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This local man is helping Parkinson's patients fight the disease in an unexpected way: through boxing

By Steve Marantz Globe correspondent, Updated March 9, 2020, 12:26 p.m.

Cary Donahue (left) spars with Michael Reyes, who runs the workout program for Parkinson's patients at his Salem Fitness Center. BLAKE NISSEN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Saturday morning boxing at Salem Fitness kicks into high gear. A playlist of 1970s/80s rock blares as owner/instructor Michael Reyes drills eight men and three women in

rock blares as owner/instructor Michael Reyes drills eight men and three women in Sweet Science fundamentals. They shadow box, jab and hook, bob and weave, slide and shuffle. Gloves pummel and thump assorted bags and mitts. Four participants climb into a ring and square off, two against two. They circle, and punch and duck, in a rhythmic pas de deux.

No punches actually land on flesh or bone. But gasps, grunts, and groans fill the room. Chatter and laughter, too.

“Thirty seconds,” shouts Reyes. “Don’t quit on me. Don’t quit on yourselves.”

The participants are alike in several respects. None have boxed competitively. All are near or above age 60. And all have Parkinson’s disease, a neuromuscular disorder that limits and slows movement. All come to Reyes’s class to cope with symptoms — tremors, rigidity, impaired balance, frozen facial expression, anxiety, and depression — inflicted by the disease.

“These people, I love their fighting spirit,” says Reyes, 41. “They refuse to give in.”

Michael Reyes (right) does a drill with Laurie Grieves at the Salem Fitness Center. BLAKE NISSEN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Not if he can help them. As a child, Reyes learned to box in the gyms south of Boston, including the famed Petronelli Gym in Brockton. As a teenager, he watched Muhammad Ali tremble with Parkinson's as he lit the 1996 Olympic flame in Atlanta.

As an adult, Reyes learned that the trainer he most admires, Freddie Roach, has Parkinson's. Roach's Massachusetts roots (Dedham) and his stable of vaunted champions (Manny Pacquiao) have made him a hero to Reyes. That Roach continues to run his Hollywood, Calif., gym despite his Parkinson's elevates him even higher in Reyes's esteem.

"Muhammad Ali and Freddie Roach are inspirations for me," said Reyes.

So when Reyes acquired the Salem Fitness health club early in 2019, and charted out exercise classes for members, his connection with Parkinson's was preordained. He was intrigued that two longtime members and Salem residents, Keith and Linda Hall, ran a program called Parkinson's Fitness, which espouses the gospel — and science — of exercise as therapy. The Halls organize weekly dance and yoga instruction, and bowling and exercise classes at various North Shore locations. They had sponsored a Parkinson's boxing class at Salem Fitness under the previous owner. Then they met Reyes, and in a blink he committed to coach and supervise Parkinson's boxing at his club.

"Keith and Linda didn't have to persuade me," said Reyes. "I wanted to do it."

Irony in the treatment

Parkinson's affects an estimated 1 million Americans, with 60,000 new cases each year, typically in the post-60 age group. A chronic condition, it worsens over time. Most cases

have no specific known cause, and no cure is yet known, but a variety of medications is the first line of defense. Vigorous exercise has emerged as a second front.

“When people are diagnosed, they’re afraid of dying,” said Dr. Terry Ellis, a chair in the Department of Physical Therapy and Athletic Training at Boston University. She collaborates with BU’s Parkinson’s Disease and Movement Disorder Center.

“But it’s the only neurodegenerative disease in which there is treatment; medicines control symptoms for a long time. I say to patients, ‘You need to learn to live with it.’ People can live for decades when diagnosed. There are ways to optimize the outcome.”

Exercise has been shown, in laboratory studies of animals and in human clinical trials, to slow the progression of the disease, she said. New patients are advised immediately to see a physical therapist for an exercise program. One option is boxing.

“Boxing has elements we know are beneficial — aerobic, strengthening, and balance training. Add in the social interaction and camaraderie — people cheering for each other — and it makes for a supportive and fun environment.”

Ellis adds a cautionary note.

“You have to be careful from a consumer standpoint,” she said. “Who is teaching? Do they know what they’re doing? What’s the ratio of students to instructors? With Parkinson’s, there’s a risk of falling. You don’t want one instructor with a whole lot of Parkinson’s people.”

Jake Mulvey (center) takes a group of people through a workout at Salem Fitness Center. BLAKE NISSEN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

The irony that boxing, albeit noncontact, can provide therapy for Parkinson's is not lost on Reyes. The punishing ring careers of Ali (56-5) and Roach (40-13) are thought by some to have triggered their early-onset Parkinson's. Ali experienced symptoms in his late 30s before he retired, and Roach in his early 30s. The average life expectancy after a Parkinson's diagnosis is 7-15 years, yet Ali lived with it for more than 30 years until his death in 2016. Roach, at 60, is just short of 30 years.

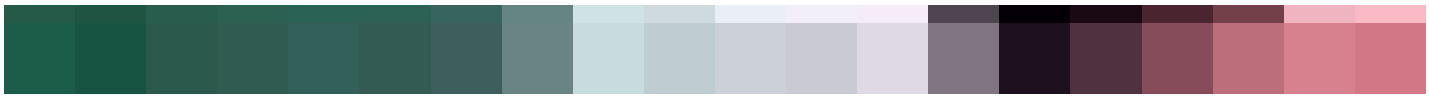
"It's a tough sport, and it takes a toll, everybody knows that," Reyes said. "But what we do in Parkinson's boxing is fight back against the disease."

