

Bears' Smith NFL's best coach

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Lovie Smith is in the company of Hall of Famers. Smith was hired to resurrect the proud Chicago Bears franchise once coached by George Halas and Mike Ditka. He did such a strong job in 2005 that he was chosen The Associated Press NFL Coach of the Year on Saturday.

Halas and Ditka each won the honor twice. In his second season with the Bears, Smith took them from 5-11 to 11-5, the NFC North title and a first-round bye.

"Each day I'm living a dream to even be talked about with those guys," Smith said. "I'm blessed to be a Bear. Each day I realize that, and it seems like more and more I realize that."

Smith also beat out his mentor, Indianapolis coach Tony Dungy, drawing 24 1/2 votes from a nationwide panel of 50 sports writers and broadcasters who cover the NFL. Dungy was next with 20 1/2.

"I would have voted for Tony for the award," Smith added. "I'm really happy for our assistant coaches, to get that award. Tony did a great job with his program, as a lot of other coaches did."

February hearing slated for Hearn

SOUTHFIELD, Mich. (AP) - Thomas "Hit Man" Hearn's pretrial hearing on a charge that he struck his 13-year-old son was postponed so the former boxing champion's lawyer could gather more information.

Hearn is to return to court Jan 26. If convicted of the misdemeanor assault and battery charge, he faces a maximum penalty of about three months in jail and a \$500 fine.

Hearn was arraigned Monday and released on \$10,000 personal bond. The 47-year-old boxer was ordered to not have contact with his son.

Neither Hearn nor his lawyer, Michael Smith, commented following Friday's appearance before Judge Shelia Johnson.

Southfield police say they were called to Hearn's home by his wife Sunday evening. When they arrived, police said they found the boy with a small cut and bruise over one eye. Hearn was arrested and jailed until his arraignment.

"This case is not a case of reasonable parental discipline," said Keri Middleditch, an assistant Oakland County prosecutor. "The injuries ... far exceed any bounds of reasonable discipline."

Southfield Police Chief Joseph Thomas had asked the prosecutor's office to review the case to see if Hearn's son should be charged. Thomas said the boy either hit Hearn or tried to hit him before he was struck.

Prosecutor David Gorcyca said Friday the boy would not be charged. Thomas declined to comment on the decision. Thomas and Gorcyca declined to release copies of the police report.

Hearn had memorable fights with Sugar Ray Leonard, Roberto Duran and Marvin Hagler. Between 1980 and 1999 he held WBA, WBC, WBU and IBO titles ranging from the welterweight to cruiserweight divisions.

Hearn began a comeback in July with an eight-round victory over lightly regarded John Long. After the bout, Hearn said he planned to fight for a long time.

Chicago had the league's stingiest defense, which figures because Smith made his reputation as a defensive mastermind, first in Tampa Bay under Dungy, then in St. Louis.

Now, he oversees a team that surged to a Super Bowl contender, armed with a defense that allowed only 202 points, just 61 of those at home.

"I definitely get the sense this is the Bears' year," he said. "We have a special group of athletes, a special team with character. We have a great team chemistry. Whatever it is the good teams have that make a run, I just think that this team has it."

Smith, who served as Dungy's linebackers coach from 1996-2000 in Tampa, recently attended the funeral of James Dungy, his close friend's oldest son, who died last month. Their bond remains strong and Smith often has credited Dungy with helping develop his leadership skills.

Bears general manager Jerry Angelo also worked for the Buccaneers.

"Lovie, when we went out and started our search for a head coach, it starts with leadership," Angelo said.

"And (with) Lovie there've never been any doubts about that. I knew that firsthand. I had the benefit of working with him down in Tampa and saw that come to fruition even more so now that he's in charge."

Smith, who moved from defensive coordinator of the Rams to the Bears, chose Ron Rivera to coordinate the defense, but remains heavily involved with a unit sparked by Defensive Player of the Year Brian Urlacher. Chicago gave up 24 points in a loss to Cincinnati in Week 3, but

otherwise never yielded more than nine points at Soldier Field in going 7-1 at home.

Rivera has become a prime candidate for some of the head coaching openings this month.

"You most certainly do have to say he is coach of the year," Rivera said. "We were supposed to be 3-13 according to a lot of people. We were supposed to be the 32nd-ranked team, and he got us to believe in ourselves and believe in each other. It's true." (See Smith, Page 15)



Chicago Bears' Lovie Smith was named NFL coach of the year for leading his team to a division title and the playoffs.

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