

Former boxer Ray Ciancaglini urges concussion awareness

By Paul Gotham

WATKINS GLEN, Dec. 13 -- Ray Ciancaglini spoke to more than 600 students and staff of Watkins Glen Central School District Thursday about the need for concussion awareness.

The former professional boxer conveyed a cautionary tale which all students, athletes and non-athletes need to hear.

A lifetime spent dealing with the consequences of poor choices made during his youth gives Ciancaglini a unique opportunity to help younger generations.

“It’s good for someone like Ray who was a professional athlete and not a health-care professional to advocate playing sports, but he is advocating doing it safely,” said Jim Somerville, the Watkins Glen Central School District trainer. “I can tell kids until the cows home that this is what we need to do, this how you need to treat this, but they think because I am a trainer I am going to go way over on the other side.”

With the awareness of head injuries on the rise because of the growing concern in the National Football League, Ciancaglini’s message is emphatic: “The game you sit out today could be the career you save tomorrow.”

Somerville took Ciancaglini’s message a step further as he emphasized the need for all students to hear what Ray has to say.

“I wanted to get Ray in front of the student body to raise awareness of the concussion issue from the standpoint that it doesn’t have to be just athletes,”



Somerville continued. "It can be kids out doing recreational things like riding the ATV or even playground injuries. I wanted to make sure Ray spoke to the entire school body."

Once a promising young boxer, Ciancaglini's life changed when he failed to seek proper medical treatment for a concussion and reentered the ring. Now, he has dedicated his life to mentoring today's youth who may face a similar decision. More than four decades after his last professional fight, Ciancaglini suffers from Dementia Pugilistica and Parkinson's Syndrome. He takes medication to cope with its effects.

Initially, Ciancaglini suffered from fatigue as a result of his first concussion. He slept for hours, only to wake and still feel tired. Forty years later, he can only sleep for three hours at a time. Somerville mentioned the positive discussions he had with students after they heard Ray's speech.

"I think they came away from the presentation and recognized that they have to be honest and get it (a concussion) treated instead of putting it off," Somerville said. "He put in their minds that it doesn't necessarily have to be a sporting event. It can be anything."

Somerville explained a situation during this school year when two elementary students sustained concussions as the result of a collision on the playground.

"That was just on the playground and with little kids," Somerville said. "It's definitely out there."

As the school district's trainer, Somerville has had numerous interactions with student-athletes who have possibly suffered a concussion. He now can echo Ray's words.

"The biggest thing is to be honest," Somerville said. "Even though you may have to miss a game or some time, it's worth it to get better, so you don't experience the same thing Ray has over the course of his lifetime. That's my biggest thing. Be honest with me, so we can get you back in there, and you can play normally and safely."

Ciancaglini's story has been featured on ABC's Good Morning America, and the New York State Athletic Trainer's Association has endorsed him. Ciancaglini, along with New York State Senator Mike Nozzolio, combined their efforts in passing the Concussion Management Awareness Act. The legislation requires coaches, teachers and other school personnel to be trained on the symptoms of mild traumatic brain injuries and the importance of proper medical treatment.

Ciancaglini is the founder of The Second Impact, an organization dedicated to concussion awareness. The foundation has an Internet website (www.thesecondimpact.com) where students and families can read more about Ray's story.

Ciancaglini and The Second Impact recently organized and presented an Educational Seminar on Concussions at the Belhurst Castle in Geneva, New York. The evening featured presentations by Dr. Jason Feinberg, the Chief Medical Officer of Finger Lakes Health; Dr. Jeff Bazarian of the University of Rochester Medical Center; Jeff Bray of Keuka College's athletic trainers' department, and Tom Del Papa of Finger Lakes Health.

In past months, Ciancaglini has spoken at Canisius College, Ithaca College and St. Bonaventure University.

Photo in text: Watkins Glen School District Trainer Jim Somerville, left, with former boxer Ray Ciancaglini. *(Photo by Steve Plopper)*