

**BASEBALL**

# **Stegeman hoping to expand on idea of girls baseball**

**BY DENNIS MAHONEY | STAFF WRITER**

Mary Jo Stegeman's back in the business of being a pioneer.

Now the Skokie resident wants girls ages 11-14 in the northern suburbs and Chicago to experience the thrill of playing baseball at an elite level.

Stegeman, who brought the high school bowling program at Loyola Academy to new heights in the 1990s, is putting together a baseball team for players ages 11-14 to participate in a tournament that begins Oct. 6 at Walt Disney World in Florida.

And only females need apply.

"I know there are girls out there who want to play baseball," said Stegeman, whose daughter Joni is a former member of the United States women's national team. "We already have a group of eight or nine girls who are committed to play in this tournament for the short term. I know there are more out there.

"I remember how much it meant to my family when Joni had the opportunity to play and I know there are girls who are really into playing baseball -- not softball. But when you get to be 11 or 12 or 13 years old it's sad to realize that your career is over. In a country where baseball is the national pastime, to me that makes no sense whatsoever.

"Playing in this tournament is a short term thing, but I mean to have a program for the long term, too. If girls want to continue to play baseball, this is a path they can choose. I know it's not easy for girls to keep playing, but if it's your passion, it's the only game in town." Stegeman is a member of the advisory board for the American Women's Baseball Federation.

The president of that organization, ex-national team coach Jim Glennie, will coach the team that participates Oct. 6-9 in an event called the Sunshine Showdown.

The team is called the Chicago Pioneers and will feature players from Vernon Hills, Northbrook, Winnetka, Wilmette, Evanston, Buffalo Grove and Chicago among others. Roster slots are still available and Stegeman is also seeking coaches and sponsors to aid in the effort.

The team is guaranteed at least four games. The fields consist of 200-foot fences, 70-foot bases and a pitching mound 50 feet from home plate.

"We're just getting started and this isn't meant to take the place of Little League," Stegeman said. "But if girls want to continue after their Little League experience is over against other female players, this is something they can aspire to."

Stegeman said the team will hold practices at least twice a week leading up to the Florida tournament.

For further information, contact Stegeman at (847) 707-8944.