

# ROCK STEADY BOXING: FIGHTING PARKINSON'S DISEASE ONE COUNTER PUNCH AT A TIME!

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## Abstract

Founded in 2005, Rock Steady Boxing is a unique program that gives Parkinson's patients a chance to fight back against their invisible adversary. By emphasizing gross motor movement, balance and core strength, the combination of "sweet science" and sweat gives hope to those combating the disease.

**Keywords:** Parkinson's disease, boxing, exercise therapy

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**"You can feel like crap most of the week. But, if you have one day where you can turn it around, one day that's better than the last, then you've defeated the logic that was dragging you down. And that's what Rock Steady Boxing is all about."**

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Rock Steady Boxing is the first boxing program of its kind in the country designed specifically to fight Parkinson's disease—one punch at a time!

Parkinson's disease is caused by the loss of brain cells (neurons) in a part of the brain that produces the chemical messenger dopamine. As the cells die, less dopamine is produced and transported to the area of the brain that coordinates movement. Symptoms, including tremors, slowness of movement, and muscle stiffness or rigidity develop when about 80% of dopamine has been lost.

Approximately four million people worldwide suffer from Parkinson's, yet the reason that Parkinson's disease develops is not known.

The Rock Steady Boxing program's founder, Scott Newman, is intimately familiar with the disease. At age 40, Newman was at the height of his career serving as an Indiana State Prosecutor for Marion County when it hit him. His world came crashing down when he was blindsided by what many consider to be the most frightening disease that could ever befall an individual.

"At first, I was protected by my own ignorance," Newman admits. "I didn't know how bad Parkinson's was; I was reminded of actress Kathryn Hepburn. She had a shake, but lived to a ripe old age. So, I thought, if you've got to have a disease, this is one that's cosmetic only and I could live with that."

When the facts were laid out in front of him, however, Newman sat in stunned silence contemplating what lay before him. He was being attacked from the inside out and there was no known cure—and none on the horizon.

"In 2000, my doctor said that I would be able to work for another five years, and I was told to put my affairs in order," Newman recalls. "That was 18 years ago and, by the way, that doctor is dead and I'm still alive."

Two years after Newman was advised to put his affairs in order, the popular prosecutor began to outwardly display signs of the disease.

Newman, a very high-profile political figure, did his best to hide the Parkinson's symptoms when in public. However, it became obvious, especially to the roving eyes of the media, that something was terribly wrong.

"I couldn't hide it any longer," says Newman. "Trying to conceal my condition from the public was adding to my stress, and that exacerbated my condition."

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## Boxing to the Rescue!

Newman's friend, a cop-turned-lawyer-and-boxer, realized that his former co-worker needed a way to release his stress.

"So, he started teaching me how to box," says Newman. "I wasn't a boxer, but he insisted. After six weeks of very intense workouts, I saw a big leap in my ability to write and type. I could even sign my name again.

"I found that, with boxing, I could slow the disease down. That made me optimistic about my ability to continue to work. Boxing was giving me the confidence to start new ventures, like Rock Steady Boxing. No one in their right mind would do that if they thought they had no future."

Feeding on optimism instead of despair, Newman founded Rock Steady Boxing (RSB) in 2005. He invited the Young Parkinson's of Indiana to attend a free class.

"I told them to come out, give it a try and see if it can do for them what it did for me," says Newman. "The ring was kind of high, so just getting everyone in the ring was a challenge. Then, we did a standing stretch where you cross your legs and touch your toes. If we'd been in a bowling alley, we would have had a strike because we all nearly fell down!"

Being able to laugh about something that is no laughing matter is part of the "can-do" spirit that defines RSB.

Newman recalls the positive energy that filled the ring when the bell rang for the first workout. Before you could say Muhammad Ali and Joe Louis, these first-time pugilists were covered in sweat as they jabbed and rope-a-doped their way through class.

"The workout lit a spark into these people, just like it did to me," says Newman. "You can feel like crap most of the week. But, if you have one day where you can turn it around, one day that's better than the last, then you've defeated the logic that was dragging you down. And that's what Rock Steady Boxing is all about."





## Combining Science and Sweat

At Rock Steady, patients of all ages, shapes and sizes don boxing gloves to do battle, not with each other, or even an array of leather punching bags. When these pugilists glove up, they are fighting time. And time is not on their side.

Newman and his team of experts created specific training programs for Parkinson's patients that include agility, speed, and endurance drills. These tailor-made workouts help improve hand-eye coordination, footwork and overall strength. The exercises vary in purpose and form, but share one common trait: they are rigorous and intended to extend the perceived capabilities of the patient.

The workouts push patients to their limits and then some. But at the end of the day, through the sweat and expended energy, comes hope. Hope derived from a sense of accomplishment, and the hope that tomorrow will be a better day.

"Studies from the '80s and '90s have scientifically supported the notion that rigorous exercise, emphasizing gross motor movement, balance, core strength and rhythm, could favorably impact range of motion and flexibility," Newman explains. "Our classes are specially designed programs to enhance all these attributes for our boxers at Rock Steady Boxing."

Newman recites statistics from academic institutions, such as University of Indianapolis and Butler University, as

to the program's success. Although there is currently no cure for Parkinson's, there is evidence that progress is made in all stages of the disease by individuals participating in the RSB program.

