

# Concussion

Rochester Hall of Fame boxer devoted to spreading the word about danger of brain trauma

By Ernst Lamothe Jr.

When Ray Ciancaglini speaks before large crowds, he has to arrive at the venue an hour before. He is typically accompanied by a Rochester neurologist. He needs a small boost of caffeine, something he's not permitted to have on regular days. His notes must be printed in big letters and in bullet point form instead of an expanded script.

There can be little to no distractions at all. Finally, doctors adjust his medication, which allows him to be audible for a few hours before his system crashes.

The rituals that Ciancaglini goes through have nothing to do with public speaking anxiety. It has to do with the reason he is giving the speeches in the first place.

Ciancaglini suffers from dementia pugilistica, a neurological disorder that affects those who take multiple blows to the head.

In his case, it was because of boxing, but sports like football, wrestling, lacrosse and soccer also involve steady impact. He condition was entirely avoidable.

"I challenged concussions and I lost," said Ciancaglini, 61, a Rochester Hall of Fame boxer, who speaks at high schools and universities weekly about brain injury trauma.

"Athletes are so vulnerable to the peer pressure of getting back on the field as soon as possible. But that's the problem because once you have multiple concussions that are not treated properly, you are headed on a dangerous road."

A concussion is a temporary unconsciousness caused by a blow to the head. It is especially becoming a problem for young students. In the past decade, 6 percent of the 2.6 million people under the age of 19 were treated for traumatic brain injury.

The number of sports and recreational-related visits because of head trauma increased from 153,375 to 248,418, according to the Brain Trauma Foundation. Football is the most common sport with concussion risk for males at about 75 percent, while soccer is the most common sport with concussion risk for females at 50 percent,

according to the Sports Concussion Institute.

A professional boxer's punch has been registered at 20 miles per hour. A professional football player will receive an estimated 900 to 1,500 blows to the head during a season. Those staggering numbers don't even compare to the estimated 1.6 million to 3.8 million concussions occurring each year. With the concussion figures increasing, officials saw a need for immediate action.

The New York State Concussion Management and Awareness Act went into effect July that set requirements for all students who sustain a brain injury.

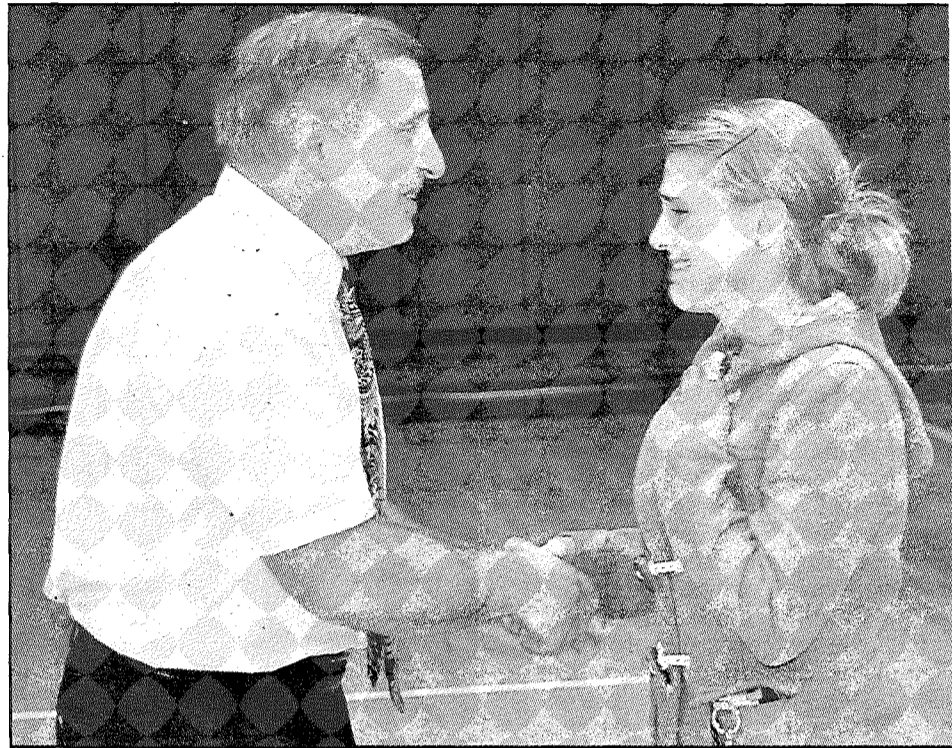
The law requires immediate removal from athletic activities of a student believed to have sustained or who has sustained a mild brain injury. The law states no return until the student is symptom free for at least 24 hours and they must be evaluated and receive written permission to return by a licensed physician. Parents must sign permission slip that contains information relating to concussion.

When it comes to school districts, they are authorized to establish a concussion management team to oversee policy implementation. In addition, school districts, and the New York State education and health departments must post information on their website.

Ciancaglini, who spoke to Keuka College students in October, discusses his story nationwide. He was a boxing journeyman for about six years, but that short stint had a wicked effect on his life. His condition causes his arms and body to tremble slightly, akin to someone dealing with Parkinson's disease. He said for years people ignored the importance of concussion awareness; however, thanks to high-profile athletes telling their heartbreaking stories, all that has changed.

Whether it's a local high school, youth sports clinic or an NFL developmental camp, he now spends his life discussing the impact of going through the protocols before returning to the field. Thanks to his and others' efforts, 39 other states have adopted the New York model of concussion evaluations for youth sports.

