

Hall of Fame

Hurricane Irene

Irene Mach stormed past opponents and raised the bar for Southington softball

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

In the opening round of the 1977 state tournament, Irene Mach dared the Stamford defense as she straddled the base path nearly 20 feet from third base. A line drive back to the mound gave them a chance for a double play, an errant throw to third base gave Mach the advantage, but fans gasped as their sophomore catcher fell to the ground with a twisted knee.

Stamford players scrambled for the ball, and Mach crawled back to third base to tag up. Stamford fired the ball to their catcher as Mach dragged herself to home plate on all fours. The umpire signaled the score, and Mach blacked out from the pain.

Hall of Fame

Few players matched her toughness. Fewer still matched her success. Mach took girls varsity sports by storm, and her arrival marks a turning point for the Lady Knights. Over the years Southington girls teams have captured 25 state titles in four different sports, but Mach's teams were the first to set the standard. Mach raised the bar for all that followed.

"I'm very competitive, but I was just a softball player trying to do my part and do my best," she said about her role as a pioneer. "As a team, we were just trying to do our best and have fun at the same time. We never thought of it that way."

Fans, on the other hand, will never forget her impact.


"In all the years that I covered high school sports—and that includes both men and women—Irene Mach was one of the top competitors that I've ever seen," said Jim Senich, former sports writer for *The Southington Observer*. "She just had it in her heart. She was a lion, and she willed her teams to victory."

These days, the Lady Knights are mentioned in just about every state title conversation. The girls dominated basketball in the 1980s. They dominated gymnastics since the turn of the century. They battle at the top in volleyball, soccer, and everything else. When it comes to softball, anything short of a championship title is a disappointing season.

Yet things were different when Mach joined the team as an inexperienced sophomore. Southington was a fledgling softball program that was looking for a star, and Mach was just looking to play.

"I hadn't even heard of fast-pitch softball until then," she said. "But I thought, 'All right, at least they had it.'"

It may seem strange today, but there were few opportunities for girls when Mach was growing up in the 1970s. She waited patiently for a chance to play against the boys in pickup games. She followed her



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

- Inducted into the Connecticut High School and Collegiate Softball Hall of Fame (1993).
- Played for SHS girls basketball team (1976-77, 1977-78).
 - Played goalie for SHS field hockey (1976, 77).
 - Played for SHS softball (1977, 78, 79).
- Athlete of the Week in Sports Illustrated (August 14, 1978).

Softball

- All-conference (1977, 78, 79).
- Pitched for Class LL state championship (1978, 79).
 - SHS Career pitching: 39-9 record.
 - Earned scholarship to Texas A&M.

1977 season

Catching—Threw out 13 baserunners.
Hitting—.365 batting average, 24 runs, 20 RBI.

1978 season

Pitching—20-1 record, 138 innings, 1.98 ERA, 137 strikeouts, allowed 61 hits with 1 no-hitter, 5 one-hitters, and 4 two-hitters.
Hitting—.458 batting average, 21 runs, 21 RBI, 1 homerun, 3 triples, 2 doubles.

1979 season

Pitching—18-2 record, 134 innings, 1.15 ERA, 131 strikeouts, 66 walks, allowed 47 hits with 3 no-hitters, 5 one-hitters, and 4 two-hitters.
Hitting—.359 batting average, 20 runs, 12 RBI, 5 sacrifice hits, 2 doubles.

Coaching (University of Hartford)

- Assistant coach (1988).
- Head coach (1989-1991).
- Overall record: 24-61-1.

brother to Little League practice with the hope that she could roam the outfield during warm-ups, and she credits her brother's coach, Mr. Dabkowski, for giving her a chance.

"Sometimes he would let me practice. I couldn't play in the games, but he would let me shag balls. Nobody else wanted to shag balls, but I was thrilled to do it," she said. "A couple of years later, they allowed girls to play Little League, but there was nothing for me. It was frustrating, but that was just the way it was. I guess I really didn't think that much about it. Those were the rules, and you abide by the rules."

Of course, rules never stopped her. By the time she entered junior high school, Mach had proven herself an equal to the boys. By the time she reached ninth grade, she had clawed her way onto the baseball roster at DePaolo Junior High School. Then her coach told her about softball at the high school.

"In those days, Southington didn't have that many great female athletes," said Senich. "They were just beginning to groom them, and they were just beginning to have leagues in town. They were just learning the games. Then, along came Irene."

As a sophomore, Mach was named as the starting catcher, and she threw out 13 baserunners from behind the plate. She paced the