"One of the things our program did for me was that, when I would have a bad day, I wouldn't panic and start to write my will," Newman says. "I now tend to focus on the good days and not the bad ones. I take out my frustrations on the heavy bag and not on myself."





## Building Hope One Gym at a Time

Joyce Johnson is the executive director leading the RSB team. She has more than 30 years' experience managing organizational change and growth for Indiana nonprofit organizations.

Johnson's mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in the 1990s and lived many years with the challenges of tremors, balance and swallowing problems.

Her mom was truly trapped in her own body. As the disease progressed, Parkinson's stole her life and all the things she loved to do. Joyce was her primary caregiver during that time. That's why she's grateful every day that Rock Steady Boxing is here to offer hope, camaraderie and a great exercise program to those battling Parkinson's.

In 2011, she was drawn to Rock Steady because of the hope the program offered to those struggling with Parkinson's disease.

"After Scott started Rock Steady Boxing, the organization enjoyed a lot of media attention," says Johnson. "The fact that a large number of older people with Parkinson's were successfully being helped with their symptoms by boxing produced a flood of calls from all over the world.



"The majority of callers wanted to know where a Rock Steady Gym was in their state. And for the first five years, we had to tell them that there was only one such gym and it was in Indianapolis.

"So, in response to this demand, we built a training camp in 2012 to teach gym owners how to do what we do at Rock Steady Boxing."

More than a decade's worth of experience was packaged into a two-and-a-half day training program. After completing the program the participants could open a Rock Steady "affiliate" program in their community.

"We started slowly, but as of July 2017, we have 405 affiliates in 47 states and seven countries," Johnson explains. "Rock Steady doesn't require a large gym. It can be taught in nearly any kind of a facility.

We have Rock Steady Boxing in boxing gyms, of course. We also have them in YMCAs, senior centers and even in church fellowship halls.

"The courage and determination of the people in our gyms who are 'fighting back' provides daily inspiration and motivation for others to do the same. And we are so happy to be able to make this program available to people around the world."

The Rock Steady Boxing training seminars cost \$699 for the two-and-a-half day session. Johnson says trainees also get a swag bag filled with boxing equipment and five meals while training.

**"We started slowly, but as of July 2017, we have 405 affiliates in 47 states and seven countries," explains Joyce Johnson, RSB's executive director. "Rock Steady doesn't require a large gym. It can be taught in nearly any kind of a facility. We have Rock Steady Boxing in boxing gyms, of course. We also have them in YMCAs, senior centers, and even in church fellowship halls."**

## Study Conclusion, RSB Improves the Quality of Life

“What we do here is help people with quality of life,” says Kristy Rose Follmar, Program Director and Head Coach for RSB. “Most of the big companies working with Parkinson’s allocate their money to research.

“Of course, we’re big advocates on finding a cure, but all of the millions of dollars that are going into finding a cure doesn’t help our members walk into a house carrying a bag of groceries or to pick up a grandchild or even to button their own shirt.”

Stephanie Combs-Miller, PT, Ph.D., NCS, associate professor and Director of Research of the University of Indianapolis has been involved in researching the effect of Rock Steady Boxing on patients (for over seven years).

“The first question I had about the program was, ‘Is it safe?’” says Combs-Miller. “We followed several people that were new to the program for a nine-month period and tracked their safety through the program. Not only was the program safe, but also the patients were getting better.

“We really felt like there was something positive happening though the research we received. Next, we compared Rock Steady Boxing to a more traditional exercise regiment that we might do as a physical therapist.

“The outcome was very positive, as we saw a more positive trend with the boxers. Their gate function and their endurance was better than the individuals who were doing a traditional workout program.”

Next, a long-term study was conducted following people with Parkinson’s disease over a two-year span. They were tested every six months.

“We tested 88 people from all over Indiana. Half of those tested attended Rock Steady Boxing; the rest exercised elsewhere,” explains Combs-Miller.

“We discovered that the boxers were able to maintain a higher level of function that includes a faster walking speed. So, the Rock Steady boxers were able to walk faster at the end of the study than individuals participating in other forms of exercise.”

The ability to reach forward is an especially difficult task for someone with Parkinson’s. This aspect of the disease was of special interest for the researchers.

“We found this of great interest because the patients had to move forward to box and to hit the various bags,” explains Combs-Miller. “The study proved that boxers could reach farther and could maintain that distance longer than individuals doing other types of exercises.

“What may be the most important outcome of the long-term study focused on quality of life. The statistics verified that those Parkinson’s patients that were participating in the Rock Steady Boxing program had a higher perception of their quality of life. And, they maintained it longer than patients participating in other forms of exercise.”

For more information about Rock Steady Boxing, visit [www.rocksteadyboxing.org](http://www.rocksteadyboxing.org).

Terry Wilson is a multiple Emmy Award-winning TV personality/producer and freelance writer based in San Diego.

To read more about many other successful independent martial arts instructors, visit the Martial Arts Industry Association’s website at [www.maiahub.com](http://www.maiahub.com). Through this constantly enhanced website, members can access a massive amount of useful information for school owners on just about any topic from A to Z.



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**After a seven-year study, Stephanie Combs-Miller, PT, PhD, NCS, Associate Professor and Director of Research, University of Indianapolis, drew this conclusion. “The statistics verified that those Parkinson’s patients that were participating in the Rock Steady Boxing program had a higher perception of their quality of life. And, they maintained it longer than patients participating in other forms of exercise.”**

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