



Tribune photo by Jim Prisching

Leo High School graduate Thomas Hayes works out on a punching bag in preparation for this week's Golden Gloves finals.

Fighting spirit grips Leo High

2 of school's boxers reach Gloves finals

By Michael Hirsley

Tribune staff reporter

Leo High School, on the ropes financially a decade ago, is back on steady footing, one of its attractions a boxing program that's one of a kind among Chicago-area high schools.

Solvency at the South Side Catholic school is testament to the efforts of Leo President Bob Foster and alumni who have donated to the cause. Just as surely, two Leo boxers reaching this week's finals of the 74th Chicago Golden Gloves tournament affirms the work of alumnus attorney/trainer Mike Joyce and a support staff of ex-fighters.

"I come here to stay in shape and stay healthy, and we all worked together to put the ring up a year ago February," said Lamar Fenner, a Leo junior who also plays football and wrestles.

After the first full year of Leo's boxing program, Fenner and Thomas Hayes, a 1999 Leo graduate who now attends Daley College, are Golden Gloves finalists.

The tournament finals will be Wednesday through Friday at St. Andrew's Gym, 1658 W. Addison St.

"I wanted to start up a boxing program when I went to school here, but I didn't know who to talk to," said Hayes, who played basketball and football and wrestled at Leo. "I tried to train like a boxer, but last year was the first time I sparred with anybody. I like physical sports."

Fenner and Hayes are among 30 participants in Leo's after-school program. Some do it just for exercise and 22 have boxed in intramural tournaments.

Hayes intends to study criminal justice at Lake Forest College next year, but he takes boxing seriously enough that he would consider turning pro "if my trainers told me I could meet the standards."

Among his tutors at Leo's second-floor gym and boxing ring is 64-year-old Eddie Perkins, a junior-welterweight world champion in the early '60s, who showed 20-year-old Hayes how much he needs to learn in a very hands-on way.

"The biggest surprise I've had in this sport was seeing a guy in his 60s in the ring with me, beating me for 12 rounds," Hayes said respectfully.

Said Perkins: "I'll do everything to show them how to fight if they train hard and show me they are serious."

Perkins and fellow former pro boxers Herman Mills and Luther Rawlings work as assistant trainers with Joyce, a 1986 Leo graduate who had a few pro bouts as a light heavyweight after fighting in the Golden Gloves. Joyce was splitting time between boxing and law school and decided to focus on the latter "when I started getting handled in the gym by guys I should have been beating."

"I was in law school, and too tired to fight."

Fenner and Hayes sparred against each other on a recent

afternoon, although Fenner as a 165-pound middleweight is 45 pounds lighter than Hayes, a super heavyweight.

"I like to work out with bigger guys," Fenner said. "If I can take their hits, I can take anybody's. I always wanted to be that No. 1 guy. In team sports, everybody works together. In boxing, it's pretty much all on you; you can't blame anybody else if you lose. And I hate to lose."

Fenner and Hayes wish other high schools had similar boxing programs that might stimulate interscholastic competition. Fellow Catholic League schools Mt. Carmel and St. Rita stage boxing nights as fundraisers, but lack on-site facilities for more ambitious pursuit.

Foster, a former Leo football star who has been the school's football coach, athletic director, guidance counselor and principal, has been involved primarily with keeping the doors open since he became Leo's principal in 1991. The school receives no funding from the archdiocese, but Foster has succeeded in persuading predominantly white alumni to support Leo, whose enrollment of 370 is entirely African-American.

Although a boxing program was the last thing on Foster's mind then, it moved up once the fiscal foundation was cemented. Foster believes boxing's lessons apply to school, career and everyday life.

"Boxing teaches self-discipline and dedication to task," he said. "And, contrary to what some believe, it teaches you to be humble. I've always liked boxing. It's a great sport when you teach it properly."

And at his school, that is not a new idea, but a revived one.

Leo had a boxing program in the 1970s that produced tough fighters such as Wayne Lynnum, a 1977 national Golden Gloves champion, and John Collins, who turned pro and enjoyed local popularity as a middleweight contender.

Their boxing trainer at Leo was Chicago police officer Bob Galloway.

"We had our ring in the basement then, and the idea was if any kids had problems and wanted to fight, we'd take it into the ring," Galloway said.

The program, he said, was discontinued under Mayor Harold Washington's edict to remove police presence from all Chicago schools.

Galloway, retired from the police force, still trains young boxers at the city's Celtic Boxing Club and touts Mt. Carmel junior Tommy Brown, 16, as a prospect for next year's Golden Gloves.

At Leo, Mike Joyce sees a promising future Golden Gloves competitor in 15-year-old Jason Riley, who trains in the after-school boxing program.

Besides being the top student in his freshman class and a member of the choir at his church, Riley competes in baseball, football and wrestling. He said he watches a lot of boxing on cable television and favors Floyd Mayweather, Sugar Shane Mosley and Oscar De La Hoya.

And he intends to do more than watch and train.

"I plan to do Golden Gloves when I'm a senior," he said.