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Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, ABC Radio Adelaide, 2 February 2017

Subjects: Boxing

NARELLE GRAHAM: Before any of that though, do weigh in to this debate because, on the eve of the big Green versus Mundine boxing rematch, the Australian Medical Association's renewed its calls for boxing to be banned. So your thoughts on those, number - 1300-222-891. In a few minutes, former world heavyweight boxing champion Aussie Joe Bugner will join me, but first we will go to the AMA with Dr Michael Gannon, who is the President of the Association. Welcome to you.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good afternoon.

NARELLE GRAHAM: About 18 months ago I think it was, the AMA campaigned to ban combat sports, all of them, at the Olympic and the Commonwealth Games. Have you made any headway there?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly, they haven't been banned. There are safety provisions with so-called combat sports in many States, there's a desire to see some of them unravelled. We're against any pastime which involves damaging another human being to the extent that you incapacitate them. That's how you win.

NARELLE GRAHAM: Are those safety measures that you discuss there, are they suitable in your mind? Do they go far enough? Or are you saying there are no safety measures that could go far enough, we just don't just think people should be doing these sports.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly if you look at the sport of boxing, and I think unlike some latest pastimes which have evolved, you have to acknowledge that boxing is a sport, that it has an ancient heritage and I think it deserves to be called that. And there are safety provisions, there are harm minimisation measures, for example in Olympic boxing in terms of shorter rounds and protective gear that are useful. So you know, for example, the AMA doesn't promote the use of heroin or injecting methamphetamine, but we recognise that there are harm minimisation strategies like clean needles.

NARELLE GRAHAM: Sure.

MICHAEL GANNON: But this is - the new combat sports in boxing, the whole idea is to incapacitate your opponent to the extent that their brain no longer works. That has acute dangers, it certainly has chronic dangers as well.

NARELLE GRAHAM: Dr Michael Gannon is with me, President of the Australian Medical Association. This is a polarising issue. Steve on the text line says 'boxing like horse racing is yesterday's sport and should not be supported', but plenty of others are saying that it should be supported.

What is the call that you're making, Dr Michael Gannon, just so that we're clear? Ban boxing for everyone or are you more concerned about people who are under the age of 18?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well I think that there's different issues at play here. In an ideal world, you wouldn't have boxing at all. The reality is that there is significant risk of brain injury, both in the short term and the long term. Within that, we always support harm minimisation measures.

So you raise an important point here. If you put young boys, young girls into a ring when they're between 12 and 18, and I've heard all the arguments about getting them off the streets and getting them physically fit, I accept those arguments, but surely there's different methods of getting kids fit ...

NARELLE GRAHAM: Okay.

MICHAEL GANNON: ... than having something where they get slammed in the head.

NARELLE GRAHAM: Well, just on that idea, does it take much to cause an injury or the parts of the sport, for example, the sparring, hitting a punching bag, those sorts of things, is that a good way to get fit and therefore okay, and your issue is when you get two people in the ring to punch each other?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think that it'd be difficult to make the argument that there's a whole great deal of danger in sparring. Of course, the next natural thing within the gym is to be encouraged, cajoled, paid to fight. Physical fitness is to be encouraged.

The important point to make about teenagers is that their brain is still developing and therefore the risks of injury at a crucial stage when the neural networks, when the connections in the brain are still being developed, that places them at an even higher risk. That's our concern when it comes to children, but I can assure you that it presents real and present dangers to people even with a mature brain and a mature skull.

NARELLE GRAHAM: It is a fighter's choice, though.

MICHAEL GANNON: It is a fighter's choice but we're often talking about very vulnerable people and ...

NARELLE GRAHAM: [Interrupts] And you're saying that they may be convinced into doing it. We will come back to you, Dr Michael Gannon, President of the Australian Medical Association, if time permits, but we're going now to Aussie Joe Bugner, who is a former international heavyweight boxing champion, you know who he is, of course you do. Welcome to you.

JOE BUGNER: [Laughs] Now, I've been listening to you talking to the doctor and this and that. I think it's one of the most ludicrous and stupid comments made by some of these so-called experts, because boxing is not as dangerous as people make out, which is something that I can prove. Because in reality, I turned professional fighter at the age of 17. In the period of, well, somewhere in the region of close to 40 years, I had somewhere in the region of 80 plus professional fights, and I am the undefeated world heavyweight champion, not because I took punches to the head. It's because I was able to control and do my job in the boxing ring. And ...

