uses the skills he picked up in boxing in his current work, preparing for his speeches "just like I did for

a fight. I train hard, prepare hard and don't eat six hours before I go," he said.

Ciancaglini always has a paper copy of his speech on hand and it must be slanted so he won't lose his spot or become dizzy when making eye contact with the audience.

The focus of Ciancaglini's speech is concussion awareness and his personal experience but he also spreads other important messages including the importance of having good character and being a role model.

"Never give up. Just keep punching," he tells the athletes. "You'll get better; just keep at it."

Ciancaglini was driven to speak up about the dangers of not letting a concussion recover after he suffered permanent brain damage as a result of not allowing back-to-back concussions heal properly.

According to the Mayo Clinic's website, a concussion is a "traumatic brain injury that alters the way your brain functions." There are two ways to concussion recovery, said Jeff Bazarian, associate professor of emergency medicine at the University

of Rochester. One way is natural as some people can recover without much intervention; the other way to recovery is to quickly treat the symptoms.

The symptoms of a concussion, at the time of the impact, are "anything that causes your head to whip around," and usually ends up leaving the injured person dazed, Bazarian said.

What happens after the initial diagnosis of the concussion includes headaches, trouble sleeping or concentrating and irritability. Repeated concussions or hits to the head can cause permanent brain damage.

Bazarian, who conducts concussion research and runs a sport concussion clinic, said while most people can recover from repeated concussions, some people don't.

"Usually it takes longer to recover from that second concussion," he said. Ciancaglini was diagnosed with

io himself. Ciancaglini said he aimed to emulate Basilio who was a "champion inside the ring and outside the ring."

Ciancaglini started fighting at 14 years old in an amateur organization. His trainers included Chuck Jennings of Elmira and Monsignor Franklin Kelliher of Buffalo, and he ended his boxing career with Al Gavin of New York City.

At 16, Ciancaglini would have a



Ray Ciancaglini poses with Lois Tannenbaum, president of the Brain Injury Association of New York State's Board of Directors, at its 32nd annual conference in Albany.

Dementia Pugilistica, a disease with features of dementia common among boxers who suffer concussions, and Parkinson's syndrome, a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system.

"Life, for me, is not what I want to do. It's what I can do," he said. Ciancaglini said he has good days and bad days, but every day requires a lot of supervision and help. Some days, he's in a "fog" and "it's hard to get things going," and other days he struggles with tying his shoes.

"I've had a headache ever since I was 16," he said.

Ciancaglini's wife, Patti, has been there for him through even the toughest days. "[She's] my left hook," he said. "Every boxer knows the importance of a good corner."

Ciancaglini said without Patti, he "wouldn't be where I am today."

The two have two children, Raymond, Jr., 29, and Anessa, 33, and a 1-year-old grandchild, Paige.

Ciancaglini was moved to become an advocate of concussion awareness because "I knew where I went wrong," he said. "I couldn't rest with knowing what I knew."

Ciancaglini developed an interest in boxing at 6 years old when he would watch the Gillette Friday Night Fights that his parents would air at their Italian restaurant.

One night, Carmen Basilio was fighting. "I was so impressed," Ciancaglini said. So he grabbed a laundry bag, propped it up and turned it into a punching bag.

"My grandmother saw me and asked: 'Raymond, what are you doing?' 'I'm Carmen Basilio,' I said. 'There's only one Carmen Basilio,' she said."

Nevertheless, this sparked an interest in boxing for Ciancaglini who would later become friends with Basil-

career-ending injury that would affect him for the rest of his life.

He had his "bell rung" during a match in Buffalo but ended up winning the match. Afterwards, he had a headache but didn't think much of it. Shortly after, he got his "bell rung" again in Syracuse.

Ciancaglini uses the term "bell rung" to describe the feeling of being dazed, experiencing blurred vision and impaired hearing after a hit to the head. In his boxing days, a crowd of people would become muffled when Ciancaglini had his "bell rung."

It was after Ciancaglini got his "bell rung" twice that he experienced significant issues. He once was an honor student but then started missing school, sleeping during class and having overall behavioral problems. He was experiencing headaches and fatigue and didn't realize there were more serious problems at play.

