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Part 1 of Our Interview with Ray Ciancaglini: A champ speaks candidly about sports, violence and injury

MJ Clausen and I interviewed Ray Ciancaglini on November 20, 2015. Our interview with Ray focused on sports and concussions in both boxing and football. Specifically, we spoke about the future of sports like boxing and football in which violence is an inevitable part of the game. Ray Ciancaglini is the Founder of The Second Impact, an advocacy organization he founded to prevent athletes from experiencing a second concussion without adequate identification and treatment from the first injury. As a retired boxer who left the sport due to experiencing multiple concussions with serious lifelong effects, his advocacy work brings him into contact with athletes, coaches and trainers at all levels, from youth sports to professional teams. Ray has also worked to establish legislative change in New York to increase concussion prevention through awareness, training and injury protection. Ray is not anti-contact sports by any stretch of the imagination; instead he is realistic in his understanding of the popularity of sports like boxing and football and what needs to be done to prevent athletes from experiencing brain injuries with lifetime consequences. Ray has told me on numerous occasions that his work through thesecondimpact.com is “to prevent another athlete from going down the path he was on.”

More athletes are speaking out against concussion and joining the ranks of retired athletes who want to prevent athletes from experiencing life-changing multiple concussions. NeuroNotes is pleased to host athletes like Ray Ciancaglini and George Visger and help them get the word out about concussions. With the big games coming up after the holidays, it could be easy to forget the risks associated with some sports. Certainly, the film Concussion is being released at an ideal time. And, concussion remains in the news with most recently the family of Frank Gifford, a football great, releasing the news that he had CTE. I am honored to consider Ray Ciancaglini as a friend and to be able to share his thoughts about sports concussions through NeuroNotes.

Dr. Rolf B. Gainer (RBG): We’ve talked about Paret and Griffith back in ’62 that resulted in Paret’s death, but then there’s been some other deaths in the ring that come to mind like Boom Boom Mancini. Ray Mancini was a kid when that fight took place back in ’82...

Ray Ciancaglini (RC): Nobody knew anything about him (Kim).

RBG: Well, I think Kim had predicted that he would go out as a champion or in a box, and his prediction about going out in a box turned out to be true.

RC: Yeah, unfortunately, it was.

RBG: Yeah, that's a sad, sad story. And then I think it was a couple days after Kim's death, remember the Larry Holmes/Tex Cobb fight?

RC: Well, I try not to remember that fiasco, but yeah...

RBG: I think that fight stopped just short of Cobb's death.

RC: Well, I believe Larry Holmes probably let up a little bit, and, Cobb was known to be tough. But that's one of the set ups in boxing throughout the ages. He was an entertainer, a "crowd pleaser" as we called it, a punching bag. He's going to be around to take the punishment, and the crowds love the punishment. It's perfect for that time because he was what we call a "safe fight" for Larry Holmes to lead to the bigger fights.

RBG: So you think Holmes used that to leverage his way up to the bigger fights, the title fights?

RC: It led him to the bigger title fights...like Gerry Cooney. And the media had a lot to do with hyping that also.

RBG: That's when a lot of the critics...I went back in time, recently to look at some of the negative stuff that came out about boxing, and it goes back to '83 when they wanted to outlaw the sport claiming it was sanctioned violence.

RC: Well, doc, I'm going to give you a little history lesson here.

RBG: I'm ready.

RC: Well, back after the Perrot fight they were clamoring pretty hard to abolish boxing. Also, back in the early seventies, when I got suspended, there was a congressman out of New York City area, his name was Lester Wolf.

RBG: I didn't know about Wolf.

RC: And he was trying to get a national commission to regulate pro boxing. Pro Boxing was, as it is today, regulated by each state with different rules and regulations applying. But he also wanted boxing abolished, and he was going head to head with the boxing commissioner, Edwin Dooley.

RBG: He was what New York State?

RC: Yeah, he was the New York boxing commissioner, and Dooley was another one Howard Cosell didn't have many good words to say. Dooley was also the one who suspended Ali. He was the first commissioner to suspend Ali in '67, so he was notorious for some decisions that drew a lot of controversy.

