



A WOMAN CALLED

Babe

WORLD'S GREATEST FEMALE ATHLETE

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Photos Courtesy Of: *The Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum, Beaumont, TX*

The most gifted female athlete of the 20th century, and perhaps of all time, was a Texas woman called Babe. Mildred Ella "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias became a U.S. sensation and an international phenomenon after she won three medals in track and field at the 1932 Olympics. Babe excelled at every sport she tried, and by the 1940s, was the greatest woman golfer that had ever played the game. She was a woman ahead of her time and although she had critics who accused her of being pushy, coarse, and unfeminine, she began to change society's idea of just what a woman could actually do.

EARLY PROMISE

One of seven children, Babe was born on June 26, 1911 in Port Arthur, Texas to Norwegian immigrants - Hannah and Ole Didrikson. Her family moved inland to Beaumont when she was four years old, after a hurricane hit the coast and destroyed their home.

It is hard to say exactly what spurred Babe's early interest in athletics, but one clue might be the fact that Babe's father was an early proponent of physical fitness and conditioning and built his own weight lifting gear from a broomstick and some flat irons. As a child Babe was a raucous ball of energy who preferred playing with boys. She gained her nickname, some say, after a particularly stellar sandlot baseball game where she hit five home runs, which the boys compared to the heroic feats of Babe Ruth.

By the time she was a teenager, Babe said her life's goal was to be "the greatest athlete that ever lived." At Beaumont High School, when she was 15 years old, Babe was already a star player in tennis, swimming, baseball, volleyball, and basketball. It was her prowess as a basketball forward however, that gave her the opportunity to shine on a larger stage.

In the 1930s, company-sponsored women's basketball teams competed on a popular national network. Babe's outstanding skills attracted the attention of a coach for the Employers Casualty Company girls' basketball team in Dallas. Although she was still in high school, Babe landed both a job and a spot on the Golden Cyclones. She was paid \$75 a month to work for Employers as a secretary since she would have lost her amateur status if she had been paid to play



HIGHLIGHTS OF *Babe Didrikson Zaharias'* ATHLETIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Competed in 1932 Summer Olympics and won gold medals in Javelin Throw and 80-Meter Hurdles and a Silver in the High Jump
- As an amateur golfer, won a record 13 consecutive tournaments and 3 major Championships:
 - U.S. Women's Amateur: 1946, 1947
 - British Women's Amateur: 1947
- As a professional golfer, won 31 tournaments and 10 major championships:
 - U.S. Women's Open: 1948, 1950, 1954
 - Western Open: 1940, 1944, 1945, 1950
 - Titleholders: 1947, 1950, 1952
- *Associated Press* Woman Athlete of the Year: 1931, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1950, 1954
- LPGA Tour money leader: 1950, 1951
- Inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 1951
- Named to the Hall of Fame of Women's Golf in 1951
- Vare Trophy (low scoring average): 1954
- In 1954, received the Richardson Award by the Golf Writers Association of America for her contributions to golf and the Ben Hogan Award for her comeback after the cancer surgeries
- Awarded the USGA Bobby Jones Award in 1957.
- In 1950, Babe was named "Women Athlete of the Half-Century" by the *Associated Press* and in 1999, "The Greatest Female Athlete of the 20th Century"
- One of six original inductees to the LPGA Hall of Fame in 1967
- In 2004, inducted into The World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame

basketball. Babe did not disappoint and the Cyclones won the national championship for the next three years, and Babe was named an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) All-American for two of those three years. Babe went on to graduate from high school with the rest of her class in June, but did not pursue college. Instead, she set her sights on the Olympics!

In 1930, after hearing the news that track and field events for women were to be added to the next Olympics in 1932, Babe began training. At her first AAU track and field competition later that year, she won four events. In 1932, the AAU held a national track and field meet that served as the Olympics' qualifier. Babe was the only entry from Employers Casualty and entered 8 of the 10 events. In just three hours Babe earned enough points to win the meet championship as a team of one! She won 6 gold medals and broke four world records earning her a total of 30 points. The second place team consisted of 22 women and earned just 22 points!

