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ATHLETICS

Former boxer tells cautionary tale to Athens Area students

By DAVE POST
Sports Editor

ATHENS — Whenever dignitaries come to our little Valley, people turn out to hear what they have to say.

Recently, a speaker came to the Valley without much fanfare to tell a cautionary tale that could have a far greater impact than most.

As long as his audience was paying attention and taking his words to heart, the 150 Athens Area students in attendance at Ray Ciancaglini's talk on Wednesday could derive great benefit.

Ciancaglini was brought to the Valley through an association with Athens trainer Steve Hicks and the Post-concussion Support Group.

"The concussion issue is significant (in the Valley)," said Hicks. "We deal with many concussions but the big thing is treating them properly at first."

For athletes, that includes making sure to be symptom-free before returning to competition.

Hicks does baseline testing through impact using the King-Devick test, then can administer the test on the sideline after an injury. If the athlete makes a mistake without making a correction or is a second off the base time it's an automatic removal from play.



Dave Post/Morning Times

Former boxer Ray Ciancaglini addresses Athen Area students about his experiences with concussions.

"It's a built-in safety mechanism for us and the coaches," said Hicks, who added that the athlete had to pass other tests as well to get back to competition. "The big thing is to get them treated properly first," said Hicks.

Such checks and balances weren't there for Ray Ciancaglini back in the 1970s.

"We didn't know back then (what we know now about concussions)," said Ciancaglini, who was a boxer 40 years ago when he got his first concussion and who has been diagnosed with dementia pugilistica and Parkinson's syndrome.

Back then, athletes were encouraged to tough out a hit to the head and go on. That was where Ciancaglini says he went wrong.

Ciancaglini spoke on Wednesday in the hope that he would be able to convince some in the audience to heed the concussion warnings that are so prevalent today.

"I knew where I went wrong, so I knew that concussion education was the key," he said. "We just didn't understand. We didn't have the research studies that we have today, so it was all very misunderstood."

Ciancaglini has been sounding the alarm for 20 years after suffering from post-concussion symptoms, but it has only been recently that his message was getting traction as he attempts to help student athletes avoid the "life-altering mistakes" that he made.

"It never got attention 20 years ago, but the last seven or eight I'm so busy," Ciancaglini said, adding. "I couldn't be any more grateful that the message is getting out. I had 40 years to ponder what went wrong."

What went wrong for Ciancaglini came down to a lack of concussion education, peer pressure and a tough-guy mentality that has caused many concussions to go unreported in the past.

"I'm a victim of my own determination and desire," Ciancaglini said.

In one example, he spoke of failing an electroencephalogram (EEG) test in New York in 1971. The state of New York suspended him until he could repeat the test and go before the state's medical advisory board.

"A lot of the old-timers told me to go to another state where it's not regulated."

He took that advice and has regretted doing so.

"We didn't know the severity of it, so I went to other states and used alias names," he said. "Little did I know I was circumventing a system that was put in place to help me."

Ciancaglini speaks at high schools because of one particular concern.

"My concern at the high school level is having an athlete hide it, and then getting one on top of the other," he said. "I'm not so concerned with the accumulation at that level, I'm more concerned with the accumulation later on when they move into the college or pro ranks."

Ciancaglini acknowledged that the attention given the concussion issue in football has helped give him the opportunity to get the word out.

"Before, they looked at me as a former boxer," he said. "(Their attitude was) 'you boxers deserve that.' Then when they found out it was happening to football players, they were taking a little firmer stand."

Concussions aren't just an issue on the gridiron.

"It goes year to year from

sport to sport," said Hicks, who added there were a number of concussions in volleyball last year. "One year, we had multiple concussions with cheerleading.

"The biggest thing is getting them, as Ray said, evaluated early and treated properly."

Concussions aren't just an issue for athletes. A simple slip on the ice or an accident while driving or riding could lead to a concussion.

Ciancaglini cited his wife, Patricia, and many true friends for helping him get through years of not just memory issues, but also depression and seclusion.

"I went through that," he said. "Only through the strong support at home (have I made it through). My wife has been with me 38 years and it hasn't been easy. She's been with me through thick and thin and I have some very good friends who keep me from going back down that road.

"Now, I'm fighting back," he said. "It's my nature to fight back. I'm not going to let the dementia beat me. I'm going to be right after it as long as I can."