

# BOXING CLASS TARGETS PARKINSON'S SYMPTOMS

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From left, Katie Jackson holds the bag as her husband Joe Jackson gets in a few hits before running down the end of the room and back during the RockSteady Boxing for Parkinson's class on Wednesday morning, April 25, at Access Fitness in Kalispell. (Brenda Ahearn/Daily Inter Lake)

“Jab! Cross!” Lynnell Finley’s voice carries over the pump-up music at Access Fitness in Kalispell on Wednesday morning. “Hook! Hook!” A line of shadow boxers match each command with a punch to the air. They’re not professional boxers, but they’re dressed for a fight — some in athletic wear, some in sweatshirts emblazoned with boxing gloves and a mission statement: “fighting back.”

For the participants in Finley’s “Rock Steady” boxing class, this training is crucial preparation for a battle that never stops, against the creeping symptoms of Parkinson’s Disease.

Parkinson’s is a degenerative neurological condition that can cause tremors, impaired movement and loss of balance. Though there is currently no cure for the disease, “exercise is medicine,” said Finley before class on Wednesday. Medicines and, in some extreme cases, deep brain stimulation surgery can help ease symptoms, but “neither of those have been shown to slow the progression of the disease. Exercise is the only thing that can do that.”

The tangible impact of exercise in fighting Parkinson’s led Finley, a longtime physical therapist with Advanced Rehabilitation Services, to establish the Flathead’s first outpost of the national Rock Steady boxing program.

Rock Steady started in Indianapolis in 2006, when a community member diagnosed with Parkinson’s partnered with a former professional boxer to develop a regimen that would combat loss of hand-eye coordination. The class has scaled into a national training program that helps people at all stages of the disease through the core elements of boxing — variety, fun, camaraderie, intensity — without actual fighting.

“I really saw the need to have something more after they’ve done their therapy, to have a community-based program that they could go to continue to exercise,” said Finley of her class. “Boxers train for power, speed, agility, coordination, endurance, cardiovascular strengthening, and that works really well for people with Parkinson’s.”

In her class, Finley tailors all these aspects of boxing — along with a healthy dose of encouragement and a playlist of workout jams — into a concerted battle against Parkinson’s. Stretching as a warm-up helps relieve muscles stiffened by the disease. Punching drills on the heavy bag maintain strength and hand-eye coordination. A combination of punches and jogging builds intensity through layered cardio and strength. And a wall sit with a competitive edge — which group can sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” the loudest? — builds camaraderie and works voice muscles warbled by the disease.

The variety of moves challenges an array of Parkinson's symptoms at their various stages, making the class a "great equalizer," according to participant Dale Bax, of Whitefish. "One thing that I think is important about this program is that we all have a variety of symptoms — some are recently diagnosed, some are in walkers, some come in wheelchairs," he said. Diagnosed in 2015, Bax is still relatively new to the progression of Parkinson's, and he pointed to the inclusiveness for people at all stages as one of Rock Steady's assets.

"For those of us who don't have as many symptoms ... it's really helpful for all of us to feel more comfortable."

The comfort level is evident as participants, caretakers and therapists cheer each other through every hook and uppercut. Whether the jab connects with a real bag or a shadow one, the energy from each punch has assembled a hopeful army against the disease.

The camaraderie "is so important," said Katie Jackson, of Columbia Falls, whose husband, Joe, is a regular at the class. As she holds the punching bag and watches Rock Steady at work, she said, "I see Joe coming to life, you know — he talks more, he interacts more — and those of us who are on the support team get to feel like, OK, we're all in this together. We're not operating in a vacuum."

On the sidelines, Mary Hagen, of Columbia Falls, watches her husband, Norm, attack a shadow boxing sequence with a smile. The social interaction — the chance to work the muscles used to talk and smile that the disease can erode — keeps them coming back to the exercise room in Kalispell. "Look at the laughter," she said. "How nice to start your morning with laughter."

For Finley, the positivity generated by this small community continues to justify the effort. "I just love the group of people — everyone is really optimistic and I love doing it because I guess you're never taller than when someone is standing on your shoulders," she said.

She hopes the program continues to grow, both in participants and in volunteers. "Anybody who wants to help can be trained as a volunteer," she said.

The Rock Steady boxing classes are held from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. every Monday and Wednesday at Access Fitness in Kalispell, 1331 U.S. 2 W. For more information or to volunteer, contact Lynnell Finley at [lynnell@arspt.com](mailto:lynnell@arspt.com) or at 406-261-8311.

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