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Part 3 of Our Interview with Ray Ciancaglini: How Can We Prevent Brain Injuries in Sports?

In the conclusion to our interview with Ray Ciancaglini, we discussed how to prevent brain injury in sports. Ray also reveals some interesting communication he had with Sony about the movie production of *Concussion*, the recent film in which Will Smith plays Dr. Omalu, who discovered the first case of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) in the brain of Mike Webster.

Dr. Rolf B. Gainer (RBG): So Ray, you're a grandfather, going to be a grandfather again soon, if one of your grandchildren came to you and said they wanted to start boxing or playing football in high school, what would you say to them?

Ray Ciancaglini (RC) : Well, I would wish them the best of luck and tell them it's a grueling sport and you really have to work hard. I would teach them about concussion, and on their very first one, now we're in a different league, okay, now, when it comes to children, this is where I'm gonna open up a real can of worms here. Children, their brain is developing. Concussion is a whole different ballgame with them. You have to be extremely careful because it is prone to swelling, and as far as the development goes, you don't want to curtail that or hurt that either.

RBG: Right.

RC: I would say you play any sport you want to play, but if you get your bell rung, now we have to address it properly, but when it comes to children we really have to address it properly. This is why, and I've got to bring up this question. And it brings up controversy but they all mumble when I bring up this question. Why is it, and God forbid, I don't want this to happen, but we have 7 or 8 deaths a year in high school football from hits to the head.

RBG: More than that, I think it was 16 this year.

RC: Oh my gosh, I didn't know it was that much.

RBG: Yeah, I just read that last night, and I was floored.

RC: Okay, but in college, fortunately we haven't had any. We haven't had any in the NFL that I can remember. You can go way back in history, that's not to say people don't get paralyzed, people don't get long term damage.

RBG: Yeah, I think that's the issue is the long-term damage in football.

RC: Why in high school? Because we go back to my second impact syndrome. The brain is developing and prone to swelling. Now, there's another theory to this also. A lot of these kids get hurt away from the sport. I mean they fall on the playground, they fall on a skateboard or off a bicycle, and they don't tell anyone. So now they get to the game, and they get that second hit on the head.

MJC: And nobody knows that it's the second one, that's a good point.

RC: Yeah, they say, well, gee, it wasn't a hard hit, but they don't know that it was the second injury.

RBG: They did a study in Ontario province and found that 50% of the kids in high school had a history of concussions, more than one.

RC: And they just didn't tell anyone that they did it. And here we go with the coaches and the athletic trainers—they're doing the best they can and you know with the kids it has to be taken...

RBG: Well that's a great answer, Ray, that it has to be taken at a different level, and I wouldn't disagree with that. I think both you and I never told our family when we had concussions.

RC: No, but again when you're older you can re-coop a little better than the children can. I'm even a little more strict here, because I've had a lot of influence on the changing of the rules for youth sports, for example, limiting hitting to one day a week in football practice, and we're teaching better tackling techniques. But, if it were my child I would sit them out for one year if they received a concussion. You've gotta let that brain heal. So I'm very strict.

RBG: I'm with you Ray, and I think that's a very powerful statement about where you're at.

RC: To put a brain, and such a beautiful life, to take any chance that something could go wrong...I don't know. And this is coming from a guy with dementia. If I can figure that out, my gosh!

RBG: You do pretty well for a guy with that diagnosis, Ray.

RC: Well, thanks, sometimes my heart does most of the talking, though.

RBG: Your heart does a pretty good job.

RC: Thank you, but, hopefully, you know, sometimes coaching on that level, it's parents and they're volunteers. God bless them for the time they put in, but I think we have to do a little bit more education to help them do a better job—especially when it comes to concussion.

RBG: Well, that's what I wanted to get to and I'm so glad that you articulated it so well is around kids and around injuries as they start to develop. But then, Ray, we get to former athletes, former football players, former boxers, yourself who've got long-term problems. Are we helping them? Are we doing the right thing to give them the help they need?

RC: Well, the horse has long been out of the barn, doctor.

RBG: So you think that, what are you saying, too late?

RC: Well, I think we can help us be more comfortable. We can help to maybe slow down the process, but when you have that kind of damage, it's really hard to...

RBG: Yeah, I understand that. The damage is there.

RC: But I think the focus is the future, to prevent it from happening to anybody else, and that's why we're donating our brains and going through the testing so that this doesn't happen to anyone else. It all happened through not being educated—nobody knew.

RBG: Well, you kind of asked the question which I was going to ask you next which is why is so difficult for folks who coach or train or have kids playing in the field or boxing in the ring to get the message?

