

'EVERY FIGHT WAS A WAR'

Ex-boxer Ray Ciancaglini, suffering the effects of repeated head injuries, to receive Courage Award

By **CHRIS MARQUART**
Finger Lakes Times

Ray Ciancaglini lives with a combination of dementia and Parkinson's disease-like symptoms, the result of repeated head trauma he suffered during a long-ago boxing career.

In March, the Varick resident launched The Second Impact, an initiative aimed at warning young athletes about the dangers of concussions and the importance of proper recovery from head injuries. It started with a few speeches at area schools and is blossoming into a regional venture.



Ciancaglini

It's a big reason the Rochester Boxing Hall of Fame is honoring Ciancaglini Saturday at its 21st annual banquet. James "Quick" Tillis, Bobby Czyz and Ron Lyle headline the festivities at the Diplomat Banquet Hall in Rochester.

Ciancaglini, 60, will receive the Jerry Flynn Courage Award.

"Ray is a fine man," lauded Mark Irwin, chairman of the 2011 banquet and Rochester Boxing Hall of Fame board member. "He is a good example of a boxer who has been upstanding in the community. Ray's name came up not only for what he has done with boxing, but also for The Second Impact."

"This really is an honor. It makes a lot of everything worth it," remarked Ciancaglini, whose hands tremble with a combination of emotion and uncontrollable tremors that have increased incrementally over the last 40 years. "This life, this disease, there are no scars. There are no bruises or marks. You just look like a guy that shakes. It's all internal, in your head, always there. Always there."

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If you go ...

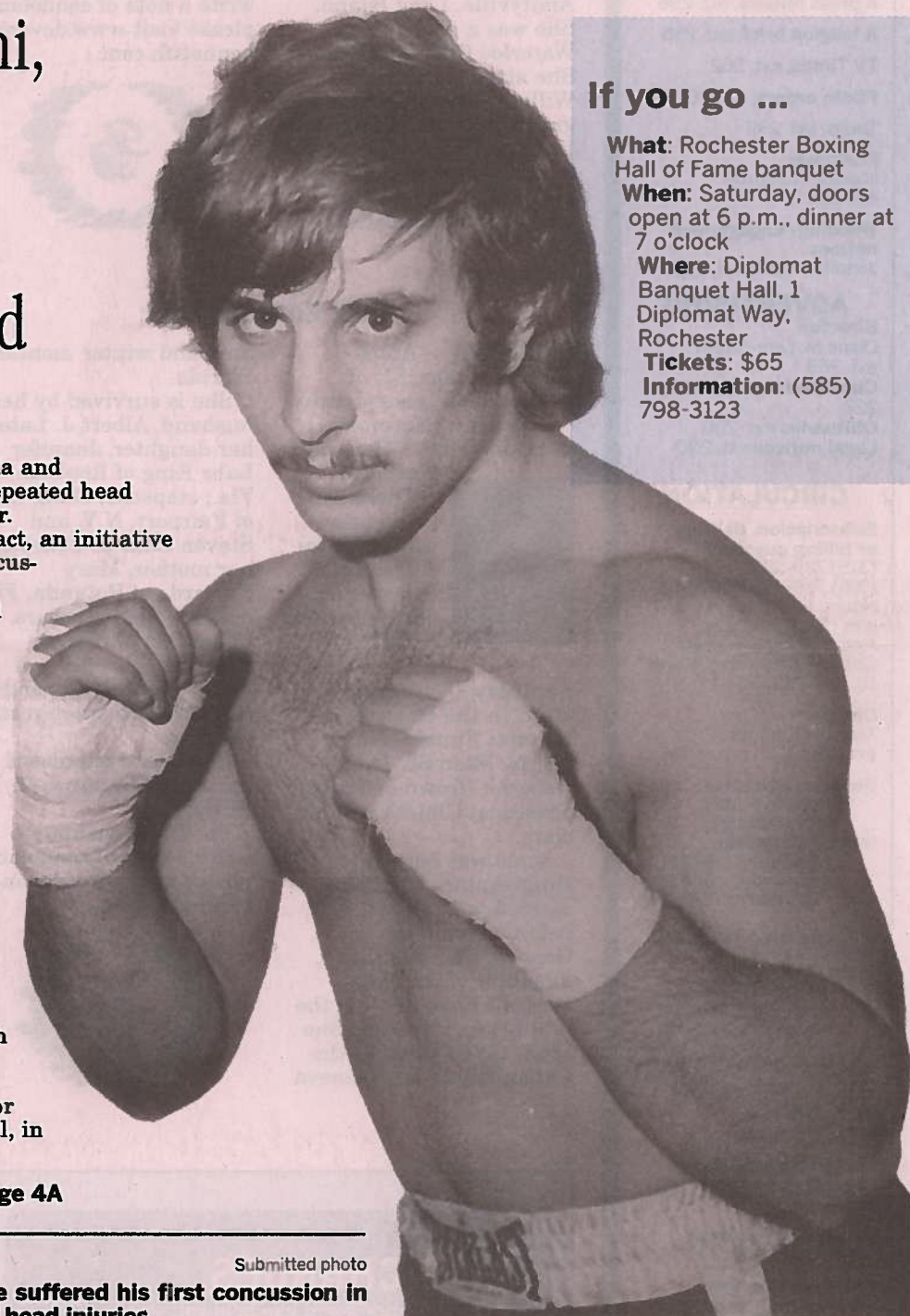
What: Rochester Boxing Hall of Fame banquet

