

# Evening The Tribune

Friday, February 16, 2018

## An ongoing fight against sports concussions



Al Bruce

**R**ay Ciancaglini is a former highly regarded boxer (middleweight 1966-1974) who suffers from Dementia Pugilistica, also known as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, Pugilistic Parkinson's Syndrome, Boxer's Syndrome or Punch-Drunk Syndrome, a neurological disorder that affects career boxers and others who receive multiple blows to the head.

The condition develops over years, with average onset of 16 years after the start of a career in boxing. Symptoms are dementia, with a decline in mental ability; Parkinson's-like tremors, and lack of coordination.

These days, Ray struggles to form complete thoughts and each day is a battle. He has a hard time writing his own name, and often struggles to recognize life-long friends. Early in his boxing career, Ray endured a second impact injury when he absorbed a concussion on top of a previous unhealed concussion.

Ray's durability was his own worst enemy during his boxing career. He had never been knocked out or knocked down which gave him a false sense of infallibility. The cumulative effects of several concussions left his fast hands unreliable and his sharp reflexes dulled.

### Ray had headaches and denial

After Ray's retirement from boxing, throughout the early

1980s, headaches became common place and denial ensued. After a 14-year career at Eastman Kodak, Ray's once impeccable work ethic progressively began slipping. He was forgetting how to perform regular duties at his job, began developing hand tremors and was constantly "dazing out."

After much prodding from family, Ray finally met with medical specialists and was diagnosed with Dementia Pugilistica, a form of second impact injury that lingered from his boxing days.

If left untreated, recurring head trauma can lead to loss of balance, which can result in unwarranted falls and injuries. The post-injury traumas can affect areas of the brain, resulting in lack of comprehension, forgetfulness, repeated sentences during speech, confusion, insomnia and inappropriate behaviors

### Ray wants everyone to understand the problem

The toughest part of Ray's situation is that he knows that the world he lives in every day was mostly avoidable. His mission now is to educate athletes to prevent them from following in his footsteps and unknowingly fall into his world.

Ray's intention is to help spread the word about the destructive nature of second impact injuries and continue in the fight to prevent adolescent and student athletes from suffering repeat head trauma in contact sports.

No athlete is immune to these head injuries, Ray says: wrestling, lacrosse, boxing, football, soccer, softball and

baseball are just a few in a long list of sports where athletes are susceptible to head injuries. With the invincible attitude of athletes today and the peer pressure to perform at a high level, responsibility now shifts to coaches and caregivers to recognize the symptoms of these head injuries to help protect the athletes from themselves, Ray says.

### Play is okay with Stricter Supervision

In summary, Ray said he is "pro-play" but with stricter supervision. "I was a sideline guest last year for the Geneva High Football program," he says. "They had two concussions the entire year and both were handled promptly and properly.

"Football builds character, especially in inner city schools where it is a major deterrent to street problems," he says.

"The Legacy study looks at the brains of ex-NFL players who have had numerous head hits. Every kid should have the experience of playing youth tackle football, whether or not they go on to high school or college football," Ray says. "But every concussion should be handled as they did in Geneva: promptly and properly.

"At every one of my speaking engagements at Upstate New York schools, I point out that I am the extreme example and not the norm," Ray says. "My message: do not do what I did. I endorse all sports if they are strictly supervised."

*The author of this weekly column is the Evening Tribune education reporter.*