RC: Some of it is living in denial. Some of it is thinking that some are a little more durable than others. And there's a few out there that just, you know, winning is more important. But I don't find that to be the high percentage. I think 98% of them are great, and the more education we can give them, the better they're going to be. I think education is the most important, you know, in the last 8 or 9 years it's really gotten attention and most people were surprised. They had no idea that long-term damage like this could be caused by a bump on the head. So the education is going to be the key.

RBG: And that's what you do so well in your work with Second Impact and the way you reach out to coaches and athletes themselves. So I guess that's where it's at in regard to education. Ray, you probably follow this guy, Chris Borland, who quit early on in his career after a concussion.

RC: Yeah, he's a football player, right?

RBG: Yes, the NFL declared him the most dangerous man in the sport. Had you heard that?

RC: Whoa! He's a very intelligent young man and he didn't want to take a chance. He's made good money and he's going to use it for his college education, and to bolster his career. He doesn't want to take a chance, I, my God, we live in America, don't we?

RBG: Well, last I checked we do live in America. But apparently, the NFL was responding to how strong a message he's been putting out to other athletes about, kind of what you're talking about, that if you get a bad hit, get out of the game.

RC: Well, I want to go a bit farther here. The NFL with this new movie, *Concussion*, coming out with Will Smith and Alec Baldwin. It was brought to my attention that the NFL made them change segments of that movie.

RBG: Yeah, I'd heard that, that there was a lot of pressure from the NFL on that.

RC: Now I come in. I was approached by Sony Productions. They wanted to do my documentary at the beginning of their movie. Okay, they were going to fly me wherever they were setting up. They kept calling me and emailing me, I've got the emails. They just couldn't come up with a timely, um, what do you call that, a time and place.

RBG: Get a schedule going or something like that?

RC: Yeah, but then all of the sudden, things started to change a little bit. They started to say no, we don't want you to be too strong with this and that, and well, I heard they canned me. And I heard from a good source that the message was not probably what the, um what's the word, conducive?

RBG: Yes, you weren't going to be politically appropriate?

RC: I might have been scaring people a little, and those people might have been the NFL, who knows? I have a pretty good idea, so I got canned. Can you believe that?

RBG: So you have something in common with Chris Borland, then?

RC: My message was...it was great for Sony and their message when they first saw it, and then somebody else got involved and said well, you know that could be too much information being given out.

RBG: Well, I think they put a lot of pressure on people. They put a lot of pressure on Will Smith, the actor who played Omalu.

RC: I would say this to anybody, because I have the emails saved, right from Sony Productions. I have the phone records—how long they talked to me on the phone.

RBG: Would you want us to put that in the interview?

RC: It's common knowledge. You know when you read those email. Now, you can speculate and say "he's full of baloney, they just found somebody else," but, okay, that's an out, but isn't that awful peculiar?

RBG: It's peculiar, and I didn't know that, that they had been in touch with you. Wow!

RC: And for whatever reason, my message was scrapped, you know?

RBG: Well, I've heard you speak and I like your message.

RC: They liked it and they were going to use it for the documentary at the beginning of the movie, and then all of the sudden it got scrapped for some unknown reason. And I guess that's the best way without being sued to put it, but it's the truth and it really bothered me for a while there. Then I kept reading and seeing where the NFL put pressure on them and made them change segments of the movie.

RBG: Yeah, that's what I heard about it, and George Visger's been speaking out a lot about that.

RC: But why change the truth?

RBG: Well the truth gets changed every day in the newspaper.

RC: It sure does. We go back to the money again. Anywhere you look, there's a story to tell, and when I tell mine, I usually get documentation behind it. That's the way you have to do things.

RBG: It's a powerful point, Ray. And I think it's where you and I have a lot in common and a very similar view of the world.

RC: Well again, with the boxing commission, it's so much money that everyone kind of overlooks what they do. It's too powerful, they can make their own rules as they go along, like the bully that you played football with as a kid. He'd change the rules, and nobody ever questioned the bully because he had so much power. Same thing with them (the NFL) nobody questions what they do. You see it in politics too, where some people get questioned and some people get a free pass.

RBG: Well, we don't want to talk about politics in this interview, because then we'd get in serious trouble, Ray.

RC: Yeah, but it's kind of similar. NFL is there to stay, and they're going to circumvent everything, they're gonna mince the words, and it's all under the guise, the words are under the guise. I don't know how you put it.

RBG: No, that's exactly how I would put it, under the guise. Thanks, Ray for agreeing to this interview.

For more information about Ray's important work in prevention of and education about sports related concussion, [click here to check out his organization The Second Impact.](#)