

The Piscataquis Observer

Boxer shares his struggles in and out of the ring for concussion awareness

[Stuart Hedstrom](#) • January 24, 2017

DOVER-FOXCROFT — During his time as a professional middleweight boxer as a teen and young adult Ray Ciancaglini took pride in having never been knocked out or even knocked down in the ring. But there was one opponent that Ciancaglini could not get past as concussions sustained in-between the ropes ended his career at age 23 and left him with lifelong health challenges.

Since putting down his gloves over four decades ago, Ciancaglini has made it his life's work to share his story and raise awareness of the dangers of concussions and the need for prevention and proper treatment through his The Second Impact Concussion Awareness program (<http://www.thesecondimpact.com>). Ciancaglini spoke on Jan. 18 at Foxcroft Academy during a public seminar hosted by the school and the Maine Concussion Management Initiative (<http://web.colby.edu/mcmi/> and on Facebook) of Colby College in Waterville and funded through the Maine Community Foundation.

In her introductory remarks, Foxcroft Academy Athletic Trainer and Assistant Director of Athletics Jaclyn Tourtelotte said changes have been made at the school and other institutions across the country to help better treat student-athletes with head injuries. "Early detection has helped us tremendously in pulling kids out and getting treated," she said. Tourtelotte said through Mayo Regional Hospital Pony athletes are receiving all the proper care, and they are being kept engaged in the school community as much as possible while they recover.

She said Ciancaglini "is a great advocate for concussion care and follow-up care." The former pugilist said, "Every successful boxer knows the importance of having an experienced and knowledgeable trainer working in their corner, and here at Foxcroft Academy this is second to none."

Standing at a podium with sheets of notes to not lose his train of thought during his presentation to Foxcroft Academy coaches, medical professionals and others, Ciancaglini said he boxed for close to a decade. "My only regret as a boxer is I didn't defeat my toughest opponent, and that is a concussion. I fought this invisible opponent throughout my boxing career." Ciancaglini said he has been coping with Parkinson's disease and dementia pugilistic for many years. Saying the choice to box and continue to fight in the ring was his, Ciancaglini said the progressive disorders are the direct result of not having the concussions he sustained be properly addressed.

“I endorse and encourage all sports,” Ciancaglini said, saying he would not try to dissuade a young athlete from taking part in any athletic pursuit. He said competitors accept risk and concussions are hard to prevent “but what is preventable is when an athlete who has sustained a concussion returns to the field before the symptoms of the concussion have subsided.”

“The No. 1 question I’m asked is how many concussions until you retire,” Ciancaglini said, saying there is no set number as physicians handle patients on an individual basis. “The symptoms of concussion are the red flags that something’s wrong, that’s mother nature’s way of telling you.”

Ciancaglini said suspected concussions — either by the athlete or those around them — should be reported immediately, and he said it is imperative the athlete does not return until cleared. “My condition could have been avoided if I didn’t ignore the concussion symptoms,” he said. Age 6 is when Ciancaglini said his interest in boxing began, when in 1957 he saw Carmen Basilio defeat middleweight boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson on a black and white television with a large crowd gathered at his grandparents’ restaurant in western New York state. Soon after Ciancaglini hung a filled laundry bag in the back of the restaurant and began to punch away.

He said he began competing in the ring at 14 and at 16, “I had everything going for me.” He said during a bout at the Buffalo Memorial Auditorium an opponent’s right hook landed on the back of his head and Ciancaglini then began to suffer vision and hearing impairment. “I fought through it and won a unanimous decision,” he said. “I just passed it off as being physically worn down. I resumed training even though I had persistent headaches and fatigue, little did I know this was the beginning of all my troubles.

“I got my bell rung for the second time in one week and the fog lingered and affected me to the point where I struggled in the post-fight interview,” he said, about his next bout a short time later in Syracuse, N.Y.

Ciancaglini said he went from being a well behaved honor student to failing and sleeping in class and he developed a resentment toward authority figures “and nobody knew why.” He said was fooled into thinking that nothing was serious. Ciancaglini had been awarded the Golden Glove Heart Award for his determination, “That gave me the false impression I was invincible.”

