

SPORTS

HIGH SCHOOLS

From the South Side ... with gloves

Under the guidance of Mike Joyce, Leo boxers take aim at Golden glory

By Tony Baranek
Staff writer

Fred Hollins is a nice kid. He stays away from drugs. He stays away from gangs.

He stays away from criminal activity. But he loves to fight. And he's one of the toughest kids at Leo High School.

Just ask him. "My toughest? There was none. They were all easy," the junior said about his recent encounters. "I'm quick and I'm strong."

And he'll knock you out if you care to take a chance at proving him wrong.

"He's more dedicated than most," Hollins' coach, Mike Joyce, said about Leo's best bet to become the next Golden Gloves champion.



Matt Marton/Daily Southtown

Leo's Fred Hollins (left) spars with former Leo student (and Golden Gloves champ) Lamar Fenner.

See **LEO**, page C9



Boxers spar in the ring Wednesday at Leo High School in preparation for the Golden Gloves. Five Leo boxers are competing in the tournament.

Leo

Continued from page C1

Hollins is one of five Leo students who will be representing the school in the annual boxing competition, which is being held through April 11 at St. Andrew's Gym on the North Side.

Hollins had his first bout in the 139-pound class Friday night, winning a unanimous three-round decision over Ken Conforte.

Other Leo boxers taking part in the competition are freshman Lavon London (106 pounds), freshman David Sadecki (132), junior Jason Riley (125) and senior Marvin Carey (178).

"He's been training real hard," Joyce said of Hollins. "He's dedicated. And now that he's getting some experience, I think he can win it all."

"He's one of the leaders on the team. The rest of the kids follow his lead."

Leo is the only high school in the Chicago area that sponsors a bona fide boxing team. The boxing "season" begins immediately after football. The 20-man squad practices Monday through Friday in a fully equipped boxing gym at the school throughout the winter.

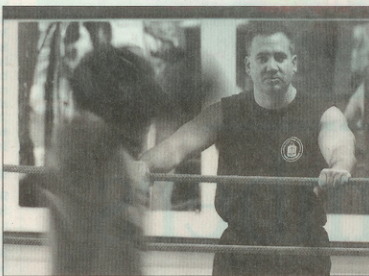
Their "state finals," per se, are the Golden Gloves, a single-elimination tournament that is considered one of the most prestigious competitions for an amateur boxer. More than 250 boxers take part in 15 classes.

Joyce, a 1986 graduate of Leo, has been the boxing coach since 1988, when he revived a program that had flourished at the South Side school in the 1970s but had been dormant since 1980.

The gym is actually an old classroom on the second floor. There are punching bags, a boxing ring, mirrors and jump ropes.

"It has everything that a regular boxing gym has," Joyce said. "We got it all through sponsorships, and the school funded a little bit of it. Everlast donated products and equipment, but we actually built the ring."

The coaching staff consists of Joyce, former old-time world welterweight champion Eddie Perkins and former lightweight contenders Luther Rawlings and Herman Mills.



Photos by Matt Marton/Daily Southtown

Boxing coach Mike Joyce, a Leo graduate, supervises a sparring session.

"They come up there every day and they really know their stuff," Joyce said. "The kids really like them. They get along with the kids really well."

Every year, from 25-30 students sign up for the program, according to Joyce. Before the Golden Gloves, team members take part in occasional amateur tournaments that are held throughout the Chicago area.

Some team members are on the track team or play baseball and football. But some are strictly boxers, such as Hollins.

"I was on a tour of Leo when I was (in) eighth grade (at South Loop grammar school)," Hollins said. "The dean (Dan O'Keefe), he took me to the boxing room and showed me around, and that's what I've wanted to do ever since."

"I'd never thought about doing it before that. I was always sure I'd play basketball. But I stuck with boxing from my freshman year until now."

Joyce is an attorney who is the director of the state's attorney's youth initiative program.

"Basically, it's the state's attorney's version of D.A.R.E.," Joyce said. "We have between almost 5,000 coaches and about 50,000 student-athletes who signed a pledge to stay away from guns, crime, hate, drugs, and to stay involved in positive activities."

"It looks to make kids involved in athletics to become role models for other students." At Leo, boxing is one of those outlets.

In the 1970s, the program was

run by Bob Galloway, a Chicago police officer whose assigned beat was Leo. One of Galloway's protégés was John Collins, a 1979 Leo graduate who went on to become a national Golden Gloves champion and a professional USBA middleweight champ. Collins boxed as a pro from 1980-87.

"He was the biggest thing in boxing here (in the Chicago area) in the last 30 years," Joyce said.

Galloway resigned from his coaching position at Leo in 1980 to help Collins turn pro. There was no boxing program at Leo when Joyce was a student (1982-86).

He played center on the football team, though, and a decade later returned to Leo to join the football staff.

"I was helping out a little bit, coaching the freshman football team, when Mr. (Bob) Foster asked me to start it (the boxing program) back up again," Joyce said.

Said Foster, Leo's principal: "He did some boxing himself and I felt that he had a vocation for dealing with young people and wanting the best for some-times guys who needed a break."

"He was just right for the program. It wasn't just that he would be an outstanding coach and mentor, but that he'd truly care for these kids and not just bring them in and then toss them aside."

Joyce himself boxed out of the park district in Fuller Park, competed in the Golden Gloves and had a couple of pro fights

before becoming an attorney. He said he jumped at the chance to restart the program at Leo, and had no problems finding young men eager to learn how to box.

"It was an easy sell," Joyce said. "The kids are there every day, anyways. A lot of times when you have boxing programs, half the battle is getting (kids) to the gym. With this being an after-school activity, we had a built-in audience."

"The kids come in completely raw. We start off mostly with floor work, from the mirror and moving around the ring. We don't do any contact for at least two months."

"We get them in shape, have them start hitting the bag, and then with the mitts and shadow boxing. We make sure that the fundamentals are strong before they start sparring."

Among recent Leo boxing success stories are Thomas Hayes (Class of 1999), who is training in the Catskills with one-time Mike Tyson trainer Kevin Rooney. Hayes is 3-0 as a pro.

But producing the next Mike Tyson isn't necessarily the No. 1 priority on Joyce's agenda.

"Maybe we're not going to find a Michael Jordan or a Muhammad Ali, but these kids are going to be focused on achieving a goal," he said. "Along the way to trying to reach that goal, they're going to be staying away from drugs, staying away from crime, staying away from gangs."

"They'll have an activity to do every day after school, and a goal that is tangible."

Hollins, for one, is an eager disciple.

"Coach is my second father from home," he said. "He means a lot to me. Without him, I wouldn't have gotten this far. He's tough, and that's the good thing. How can you expect to get somewhere without having a tough coach?"

"We've got a special bond on this team. It's all family. Everybody is taken in on the team as a brother."

This will be the second Golden Gloves competition for Hollins. He lost in the first round last year.

"But I'm very confident going into this one," he said. "It'll just take skills."