Strength in Numbers

Boxing classes for group support against Parkinson's

By Mark Travis



It's midmorning on a breezy Thursday, and a steady percussion echoes through Corpus Christi's YWCA facility. It's not the bounce of a basketball nor weights hitting the mat, but rather the rhythmic pop of boxing gloves striking mitts. The people throwing punches might not be competitive boxers, but they are fighters, sharing a common opponent: Parkinson's disease.

Parkinson's is a neurodegenerative disorder that disrupts motor skills, causing tremors, slowed movement and rigidity. While there is no cure, exercise is considered a first-line treatment to help delay its progression. And sometimes, that therapy looks like a series of well-intentioned jabs.

"Boxing is great for hand-eye coordination and stabilizing your balance," Tom Perkins, a retired physician assistant (PA) who was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2008, said. "It helps replenish the dopamine we lack, and it lets us get our frustrations out."

When Johnny Swanson received his diagnosis, he was told to go home and rest. "No thank you," he replied, "you're gonna watch me fight this."

In 2017, Swanson joined classes offered by Rock Steady Boxing, an international nonprofit designed specifically for people with Parkinson's. His daughter, Carrie Tonne, attended alongside him for five years, serving as both a caregiver and a sparring partner. "I saw firsthand exactly how much this program works," Tonne said.

Music injects energy and sets the rhythm during workouts. Anytime Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" played, Swanson got a little extra pep in his step. After his passing in 2022, Tonne continued her involvement, eventually obtaining affiliate licenses for the local Rock Steady chapters and later becoming a head coach for both regional programs. In 2023, she created the Johnny B. Good Boxing for Parkinson's Wellness Foundation, which raises awareness and covers membership fees for participants.

"The camaraderie and the family they build is extraordinary," Tonne said. "[There was] no better way to honor my father than to keep up the fight in his memory."

Each session begins with a calisthenics warm-up before gloves go on, but even the first task—signing in—can be a challenge, as Parkinson's affects precision and dexterity.

"Parkinson's is a life sentence, not a death sentence," Andy Morales, diagnosed in 2011 and the director of the Coastal Bend Parkinson's Support Group, said. "Just because I can't do it today doesn't mean I can't do it tomorrow. And just because I can do it today, doesn't mean I can do it tomorrow."

Rock Steady Boxing holds a class every weekday at 10:30 a.m., Tuesdays and Thursdays at the YWCA in Corpus Christi and Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at Fit Lab in Rockport.

For many, symptoms worsen long before diagnosis, making early detection critical. Dina Infante is living, and moving, proof. After a PA noticed subtle changes, she underwent a specialized brain scan and was diagnosed in 2018. That PA was Tom Perkins. "I owe Tom my life," Infante said.

At the time, Infante struggled with basic tasks like cutting food and combing her hair. After a year with Rock Steady, she is back to slicing and styling all on her own. "I was embarrassed to go outside, to see people," Infante said. "But with this program, we support each other. We no longer feel alone."

Inside the class, this is evident. The group's vitality is infectious. Roaring rally cries fill the room. During grueling parts of a workout when their bodies are feeling the strain, a member of the group might shout "All Day," to which the rest of the group will reply "All Night." Parkinson's is a relentless disease that confronts patients from all angles, but every time they step into this ring, you can score another round for them. TB

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