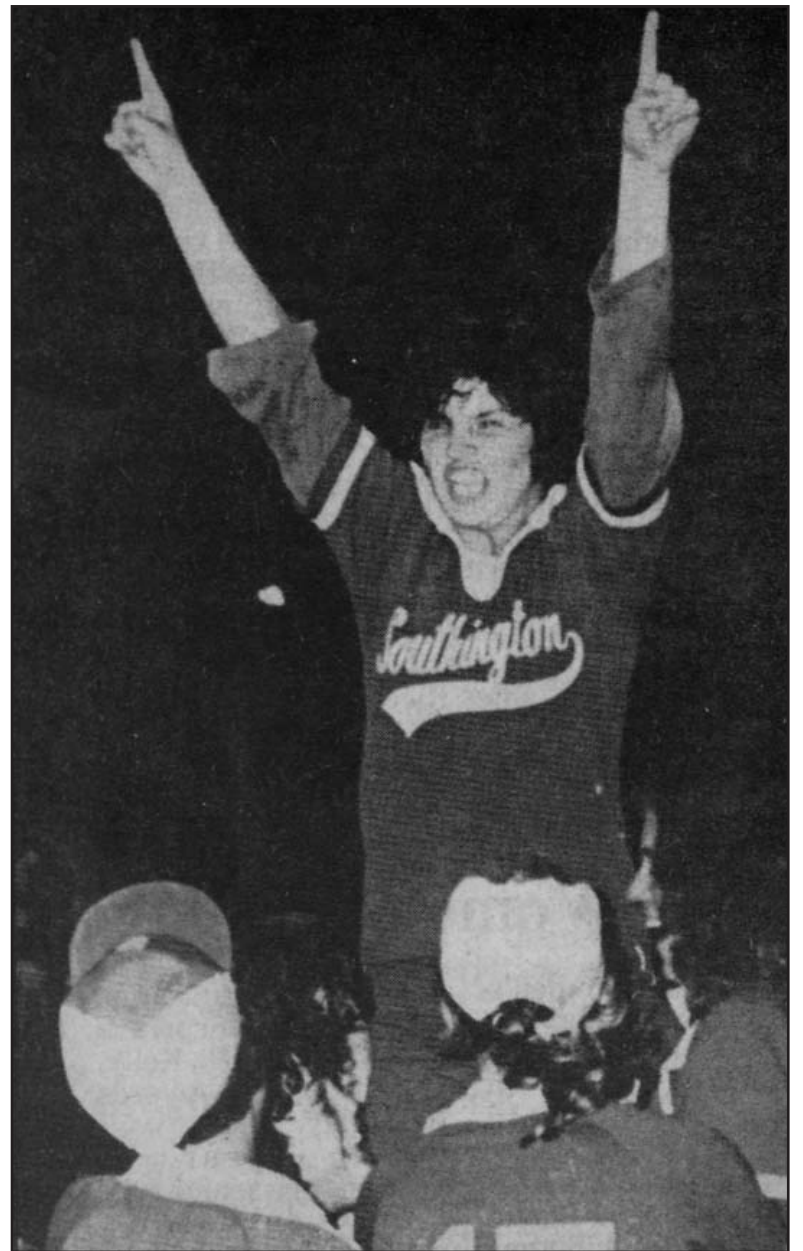
offense with a .365 batting average. She gave 100 percent effort, but her body was already breaking down. By the start of her junior year, she had to give up field hockey and basketball. Even catching seemed too much to handle.

"I talked to coach, and told him that I wasn't going to be able to do it," she said. "He had other things to worry about, so he gave me a ball and told me to go throw, go pitch against the wall. We'll figure something out, and that's sort of how it started."

Mach was named as the starting pitcher on opening day, and she went 20-1 in her rookie season with a 1.98 ERA. Mach struck out 137 batters in 138 innings, but she was still wild on the mound.

"I had a really good catcher. Sandy Sprague stopped everything that was within her reach," said Mach. "I probably walked as many people as I struck out, and then I hit a lot of people. I was very, very wild. I was very, very green... I didn't think about it. I just sort of went up there and tried to remember where the release point is and hope for the best."

Her 'best' was good enough to carry the Knights to the championship game. The following year, she did it again. She went 18-2 as a senior, pared her ERA to 1.15 and struck out 131 batters in 134 innings. She was named to the all-conference roster every year at the



FILE PHOTO

Irene Mach celebrates Southington's first softball state title in 1977.

high school and probably would have been named to the all-state roster if it was available at the time.

"Man, when she got her fingers on that ball? Whew. She was some pitcher," said Senich. "Every ground ball that was hit in the infield, she wanted to get—and she could almost get them all, too. She was a great athlete."

Her efforts drew the attention of newspapers across the state. She began to dominate headlines typically reserved for boys sports. College coaches converged on the Southington pitcher, and local girls began to follow the Southington sports pioneer.

Val DePaolo credited Mach as an early influence when she was inducted into the Southington Sports Hall of Fame in 2010. Julie Bolduc said that she felt guilty for being inducted ahead of her childhood hero. Kelly Hart, who will be inducted beside Mach this fall, credits the pitcher for a big part of her success.

"My mother used to take me to the field to watch her games when I was younger," said Hart. "We'd go there to watch Irene...She played so hard that she was dirty head to toe. When she was a catcher, she'd play all-out. When she was a pitcher, it was the same thing. She was just one of those all-out players."

Unfortunately, Mach's body was already paying the toll for her efforts on the field. She signed a letter of intent to play first base for Texas A&M. She was pushed into the lineup as a freshman to serve as a backup catcher for the Aggies, but Mach suffered yet another injury to her knee. This one was

the final straw.

"They were going to allow me to come back one more year even though I couldn't play, and then they would assess me from there," she said. "With knee surgery after knee surgery after knee surgery, I had enough. You can't play competitive like that, and I didn't want to be there if I couldn't play ball."

Even though her playing days were over, Mach continued to give back to the sport. She volunteered as an unpaid assistant coach for the Lady Knights for a number of years. She joined the coaching staff at the University of Hartford in the mid 1980s and was named as their head coach from 1989-1991. Mach called it a labor of love and a way to pay back all the support she received as a player.

"I got a lot out of the sport, but I hope that I gave back a lot to the sport and the town. I mean, the whole town rallied around us when we won," she said. "My dad used to leave work to come to my games. He used to pace back and forth, and my mother used to be yelling in the stands. It was all the parents, really, and their support meant a lot."

With her storied career and continued dedication to local sports, Mach was an easy choice for the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, she will be inducted into the local hall in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"It's an honor," she said. "You think about all the good athletes that have come through this town. To be part of that and be one of them is quite an honor."