"I get emails and letters from



Ray Ciancaglini (left) chatting with Sarah Hillman of Elmira, a senior at Keuka College. She was a member of the team's soccer and lacrosse who suffered numerous concussions. She had to forgo the last two years of her athletic career because of too many concussions

young athletes who ask me can they get away with playing just one more game without telling their coaches they have a concussion," said Ciancaglini, of Romulus. "I convince them that it isn't worth it and I believe the message is resonating."

Educating athletes is essential because it teaches and reinforces the importance of prompt and honest reporting and dispels the myth that being a man means sucking up the pain and pushing forward. Those who have dealt with concussions said it is a good thing that some districts are also re-checking equipment to ensure helmets and protective devices are up to date. Those in charge of protecting their student athletes feel it's their responsibility to put a spotlight on the subject so there will be fewer people rushed back from debilitating concussions.

"Ray's story is one that all athletes, coaches, parents and administrators need to listen to," said John Boccacino,

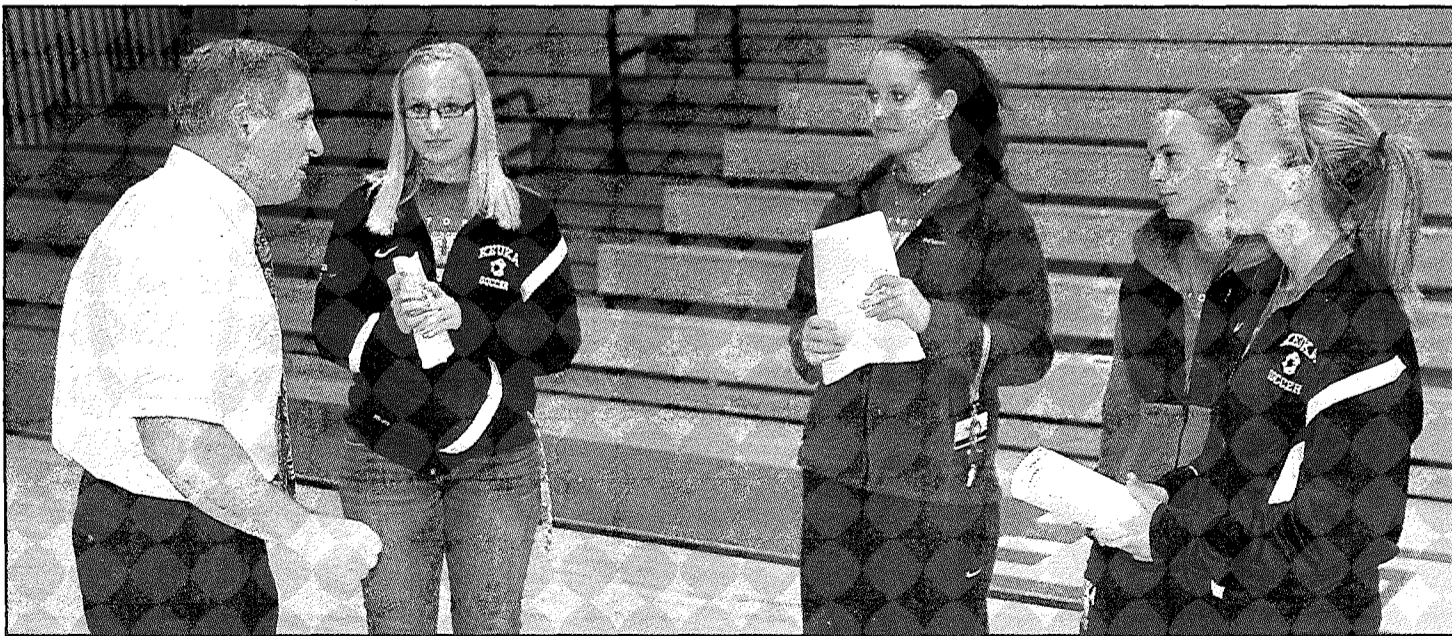
Keuka College's director of sports information. "He was the ultimate competitor who wanted so badly to win, and in the end, his dedication to his sport cost him more than a win in the ring; it cost him his quality of life. Today's student-athletes need to know how important it is to get properly checked out, otherwise they could suffer a fate similar to Ray."

Linda Kohn, director of health care issues for the U.S. Government Accountability Office, spoke at a House Education and Labor Committee meeting several years ago about the issue. She viewed that concussion figures might actually be underestimated and that the problem isn't going away.

"It is clear we need to put more focus on the student part of the student athlete," said Kohn. "A concussion doesn't have to mean the end of a student's athletic career, but without the appropriate management and treatment, it could have serious implications."

Now school districts are educating classroom teachers to notice signs a student-athlete has been concussed. Students could have serious cognitive difficulties that would impact their classroom learning, such as listlessness, headaches, dizziness and unresponsiveness.

"The sheer number of concussed athletes is always alarming since good technique, sportsmanship and good protective devices should help to reduce the number," said Cindy Devore, state chairwoman of the Committee on School Health and Sports Medicine for the American Academy of Pediatrics Division II. "What alarms me is not so much one statistic, but it is the astounding opposition and pressure from parents who insist their concussed athletes should skirt school protocols or New York state law and return to participate because 'tonight is the big game.'"



Ray Ciancaglini (left) talking with Keuka College students about concussions.