

Ray Ciancaglini Has the Heart of a Champion

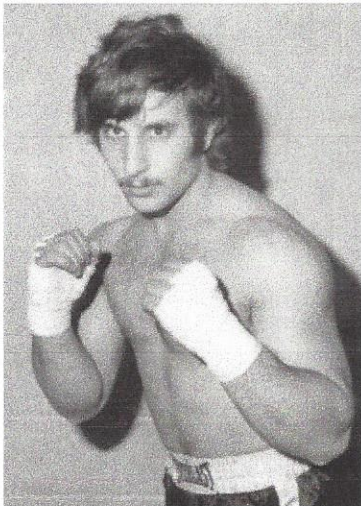
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We recently had the opportunity to interview Ray Ciancaglini about his work in preventing brain injuries from sports. Ray reflected on his boxing career and his own experience with concussions. The following is part one of two and tells the story of Ray's boxing career.

“I had my eyes on the prize.”

At the young age of six, Ray Ciancaglini aspired to become a boxer after watching a Carmen Basilio bout at his family's restaurant. Young Ray ran to the back room, and, after filling a bag with dirty linens, began throwing his first punches. Despite his grandmother catching him that night and telling him to forget about being a boxer, Ray's destiny was set. “I had my eyes on the prize at an early age,” Ray described, and he began boxing at age fourteen. During the amateur segment of his career, Ray vied for two Golden Glove titles. He had been bitten by the boxing bug.

“When I entered the ring in Syracuse, I knew something was wrong.”



Ray Ciancaglini 1969

Two years into his career, at only 16, Ray experienced his first concussion. During a bout in Buffalo, New York, he describes fighting through it, but after taking a punch to the back of his head, he had blurred vision and remembers a fluctuation in the noise of the crowd. He had a fight scheduled in Syracuse a week later. His lingering fatigue and “just not feeling right” stayed with him during the week as he pushed through and prepped for the Syracuse bout. “When I entered the ring in Syracuse, I knew something was wrong.” Ray describes getting his bell rung in the first round, and returning to his corner to vomit in the water bucket. He felt like he was in a fog, but went the distance and lost a close decision. After the fight, during interviews, Ray didn't remember the outcome of the fight.

It was at this fight, when a new battle began. Ray states that “after the second impact injury, everything changed.” What followed was Ray fighting against himself as a former honors student who now struggled to concentrate and even stay awake during classes. He also battled with anyone in a position of authority. Ray pinpoints his rapid personality change to the aftermath of that second concussion within the span of a week. Still, he stayed in the fight game fighting headaches, sleeping excessively and dealing with school problems.

“Gut it up!”

Ray had no idea what was happening to him. He didn't know the warning signs of concussion, and thought, as some people still think today, that you had to get knocked out to sustain a concussion. Ray had never been knocked out, but he knew something was wrong. He sought help at the only place he knew, the gym where he trained. After describing the headaches and fatigue he was experiencing, an “old timer” as Ray called him, jumped up and told Ray that headaches are part of the game. Ray said he was told to “gut it up,” and from there he kept battling through. He self medicated with aspirin to the point that one fight had to be called due to unstoppable bleeding from a cut above his right eye. He took NoDoze to “stay awake” as he struggled with fatigue and sleepiness.

In 1971, Ray failed an EEG test required by the New York State Boxing Commission, but continued to fight in other states not requiring a license and even fought under different aliases. His “relentless determination and desire defied common sense and logic” when he went around the New York State Boxing Commission's Policy. The headaches and foggy thinking continued to wear on him. It was during this time when Ray, the former winner of the Golden Glove Heart Award had people around him question if his heart was still in the ring. He explains this was part of what caused him to push himself even harder. As he fought through the symptoms of multiple concussions, he was still winning his bouts, but he wasn't winning as decisively as before. In an attempt to regain his New York Boxing Commission license he went for a medical examination. The follow up EEG results in 1973 were grossly abnormal and the following year, Ray took a break from the sport of boxing hoping his symptoms would be alleviated by rest. The symptoms persisted, and his boxing career ended. He punctuated this ending by throwing out all of his memorabilia. On the advice of a friend, he checked himself into a mental health facility where he stayed for ten days. Ray received a diagnosis of severe depression which he couldn't accept and discharged against medical advice. He travelled the country, stating that he took “refuge in the National Parks.” It was as if Ray had lost himself and was adrift in the world.

“To answer the bell for the toughest fight of my life.”

Ray used all of his experiences to ready himself for round two, and as he says, “to answer the bell for the toughest fight of my life.” He was going to keep punching, and he was going to make a difference in the lives of many. In Part II, we will tell you what happened after Ray made the decision that he would never give up.