RBG: I appreciate the history lesson. I didn't know that he suspended Ali.

RC: Yeah, he suspended Ali, and ended up in a lawsuit over it. Ali was suspended for refusing to be drafted into the US Military because of his religious beliefs and his opposition to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. But Benny Perrot, like I said, Lester Wolf was right at him and Dooley had to appear at several congressional hearings, and this was another reason why I left New York state, because I didn't want to get caught in the crossfire of that. Because they became really strict with their suspensions and their EEG tests, and they were far beyond any other state in the country and it was the toughest state here to deal with. In my case, I knew that different states have different regulations so why go through all that turmoil when I could box somewhere else?

RBG: Yeah, I understand that. Do you think he got close to outlawing the sport?

RC: Lester Wolf? No, this went on for a while. With Boom Boom Mancini, they started making a fuss, but there's too much big money in it...too much big money and it's not a national thing. It's actually a world sport where you have other countries involved.

RBG: Sure.

RC: If it were up to the United States and England, it might have a little bit of a shot, but there's just too much money. It's like the NFL, there's too much money.

RBG: That's what I was going to ask you. Is there a parallel you could draw from boxing to the NFL?

RC: Well, I'll tell you there was a young lady that just got...Rhonda Rousey...

RBG: I saw that, and everybody in the gym has been talking about that fight. Did you see that?

RC: I got invited to see it, and I wasn't doing too good that night. But I did catch part of it, and I kind of predicted that she was going to get it because this girl had a good boxing history behind her, and I knew if this other Holly girl stayed away and used her ability that she would win and she did.

RBG: Oh, yeah, and what did it go, ninety seconds, the fight?

RC: She really put it to her—pinned her ears back as we say in the business.

RBG: She was a boxer and Rousey's a wrestler...

RC: Yes, and she never got to wrestle.

RBG: She never got to wrestle, because she had one move that ended all of her fights rapidly was that choke hold.

RC: Yeah, and she made the mistake of not cutting the ring off. Holly Holmes was a lefty. So, it was pretty much all Holly's way.

But I just found out that the UFC that governs the MMA just levied a six month suspension for Rhonda Rouse. And I couldn't be any more ecstatic about it.

RBG: What was the reason for the suspension, Ray?

RC: Well, because she took such a beating, and I think they said upon the negativity of the CAT scan. See negative is good—people think it's the opposite. But pending the negativity of the CAT scan it could either be shortened or prolonged. And for somebody to levy a six month suspension, I find that so applaudable. Because I wonder where the NFL is now.

RBG: Well, that's a good point, and CAT scans are gross measures. What would actually be better would be a functional magnetic resonance imaging where you could see the more microscopic aspects of the injury. But for them to put her out for six months is a pretty powerful move.

RC: Yes, well you know, boxing has been way ahead of everybody else. Back in my day they had 30 day suspensions for a knockout.

RBG: I remember that.

RC: And during the Perrot era, and now they've lengthened that to 60 and sometimes 90 days in some states. So where's the NFL when they get a concussion? They leave it up to the doctor and the guy can be back in a week?

RBG: And sometimes they come back in the same game.

RC: But money talks, you see because you know the other thing about the NFL or any of the other pro sports—all these athletes have long-term contracts, Doc, even if they get hurt. What is the sense of, outside of wanting to win, rushing them back? In a boxer's case, we don't fight, we don't get paid, so there's an urgency to get back.

RBG: It's a whole different set of economics, Ray, when you think about it that way.

RC: It certainly is, and look at the objective of the sports. MMA the motive is to knock your opponent unconscious—a hit to the head you get rewarded for that. In hockey and football, you get penalized for that, and yet their regulations are a little more lax. Well, bigger money. You know, they're doing a great job as far as trying to monitor these things. But, yet, to me, I'd love to see a thirty day suspension for any concussion.

RBG: In football?

RC: In football and hockey.

Stay tuned to NeuroNotes for Part Two of our interview with Ray when our conversation focuses in on football and violence in sports.