"I had never been knocked out or knocked down," Ciancaglini said. "My resiliency and durability fooled me."

The advice from veteran boxers was to "just deal with it," he said. "I just kept battling the symptoms." Nobody understood the symptoms of a concussion were invisible.

"Nobody knew I was carrying this. I just kept thinking it would go away," he said.

Ciancaglini was taking aspirin for the headaches and antacid to fight the stomachaches from the aspirin. The aspirin thinned his blood and after a hit during a fight, he couldn't stop bleeding.

Because he didn't allow time for recovery, "I beat myself," he said.

The skills that helped Ciancaglini succeed at boxing deterred him from seeking adequate medical help.

"My relentless determination and

desire defied common sense and logic," he said.

As a result of his injuries, Ciancaglini became less aggressive.

"They were questioning if my head was still in the game," Ciancaglini said. "They asked if I had lost the eye of the tiger."

Ciancaglini stayed in boxing due to peer pressure, not taking one day of training off. He realized that the headaches weren't going away and knew he would have to leave the sport, retiring from boxing at age 23.

Ciancaglini took some time off traveling to parks across the country, and eventually would return to Rochester, working several years at Kodak. For some time, he was holding his own, but he retired at the age of 44. Since his retirement, he formed The Second Impact.

As part of his efforts, Ciancaglini has educated himself and others about the dangers of not letting a concussion properly heal. Healing means that a person is symptom-free and has been following his or her doctor's protocol, Ciancaglini said.

"You challenge a concussion and you're going to get beat," Ciancaglini said.

Ciancaglini shares his story through The Second Impact and was recently the keynote speaker for the 32nd annual Brain Injury Association of New York Conference and is expected to speak at the Burke Medical Research Institute and Nazareth College in September.

Ciancaglini has recently completed another segment of the ongoing chronic traumatic encephalopathy research study at the Boston University School of Medicine, along with several other retired professional sports players. Upon his death, his brain will be donat-

ed to the university's study.

Ciancaglini was integral in getting the Concussion Management Awareness Act passed, which "establishes minimum guidelines regarding removal from play, physician clearance, and 'return to play' protocols," according to the New York State Senate's website. The acts allows for a concussion management team at each school district comprised of health professionals and sports staff who are responsible for educating parents and staff, and for monitoring students who have suffered a concussion.

Of his accomplishments inside and outside the ring, Ciancaglini is most proud of helping to get the Concussion Management Awareness Act passed and it's his way "just to make sure no one falls through the cracks. Athletes sometimes have to be protected from themselves. That's why you have regulations across the board," he said.

Current concussion research is aimed at improving concussion diagnosis. After an athlete is hit in the head, it's not easy for them "to tell you if they have a headache or if they are confused," Bazarian said. These studies are focused on looking at a more objective way to determine if an athlete has experienced a concussion.

"There's some growing evidence that you can prevent concussions by strengthening neck muscles," Bazarian said, and noted that the research is in the early stages. Strengthening the neck muscles "keeps the head from bobbing around," Bazarian said.

Ciancaglini said while he advocates for concussion awareness, he encourages athletes to play whatever sport they like.

"Play hard but if you have your bell rung, have it checked out by a professional."

Concussion Myths

Jeff Bazarian, associate professor of emergency medicine at the University of Rochester, said there are a lot of misconceptions when it comes to concussions.

"For athletes, the biggest mistake is not telling anybody," Bazarian said. Athletes will sometimes mask symptoms so they won't be taken out of the game.

"Part of the trepidation of that is not realizing their symptoms are treatable," he said. Bazarian added it's easier to treat someone who just experienced a concussion as opposed to a person who has attempt-

ed to hide his or her symptoms.

"For parents, the biggest mistake is sending them back to school too quickly," Bazarian said. Parents may want to send their child back to school the next day after the child experiences a concussion but the child should be permitted to rest a few days, he said.

Bazarian said he encourages coaches to listen to their athletic trainers when an athlete suffers a concussion.

To protect yourself from concussions, the "best way is to play properly," he said.