When: Saturday, doors open at 6 p.m., dinner at 7 o'clock

Where: Diplomat Banquet Hall, 1 Diplomat Way, Rochester

Tickets: \$65

Information: (585) 798-3123



Submitted photo

Ray Ciancaglini began his boxing career in the 1960s. He suffered his first concussion in 1968. He now warns young athletes about the dangers of head injuries.

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Ciancaglini's boxing career started in the 1960s. He trained primarily at Singer's Gym in Buffalo and fought in New York, Pennsylvania and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. He played the role of a journeyman, slugging away with some of the top talent in the country.

"I'd go into their hometown, fight as an out-of-towner and give it every-

thing I had, you know," Ciancaglini said.

Ciancaglini was a rising talent when he suffered his first concussion in 1968. Four years and countless devastating blows to the head later, he retired, not yet aware of the long-term damage his boxing career would inflict.

"Things never went away, even after a month off, and things weren't getting any better," Ciancaglini said. "I was

durable, I had a good punch and I never took time off. When I took that time off, and things didn't get better, we knew something was wrong.

"That was kind of my downfall. I never turned down a fight. I never walked away. Every fight was a war. Promoters always told me I was in too many wars."

Even after he secured a job at Kodak in 1981, Ciancaglini remained in a fog. His hands trembled. The tremors grew worse.

"I'd go out and I would sit on my hands so people didn't see them shake," Ciancaglini said. "I was embarrassed, ashamed. I didn't know how to handle it ... there were real, underlying problems that had a root in the same things that happen to kids in sports today."

He worked with area neurologists, including Dr. Heidi Schwarz at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester and Dr. Jason Feinberg at Geneva General Hospital, in an effort to improve his quality of life. However, the continuing effects of the head trauma forced Ciancaglini to retire from Kodak in 1994 and left him in a state of depression.

It took a long time, but the competitive fire that

marked his days in the ring eventually returned for the simplest of reasons.

"I don't want any parent to see their kids end up like me over a high school sports game," Ciancaglini said.

Since founding The Second Impact, Ciancaglini has spread his message to about a dozen schools, including Romulus, DeSales, Mynderse, Geneva, Red Jacket and Hobart College. He said the Rochester City School District is interested in having him speak, and Southern Tier schools have been in contact.

Feinberg joins Ciancaglini when his schedule allows.

Ciancaglini's work garnered the attention of the Rochester Boxing Hall of Fame committee.

"We support [The Second Impact]. We want to draw some attention to it," Irwin said. "This is aimed at the repercussions of not addressing injuries properly, and we want to promote awareness of that. We want to keep others from having these types of injuries."

"The award couldn't go to a better person," Hobart football coach Mike Cragg praised. "Ray is one of the greatest people I have ever met."

Cragg said Ciancaglini's words resonated with at least a couple of Statesmen players.

"The way concussions result in the side effects we're finding out about, we knew we had to have Ray speak," said Cragg, who has lost two players from this year's team to concussions. "I'm grateful Ray had his story to share with us and to help these young men. It shook them up to know what a second-impact syndrome is all about. They were talking about it."

Ciancaglini took a slightly different tack when he spoke at Romulus Central School's fall sports meeting.

"We try to tailor each talk so we don't scare anyone," Ciancaglini said. "We're not anti-sport. We're pro-awareness, but we're not anti-anything. We want to keep kids playing to their potential, and if that means missing a game or two ... we're just trying to help them connect with the people who can help them make smarter decisions about their well-being."

"Ray's talk at our school was awesome," Romulus Athletic Director Mike Pane raved. "We've got a lot of multi-sport athletes, so we hope to have Ray back in the spring to do

this again and put a little different twist on it."

Pane cited the hesitation teen athletes often encounter when weighing playing time versus recuperation time as a reason he wanted Ciancaglini to talk to parents.

"Now, if we suspect anything, we're stressing to the kids to be honest and up front," Pane said. "That's what hit the parents the most, the importance of following through to make sure kids were taken care of."

Pane said two athletes, both soccer players, have suffered concussions during the fall season.

Like Hobart, Romulus has baseline testing in place to assist in diagnosing a concussion and remove the guesswork. Ciancaglini's effort reinforced what the school district has done.

"The work it took to get up and talk about the struggles he went through ... It can't have been easy," Pane said, adding that Ciancaglini's award is well deserved. "It's awesome what he's doing. This hits home, and it makes a huge impression, on kids and parents. I applaud Ray and the work he's done. It's of benefit to everyone involved, and it's a passion of his."