Boxing as therapy started at a gym in Indianapolis in 2006. A county prosecutor, Scott Newman, was diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's at age 40. Newman's friend, Vince Perez, a former Golden Gloves boxer, had a notion that boxing drills could slow the

Perez, a former Golden Gloves boxer, had a notion that boxing drills could slow the disease, because boxers condition for agility, speed, muscular endurance, accuracy, hand-eye coordination, footwork, and overall strength.

So Newman went to the gym with Perez, and sure enough, the workouts and drills reduced his symptoms. What Parkinson's tries to take away, Perez and Newman came to believe, boxing drills protect and preserve.

Encouraged by his results, Newman opened the nonprofit Rock Steady Boxing to help other "Parkies," as they are sometimes known. Six people attended the first class, but word spread, and the program quickly grew. One of the early attendees was Greg Geheb, a "Parkie" from Nashua, N.H., who learned of Rock Steady from his daughter in Indianapolis. Geheb was heartened by the results, and persuaded a personal trainer he knew in Chelmsford, Al Latulippe, to help import the program to the Northeast. After Geheb and Latulippe attended a 2½-day certification class in 2012, they started a Rock Steady class in Lawrence.



Allen Young (right) spars with Richard Colby during a boxing class at the Salem Fitness Center. BLAKE NISSEN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

By 2016, Geheb and Latulippe had expanded to Concord, N.H, Cambridge, Randolph, and Newton, and counted 300 clients. Rock Steady, meanwhile, has expanded to 26 Massachusetts locations, and spread to 50 states and 18 foreign countries.

“Our program combines boxing, calisthenics, balance, agility, and strength — we try to combine everything,” said Latulippe. “But the basis is boxing. Nothing is cooler than boxing. A lot of our clients bring their grandkids to the gym, and their grandkids think it’s so cool.”

Among the early clients of Latulippe was Keith Hall, a former commercial airline pilot, who was 55 when diagnosed in 2007. A fitness buff and a boxer in his youth, Hall, along with his wife Linda, launched their own program, Parkinson’s Fitness. Keith Hall taught the first boxing class at Salem Fitness and was succeeded by Kim Crowley, who eventually moved to her own studio. Then Reyes, who has personal trainer certification and has studied online courses specific to Parkinson’s, took over. Another certified personal trainer, Will Southerton, helps out, along with an intern, Jake Mulvey.

“You don’t have control of the disease, but you have to do something,” said Linda Hall. “I’ll never forget one woman who was diagnosed. She was overweight and frightened. Took every class and fell in love with boxing. Said it made her feel empowered.

“Boxing requires a lot of balance, which is huge for people with Parkinson’s. There’s left brain/right brain opposition. You put your left foot out and throw a right cross over it. That’s coordination.

“Most people with Parkinson’s, their arms don’t swing when they walk. In boxing, you put on the metronome and help them get a rhythm of movement. It doesn’t matter if you get it exactly right, you’re moving.”

A fistful of hope

Reyes's class demands an hour of continuous motion. One participant, Tony Terrizzi, unloads a four-punch combination on a heavy bag. Terrizzi, 68, was a bank vice president and a college hockey referee when diagnosed three years ago. When it became difficult to shower and dress, he retired and pursued exercise therapy.

"Michael's class keeps me moving, which is important," said Terrizzi. "And I like the people. The empathy and camaraderie."

Allen Young, diagnosed four years ago, is shoulder-to-shoulder with Reyes, head down and gloves up to mimic infighting. Twenty seconds of resistance has Young sucking wind.

"I like that Mike gets me to do something I wouldn't normally do," said Young, 71. "I don't like being out of breath."

The group camaraderie is an important part of the therapy. BLAKE NISSEN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Carol Everson uses a walker to move about, and attends classes with the help of her husband, Jeff, who does not have Parkinson's but joins in the drills.

"This is good for her," said Jeff Everson. "Even better would be a cure."

He is hopeful that a solution could be near-infrared light, which in a recent study cured laboratory monkeys induced with Parkinson's.

One of Reyes's clients declined to be named because he does not want his co-workers to know he has Parkinson's. Which is not uncommon, according to Linda Hall.

"Some people are self-conscious," she said. "And some are worried about performance evaluations."

That's not a concern for Rich Bernstein, a retired special ed teacher diagnosed three years ago at 65. His workouts are scheduled between lending a hand with two grandchildren and caring for his 92-year-old father. The speed bag is his favorite, and he gets a kick out of climbing through the ropes with Reyes barking instruction.

"He tells us to slide and shuffle, slide and shuffle," says Bernstein.

Then he chuckles.

"It's ironic," he says, "because shuffling is one of the symptoms we're trying to control."

Irony abounds in Parkinson's boxing. For a long time, the cause of Parkinson's was thought to originate in the brain. But recent research has focused on the gut. In theory, bacterial matter and/or intestinal inflammation move from the intestines to the brain to ignite the disease. If the new research proves out, then Parkinson's evokes an obvious and unavoidable metaphor. It's a gut punch, more brutal than any Ali absorbed from George Foreman in Zaire.

Every "Parkie" who pulls on the gloves knows all too well the power of the disease.

“Pick it up,” Reyes implores. “Move, move, move.”

Stay off the ropes. Counterpunch. Fight as if your life depends on it.

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