



Rock Steady Boxing

New study wants to knock out Parkinson's disease

When someone mentions the fight against Parkinson's disease, people in Indianapolis are taking that literally.

In a gym on the east side of the city, dozens of people with Parkinson's show up two to three times per week for a rigorous boxing regimen.

Wimps need not apply: it's taught by professional boxer Kristy Follmar, who once was world-ranked in the sport and isn't afraid to make the participants sweat.

Rock Steady Boxing came into being three years ago when Scott Newman, public safety director of Indianapolis, was diagnosed at age 40 with Parkinson's disease.

Newman's friend Vincent Perez, a trained amateur boxer, wanted to help him stay strong and introduced him to the idea of boxing.

What Perez discovered is that boxing began to help Newman fight the disease, a degenerative disorder that robs people of motor skills, balance, speech, and sensory function.

Above: The program's participants work with both speed bags and heavy bags and spend time in the ring

In this corner: hope

No cure for the disease yet exists. Through the boxing, however, Newman began to acquire physical conditioning, better coordination, and more endurance. His handwriting, speech, and overall physical function improved.

The word began to spread about Newman's success, and more people with Parkinson's wanted to try boxing for themselves.

Rock Steady Boxing was born.

"We're really excited to have a program like this right here in our backyard," says Dyer Diehl of the UIndy Krannert School of Physical Therapy, which reached out to the Rock Steady program in order to research results. Diehl and colleagues Stephanie Combs and Bill Staples are researching the positive effects the boxing program is having on people with Parkinson's.

"The exciting thing is that the anecdotal evidence is really positive," Diehl says. "Folks are saying that the exercise is slowing the progression of the disease if not halting it."

When people sign up to take part in the boxing classes—which are free to those with Parkinson's—they are signing up for an intense program.

Classes run 90 minutes and include work with speed bags, heavy bags, and time in the ring, "though they don't hit each other," adds Staples with a laugh.

The faculty and graduate students in the School of Physical Therapy hope to learn more about why this program is succeeding and what kind of results can be achieved.

Tale of the tape

When new members join the program, the students and faculty ask if they can collect measurements from them such as information about their balance, walking ability, and quality of life measures. New measurements are taken every 12 weeks.

The results are encouraging.

"It's exciting to have an opportunity to show evidence that these folks are really doing better," Diehl says.

Researchers around the country are studying other forms of intense training, such as tango dancing and tandem cycling, that provide some relief for those with Parkinson's.

However, the boxing program in Indianapolis is the first of its kind and the largest in the nation, with about 70 participants ranging in age from the 30s to the 70s.

After a segment about the program appeared on the national news last year, Rock Steady Boxing received dozens of inquiries and phone calls from people wanting to learn more.

"We are blown away that these people are able to handle this level of intense exercise," Staples says.

"A lot of people without a neurological disease would have a hard time keeping up. To see them doing speed bags and heavy bags and bobbing and weaving around in the ring is just amazing."

Participants have reported great results, such as a reduction in tremors, renewed confidence, and increased physical conditioning.

Sassy septuagenarian

"One of the neatest aspects is the camaraderie," Combs says. "Everyone is yelling and cheering each other on."

"One of our best experiences was seeing a 70-year-old with her personal pink boxing gloves out there in the ring, bobbing and weaving and fighting and loving it."

"It was awesome. She wasn't afraid of anything."

UIndy's researchers have applied for a grant and plan to conduct a pilot study to delve more into the data being generated by the boxing program.

"It's so neat to be in at the ground level on a project like this," Diehl says. "I hope this program explodes if we have really impressive results."

"People all across the country have heard about Rock Steady Boxing."

"We have such a great opportunity to work with them and be part of research that can change many lives."

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— Stephanie Combs, PT professor