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JASPER-TROUPSBURG

'Leave no doubt, sit it out'

Former boxer packs punch with presentation on concussions

By Al Bruce
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JASPER — Boxer Ray Ciancaglini was a promising regional middleweight before repeated blows to

the head scrambled his brain and ended his career at age 20.

Ciancaglini now fights in another ring: teaching student athletes, coaches, school officials and parents

across New York State how to battle sports-related brain injuries before the concussions that stopped him shorten other lives

SEE CONCUSSIONS, A2



Former fighter Ray Ciancaglini presents Jasper-Troupsburg athletic director Jean M. Green with a boxing glove. PHOTO PROVIDED.

CONCUSSIONS

From Page A1

and careers.

His presentation to nearly 200 people at Jasper-Troupsburg one night last week was part of his commitment to raise awareness among teenagers and parents about the dangers of multiple concussions.

His blunt remarks were spell-binding: Middle- and high-school students sat seemingly riveted to their seats. Nobody whispered, not a single cough or snuffle interrupted the description of unwise post-concussion decisions that cost him a normal life.

His mantra now: "Leave no doubt, sit it out." If you have the symptoms of a head injury, don't re-enter the fray. "Make the smart choice. Get a medical opinion," he said more than once.

Ciancaglini focused on second-impact syndrome (SIS), the dangerous results of second concussions that hit developing young brains still healing from previous injuries. SIS causes brain swelling and bleeding that can cause death or permanent disability.

"If you hurt your brain, everything's affected," he counseled. Teenage brains "are still developing and especially sensitive" to trauma.

Ciancaglini's simple recommendation for avoiding SIS: Remove concussed athletes from practice or play until symptoms disappear and health-care professionals clear them to play.

After his first concussion, Ciancaglini admitted he walked in a haze of headaches. Some advisors accused him of sloth: "Get out there and fight," one counseled.

He self-medicated with hundreds of vitamin B tablets and aspirin: "Handfuls of aspirin for the headaches," he said.

One week after the now-obvious fight concussion, Ciancaglini fought and lost his career and a normal life. And, because of the anticoagulant aspirin, a lot of blood.

Thanks to volunteers and a loving wife, he adapts and takes pharmacies of medications four times daily. "I'm okay for just enough time to make a speech."

But on his way home, what medicos call Dementia Pugilistica and Parkinson's Syndrome start shaking his body. He struggles to get three hours of sleep a night.

Forty years after Ciancaglini lost his normal life, medical professionals know how to prevent those problems. Many area schools, for example, follow protocols similar to Jasper-Troupsburg to prevent SIS. Superintendent Chad Groff explained: "The goal is to provide the interscholastic-athletic experience while keeping students safe. Each athlete is assessed with a neurological baseline test. If someone suffers concussion-like symptoms, she must recover until symptom-free and then retake the baseline test" and obtain a doctor's release.

School athletic director

Jean M. Green was equally blunt: "We cannot ignore symptoms or simply hope the headache goes away before the coach notices. Athletes shouldn't need to adapt a life around permanent brain or memory issues because they want to keep practicing and playing for one more quarter or one more game."

Jasper-Troupsburg athletes take baseline tests in seventh and 10th grades, Green said. No students represent the school without those tests, she said.

The former boxer also helped promote the state concussion-management act that made mandatory last July the protocol Jasper-Troupsburg has followed for several years.

How willing to help fight concussions is Ciancaglini? He speaks gratis, as long as the presentation prompts news coverage for his anti-SIS message.

Ciancaglini is surrounded with friends and adaptations. His typed speech in large letters fits onto a special easel. His checklist includes rows of what goes with him to each presentation and what returns home. His wife Patti lovingly typed the speech and lists.

The first item on the list: His religious scapular, for Ciancaglini a symbol of faith and maybe hope.

A final goodbye and the start of a shaking right hand as his medication starts to wear off. Then the ride home and another night fighting to get a few hours of sleep while hoping his audience remembers instructions for living normal lives.