NARELLE GRAHAM: [Interrupts] Others have been impacted, though, haven't they?

JOE BUGNER: Yes, but my love, so how many great football players- how many football players have you seen going 100 miles an hour, and another football player coming towards him at 100 mile, crunching each other, and they're both on the ground knocked out? I mean,

surely to God if we did not have athletes in the world, there's going to be a few ups and a lot of downs, only because people like the so-called critics will stand up and say 'oh, it should be banned, oh my God, did you see? Oh my God'. We might as well all go to sleep if that is the case, because in reality we - I'm talking about the male side mostly - are athletes in our inner selves, and all I know is that ... well, if we had the time, I could give you a whole lowdown why I took up sport.

NARELLE GRAHAM: Have you seen some nasty injuries from boxing, though?

JOE BUGNER: The only injuries I have are from my boss, and I've been happily married now for nearly 40 years, and she's got a better left jab, right cross, than Muhammad Ali. Even Muhammad Ali couldn't do it.

NARELLE GRAHAM: [Laughs] In other boxers, though. Not for yourself, Joe Bugner, but in other boxers have you seen nasty injuries?

JOE BUGNER: Yes, I have. And unfortunately, this- 99 per cent of the time that these injuries occur, it's up to the referee to make sure that the fight does not continue on should the opponent be in serious danger of getting hurt. And the other thing, of course, is the most important part of all. The preparation for any major fight - it doesn't matter what it is, whether it's Australian title, world title, doesn't matter - if the preparation is not controlled by a sensible person in the gymnasium, the fighters can get hurt well, well before the actual bell goes for the real thing, the real fight.

NARELLE GRAHAM: And of course, Joe, we have the Green-Mundine bout happening here in Adelaide tomorrow night. Who's going to win?

JOE BUGNER: Yes, you are. Well, you must understand for someone like me who has been around for a very long time, it is difficult to make an actual point, because - I mean, I'm a Danny Green fan, and the fact of the matter is that both guys, both men are very determined. But I think Green may just have the edge.

NARELLE GRAHAM: Thank you very much. Joe Bugner there, who is the former world heavyweight boxing champ.

We're going to just take this back to Dr Michael Gannon, president of the Australian Medical Association there. And I think we can say all sorts of things. Joe Bugner, sure, he has come out of his boxing career relatively unscathed but it's a small sample size - isn't it? - where we're talking about one individual and we need to look at all of them. But he does make a good point about the referee being there as a safety mechanism to get involved.

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, I'll say a couple of things about what Joe said. It's great to hear Aussie Joe sounding fighting fit. You asked him whether he'd ever seen anyone damaged. Many of your listeners will know that Joe fought Muhammad Ali twice. He's a tragic example of a much admired sportsman who was damaged, and developed Parkinson's from boxing.

Joe sounds like the person who says at a barbecue, 'I haven't vaccinated my kids and they haven't died of measles yet'. He sounds like the smoker who escapes lung cancer. We can all dodge bullets in life. It's a question of the level of risk and a responsible professional body that sees people damaged acutely by fights - whether they're organised or disorganised - can only have one view.

I'm glad Joe raised the issue of concussion in other sports, because that's an area of work that we're doing in conjunction with the AIS. And we applaud moves by the AFL, Cricket Australia and other sporting bodies to look after footballers and cricketers.

NARELLE GRAHAM: Okay.

MICHAEL GANNON: But although there's risk in those sports, I can tell you the primary intention is not to damage your opponent so they physically can't stand up any longer.

NARELLE GRAHAM: [Talks over] Understood.

MICHAEL GANNON: That's what differentiates cricket from boxing.

NARELLE GRAHAM: Are you in this campaign or have you yet - do you have any evidence that you've managed to change anyone's mind? Anyone who was pro-boxing that said, you were right?

MICHAEL GANNON: Oh look, I think that it's very difficult to change peoples' mind. I've received lots of interesting correspondence from the gun lobby in recent weeks saying how they safely use guns in sport. It's just a case of wherever possible reducing the risk to human beings. If you are shot, if you are one of those two kids dead from sporting boxing in Queensland in recent years, there's no coming back from that. This is the responsible thing to do - to identify a pastime which, although it has a rich history, is a dangerous one.

NARELLE GRAHAM: [Interrupts] We have to leave it there but I think you have certainly made that point and the debate rages on. Thank you for your time this afternoon. Dr Michael Gannon there, the president of the Australian Medical Association.

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