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# Punching Out Parkinson's Disease

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

ROCK STEADY BOXING PROGRAM COMES TO PITTSBURGH

One local fitness trainer is teaching people affected by Parkinson's disease to fight back — one jab, cross and hook at a time.

Rich Mushinsky, owner of Fit 4 Boxing Club in Allison Park, is the first to bring Rock Steady Boxing, a unique exercise program specifically designed for people with Parkinson's disease, to Pittsburgh. The program is based on research that shows that continuous, intensive training — like the kind that accompanies non-combat boxing workouts — can slow, stop and even reverse the progression of Parkinson's symptoms.

Boxing's forced exertion can help patients regain control of their physical movements that have been lost to the degenerative effects of the disease, says Mushinsky.

"It is absolutely unbelievable what this workout does for people with Parkinson's," says Mushinsky.

"Boxing is one of the hardest workouts you can do. It forces your body to go beyond what you think it can do."

Mushinsky, an amateur boxer, started teaching boxing on the side after his first wife passed away 15 years ago.

"I needed something to do at night, and since I always enjoyed boxing, I figured I would just start training other people," he says.

After spending 35 years as a master plumber, Mushinsky said it was time to "retire his tools" and pursue his passion. With the support of his second wife, Laurie, and their daughter Ava, he opened Fit 4 Boxing Club in the spring, where he and his team train members how to do "everything a fighter would do, except get punched," he says.

One day, Mushinsky was asked if he would be able to help a man with Parkinson's — a retired doctor who, at 70, was suffering from the degenerative effects of the disease.

"When I first met him, he could barely walk, but he had always had a passion for boxing," explains Mushinsky. "After he started to box, I noticed he was getting better. At first, I didn't know why — I just knew that it was working."

That physician, Dr. Michael Bell, began working out with Mushinsky three to four times a week.

When Bell was about 72 years old, he showed Mushinsky a newspaper article about a program called Rock Steady Boxing that was helping people combat Parkinson's disease. After working with Bell, Mushinsky said he knew that boxing could be an effective way to combat Parkinson's disease, but didn't know that a formal program existed. The program, he learned, had affiliate gyms throughout the country. He got in touch with Rock Steady's headquarters, which is based in Indianapolis. He was invited to attend a training camp to become certified as a Rock Steady Boxing instructor, along with Maria Berexa, a Fit 4 Boxing trainer who now helps to oversee the Rock Steady program at the gym.

The original trainer and trainee have since become close friends; at his 75th birthday party, Bell's family commended Mushinsky for his work with the doctor, saying that he saved his life. Bell is now 77 and has made considerable strides keeping his symptoms at bay.

"The Rock Steady program has helped me with the five major symptoms that come with Parkinson's disease: tremors at rest, muscle rigidity and spasms, slowness of movement, imbalance, and slowness of thought and speech," says Bell. "I can wake up in the morning and feel the muscle tightness that inhibits me to move properly, and once I have gone through my stretching routine and workout routine, the muscle rigidity is gone. It improves my balance, coordination and the hoarseness in my voice."

Bell says that his favorite exercise in the Rock Steady program is the non-contact boxing, where the trainer holds mitts and calls out different punching combinations by number.

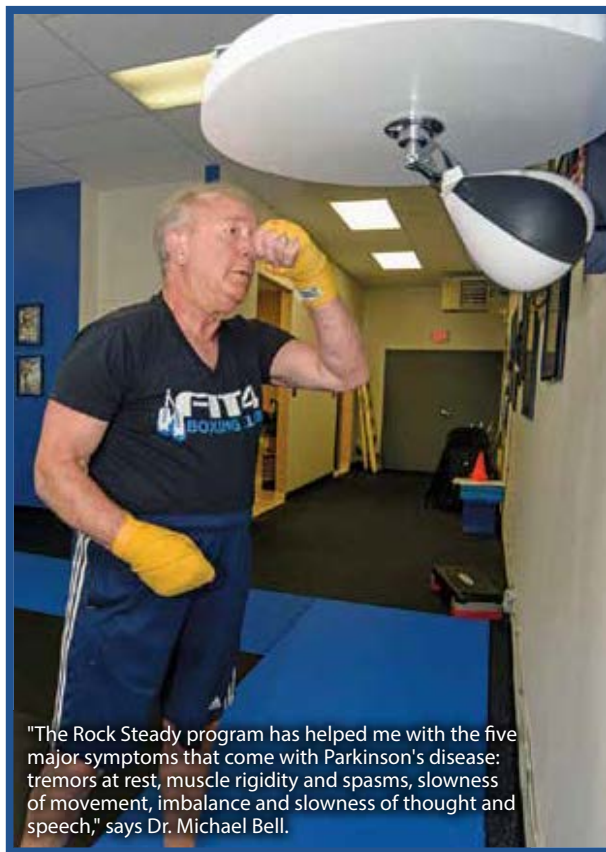
"What's good about the number combinations being called out by the trainer is that it helps with the cognitive symptoms of Parkinson's disease," explains Bell. "Before Rock Steady was founded, the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease was a dreaded one with no particular treatment available. Since the institution of Rock Steady Boxing and training as a classic boxer does, it has given us a support system and safe place to share our symptoms and certain social issues that happen with Parkinson's, even simple things such as trying to eat soup out in a restaurant, getting your wallet out of your pocket, trying to get out of the car after a long trip or holding a glass of wine."

"These things lead to loss of self-confidence and dignity, and Rock Steady Boxing has been the single most important therapeutic measure in the treatment of my Parkinson's outside of the routine measures taken to treat it," says Bell, whose physicians are neurologists Dr. Susan Baser and Dr. John Carey.

In addition to non-combat boxing, the Rock Steady program also involves stretching, bicycling, running, jumping rope, push-ups and balancing exercise. It can help nearly all Parkinson's patients, no matter what their ages or condition. An evaluation process is conducted before the first training session to determine a recommended class level, and some participants may require the assistance of a caregiver.

"This program has formed a family," says Mushinsky. "Everyone is fighting the same disease. Some of them feel depressed or embarrassed by their symptoms. They might feel they have nowhere to go. This gives them a place to feel welcome. We're not going to turn anyone away."

Fit 4 Boxing Club is located at 4706 William Flynn Highway in Allison Park. For more information about the club or the Rock Steady Boxing program, call 412.213.3584 or visit [fit4boxingclub.com](http://fit4boxingclub.com). ■



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