

Amicus Curious



Paul McGrath

Chicago lawyer Michael J. Joyce puts his youthful experience as a boxer to use at Leo Catholic High School, where he is preparing the South Side school's team of about 40 pugilists for participation in the 2007 world boxing championships at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The event will serve as an opening qualifier for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, with hundreds of boxers coming from around the world.

School gets help from hard-hitting lawyer

By Pat Milhizer
Law Bulletin staff writer

The Leo Catholic High School boxing team is getting loose for practice at the end of a recent school day when team director Michael J. Joyce is asked to show what these guys can do.

"Let's get Curtis hitting on the pads," Joyce said.

At about 420 pounds, 17-year-old Curtis Banks is built like a lineman, which he is, playing on both sides of the ball for the football team.

"If I'm the biggest guy on the field, I might be the fastest also," said Banks, who is nimble for his size.

Needless to say, you don't want to be on the receiving end of this super heavyweight's right hand.

"Boxing is one of the sports at Leo that's not really the primary sport that everybody does," Banks said. "But the people that do it, do it well."

And now, they have a better facility for training.

The school at 79th Street and Sangamon Avenue received a \$100,000 state grant to buy new equipment, double the size of its training room and run the program year-round. To build their new facility, they knocked down a classroom wall, turning two classrooms into a gym.

Practicing in the school building is nothing new for Leo athletes. The school doesn't have a track, so sprinters regularly use school hallways

for their workouts.

Joyce, a former Cook County assistant state's attorney and now a sole practitioner who handles personal-injury cases, started the boxing program about 10 years ago at the request of school President Bob Foster. Foster was Joyce's football coach when Joyce attended Leo in the mid-1980s.

So in Joyce's mind, "it wasn't a request. It was a command."

About 40 students are on the team, and they're also coached by Devin Vargas, the captain of the 2004 U.S. Olympic boxing team.

For the next few months, Vargas will help the teens prepare for the 2007 world boxing championships at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The event will serve as an opening qualifier for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and will feature hundreds of boxers from around the world from Oct. 17 to Nov. 1.

Joyce, who boxed before he got his law degree, said the sport provides more than just exercise and competition for the teens.

"It lets them set a goal and work toward that goal. It teaches them respect for others, discipline. And it's a very humble sport. Everybody has to take their lumps when they first start out," Joyce said.

"We're like a team here. Everybody is rooting for each other. And some of the kids do it to get in shape for football, but a lot of kids get a lot of self-esteem out of it," Joyce said.

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"A lot of these kids come from single-parent households, some kids are from the Mercy Home for Boys, some kids live with their grandparents," Joyce said. "But you can really see the difference from freshmen coming in here and when they leave as seniors. Ninety percent of them go to college and the rest end up in the military or organized labor."

As part of the boxing program, the students have to take part in a program to prepare for college and the ACT. They also tutor and coach grade school students.

"We were given this grant, and it was

something that was a gift to us," Joyce said of the money that came through the office of state Rep. Mary Flowers, D-Chicago. "We want to show something not just in athletics but for the community."

And alumni such as Joyce continue to give back to the school, either through volunteer work or donations.

"I love the sport. I love the kids, I love the school. I have a million laughs every day. I get to be around people I like," Joyce said. "And I try to keep the weight off."

E-mail: pmilhizer@lbpc.com