Consulting the advice of retired boxers on how to cope with lingering headaches, Ciancaglini was told this was part of the sport. “Don’t get me wrong, the old-timers were not giving me bad advice they just didn’t know better,” he said.

“I thought boxing was my whole life, and instead of seeking proper advice I sought my own remedies,” Ciancaglini said. He said he would take caffeine pills to cope with the constant fatigue and high doses of aspirin for the headaches. The latter medication thinned Ciancaglini’s blood to the point where during another bout in Buffalo he sustained a cut that would not stop bleeding, leading to the fight doctor stopping the action after four rounds.

“Some athletes have to be protected from themselves,” Ciancaglini said. He said in 1971 his New York state boxing license was withheld based on the results of an electroencephalogram, which measures the brain’s electrical activity. Ciancaglini then fought elsewhere in states with little or no regulations at all, competing under assumed names.

In 1973 another EEG showed abnormal results. “I circumvented a New York policy that was in place to protect me,” Ciancaglini said about his competition between the pair of exams. Retiring from boxing in 1974 when he was 23, Ciancaglini said the symptoms remained. He said at first he was depressed with the reality that he would never be the middleweight champion and threw out all the memorabilia from his career. Ciancaglini said he attended a clinic for treatment but left after 10 days as he traveled around the country for several months. “The expression you can run but can’t hide became a reality,” he said.

Returning to western New York, Ciancaglini enrolled in college with the goal of teaching physical education but he said he failed during the first semester as a result of concentration problems caused by his condition. He got a job with Eastman Kodak in Rochester, N.Y. but had to retire at 44 due to hand tremors from the Parkinson’s and dementia pugilistic, “the direct result of untreated concussions, I repeat untreated concussions.”

“If Carmen Basilio had told me about the need for resting, I would have listened,” Ciancaglini said, hoping young athletes will heed his own advice.

“The most important message I want athletes to take away from me is honesty,” he said, saying his brain will be donated after he dies to the Boston University School of Medicine. “It is imperative they are honest about symptoms and they must be honest about symptoms in rehab.” “I have had 40 years to ponder what went wrong and the lack of concussion awareness and peer pressure led to my demise,” Ciancaglini said. He said that despite the headaches he was still winning matches but not as decisively as earlier in his career. Ciancaglini said exterior made the pain in his head worse, so he was holding back and this led to fight observers questioning his desire.

Ciancaglini said he has two quotes he repeats to others, “leave no doubt, wait it out” and “the game you sit out today may save your career tomorrow.”

“Today my life now consists of not what I want to do but what I am capable of,” Ciancaglini said. “I have had a headache every day since I was 16 and now I’m 65.” He said he struggles to sleep more than a few hours at a time as well as having hand tremors.

Ciancaglini said he has good days and bad days, and on bad days he struggles to tie his shoes, remember the names of close friends and cannot leave the house. “I have had my hiking and driving privileges taken away, but the hardest thing is being restricted from taking my granddaughter for walks unsupervised because of memory lapses.”

If given the chance to go back in time, Ciancaglini said he still would have pursued boxing but would have instead immediately sought treatment at the first sign that something was wrong. “Remember I would not be standing here today if I had addressed my first concussion properly,” he said.



Observer photo/Stuart Hedstrom

THANK YOU GLOVE — Retired boxer Ray Ciancaglini, who now shares the story of his own struggles in and out the ring through his The Second Impact Concussion Awareness program, gives a signed glove to Foxcroft Academy Athletic Trainer and Assistant Director of Athletics Jaclyn Tourtelotte at the end of his presentation on Jan. 18 at the school’s student center. Foxcroft Academy and the Maine Concussion Management Initiative hosted a concussion awareness seminar, with funding provided by the Maine Community Foundation to bring Ciancaglini to the state.



Photo courtesy of Foxcroft Academy

CONCUSSION AWARENESS — Speaking at a concussion awareness seminar on Jan. 18 at Foxcroft Academy were, from left, Foxcroft Academy Athletic Trainer and Assistant Director of Athletics Jaclyn Tourtelotte, retired boxer and founder of The Second Impact Concussion Awareness program Ray Ciancaglini and Hannah Willihan of the Maine Concussion Management Initiative of Colby College in Waterville.