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Schools required to have policy for head injuries

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Ray Ciancaglini was a middleweight boxer who never was knocked down in seven years, he told the East High football teams.

Ciancaglini, who grew up in Geneva, also shared another important part of his boxing career Friday afternoon.

"I'm still paying the price for gutting out a concussion," the 61-year-old Romulus resident said. "My life consists of not what I want to do, but what I'm capable of doing.

"I've had a headache every day since I was 16."

Ciancaglini shares the story of his improper treatment of a concussion more than ever, as head injuries in sports are a growing concern from the youth to professional levels.

"It cost me my quality of life and potential," Ciancaglini cautioned the



**Ray
Ciancaglini**

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players.

School districts are now required to pay closer attention to how they help athletes and their parents deal with concussions. The Concussion Management and Awareness Act, a state law that went into effect on July 1, requires districts to have a policy in place on how to deal with the head injuries.

The state's largest high school sports sanctioning body is passing along recommendations for those concussion management plans to its 780 member schools, including those in Section V.

Dr. Jeffrey Bazarian is an associate professor of emergency medicine, neurology and neurosurgery at the University of Rochester Medical Center. He was part of a panel that put together the recommendations by the New York State Public High School Athletic Association.

"It's a big step in the right direction," Bazarian said of the law and recommendations. "It treats a concussion like the legitimate injury that it is.

"It takes it seriously; it's considering the long-term neurological health of the student."

The law also requires all coaches, physical education teachers, nurses and certified trainers to complete a course ap-

proved by the state education department on concussion management every two years.

Any athlete believed to have suffered a concussion or mild traumatic brain injury must be taken out of the game immediately. They are sidelined for the rest of the game and not allowed to practice or play until symptom-free for 24 hours.

A licensed physician then must give written approval before the athlete can practice or play again.

The recommendations by the NYSPHSAA, which are not mandates, encourage districts to have boards of education create a policy on concussion management.

A five-day step process for athletes who want to return to action after they have suffered a concussion also is recommended by the high school sports sanctioning body.

The NYSPHSAA also suggests that each school district develop a team that would put into place and monitor the concussion management pro-

gram.

"We feel that this is something that should not catch our member schools off-guard," NYSPHSAA assistant executive director Todd Nelson said.

"We've been talking about this for years."

The law, which Nelson said the NYSPHSAA supports, still comes up short, according to Michael Kaplen, chairperson of the New York State Traumatic Brain Injury Services Coordinating Council.

Kaplen, an attorney, is on the board of directors for the Brain Injury Association of New York State, for which he was a past president.

"If you are going to make a law to protect children and their most important organ, do it right," Kaplen said.

Kaplen sees no protection provided by the law to children in youth sports. The 24-hour, concussion symptom-free period is "totally unacceptable," according to Kaplen.

"It doesn't comport with current medical thinking," he said. "It pro-

vides everybody with a false sense of security.

"It's a dangerous period. It may take many days for this injury to evolve."

Kaplen points out that the law fails to call for uniform standards, including the requirement that districts perform preseason baseline testing.

While baseline testing is just one of the tools districts should use, Kaplen said "it's an important component of concussion management."

Cost and the differences in size and financial resources among school districts were reasons why the panel stayed away from adding baseline testing to the NYSPHSAA's recommendations.

"It was so all of the districts could do all of the same things," Bazarian said. "We could not recommend an expensive computer test.

"Not every district could do that."

The new law also fails to address another financial question, according to Kaplen.

"What happens to a child who doesn't improve

CONCUSSION LAW

The Concussion Management and Awareness Act requires:

» All coaches, physical education teachers, nurses and certified trainers to complete a state-approved course bi-annually.

» Removal of any athlete believed to have suffered a concussion and no entry of that individual into that game.

» Athletes are symptom-free for at least 24 hours before they practice or play.

» Written permission from a licensed physician before an athlete returns to school sports activities.

and needs further treatment, who needs further care?" he said. "Who is going to pay the cost for this child's needs?"

Kaplen said that the new law also "ignores" the academic fate of a student after they suffer a concussion, and is "vague" about the level of training a physician needs in order to provide clearance for an athlete's return.

"Unfortunately, many physicians are not properly trained to make this decision," Kaplen said.

Ciancaglioni believes one of the worst decisions he made was to dismiss his mild but persistent concussion symptoms after he was punched in the back of the head during a match.

The former boxer said he fought for another four years with the symptoms.