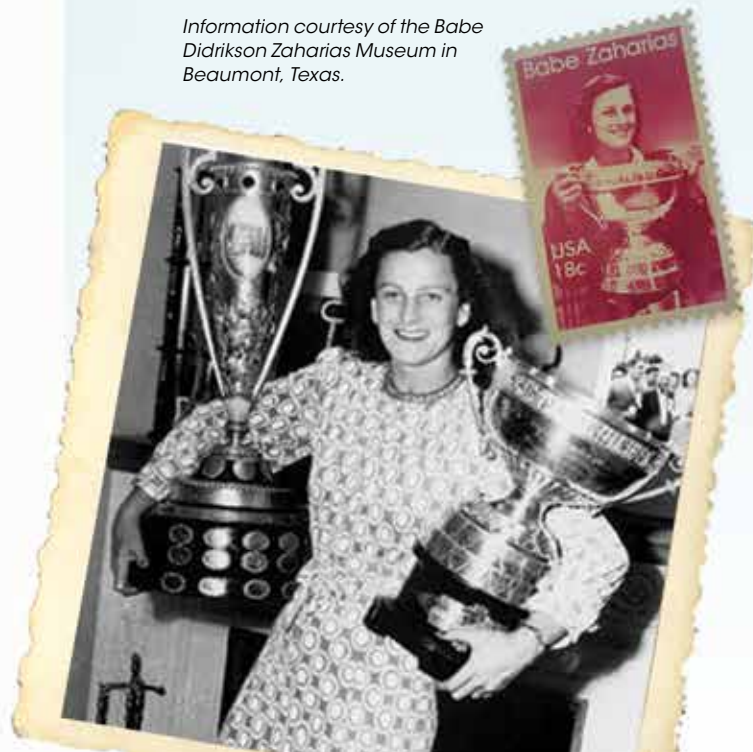
WONDER GIRL!


By virtue of her AAU success, Babe qualified for six different events at the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, Olympic rules restricted women to competing in just three events at the Summer Games. Babe broke the world record in the javelin throw and twice broke the world record for the 80-meter hurdles. She also made a world record high jump, but it was disallowed on a technicality and Babe only received a silver medal in that event to go along with her two golds.

After the Olympics, the world definitely sat up and took notice of this 5 foot 6 inch, 115-pound dynamo! The media around the world started calling her "Wonder Girl" and her legend began to grow. One of the most famous sports writers of the day, Paul Gallico, called her "the most talented athlete, male or female, ever developed in our country." In addition to track and field, Babe excelled in about every sport imaginable. In 1939, *Time Magazine* described Babe as a "famed woman athlete, 1932 Olympic Games track & field star, expert basketball player, golfer, javelin thrower, hurdler, high jumper, swimmer, baseball pitcher, football halfback, billiardist, tumbler, boxer, wrestler, fencer, weight lifter, adagio dancer." Even that effusive description left out her expertise in bowling, tennis, diving, and skating!

In the 1930s there were very few opportunities for women athletes to earn money, no matter how famous they might be. Babe, however, was gutsy, talented, and creative and for several years performed on the vaudeville circuit playing the harmonica and telling somewhat bawdy jokes. She also played professional pocket billiards, traveled with a basketball team called Babe Didrikson's All-Americans, and toured with a House of David baseball

Information courtesy of the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum in Beaumont, Texas.





team. In 1934, Babe got the opportunity to show her baseball prowess by pitching in some Major League Baseball spring exhibition games, where some reports say she even struck out Joe DiMaggio! These activities gained her a little money and some notoriety, but little satisfaction. She needed a new challenge.

LEGEND ON THE LINKS

Golf became Babe's new obsession. Although she had played the game a little in high school and dabbled in it over the years, it was not until 1935 that she turned her considerable focus and talents solely to golf. Not long after winning her first competition, the Texas Women's Amateur Tournament, her golf career hit a snag. The U.S. Golf Association officials declared that Babe was not an amateur because she had competed professionally in other sports. Babe stoically continued to play golf and was not reinstated as an amateur until 1943, when the ruling was overturned. Regardless of that controversy, Babe soon became a legend on the links and easily outperformed her women competitors.

In 1938, she qualified for the men's Los Angeles Open and was fortuitously paired in the tournament with a man who would become her future husband, George Zaharias. George was an excellent golfer, sports promoter, and successful professional wrestler known for his villainous role as the "Weeping Greek from Cripple Creek." The outgoing George and the brash Babe hit it off and were married in St. Louis only 11 months later. Babe added Zaharias to her name, moved to Tampa, and George became her manager and advisor. The couple never had any children.

Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, Babe was the leading woman golfer in the world and also continued to play occasional male PGA events. Though without a peer on the links, Babe's brash and sometimes arrogant manner did not always win her friends among her competitors. It was said that Babe was fond of boldly striding into the locker room before a tournament with the announcement, "Babe's here! So who's gonna come in second?"

Not everyone resented Babe's bravado and spunk. Many people admired her wit, sass, and unbelievable skill and enjoyed the way she threw out hilarious quips and totally engaged the gallery during tournaments, something no other professional golfer had done so well before. Babe made a huge impression on a young, up-and-coming golfer by the name of Arnold Palmer. He admits that she was the inspiration for the folksy, bantering style that later became his trademark. According to Palmer in his autobiography, *A Golfer's Life*, "Babe was one of the great women of American golf, with sparkling wit and a swing as strong as garlic." The summer Arnold was 13, Babe came to Latrobe, Pennsylvania and played an exhibition golf match with Arnold, his dad, and a promising young golfer named Pat Harrison. He observed how Babe turned to the gallery and joked with them and how much the audience ate up her showmanship: "Babe had a flair for the spectacular and the talent and personality to pull it off. Though no one else realized it then, so did I." He said that he daydreamed about how great it would be to make people "ooh and ahh over a golf shot," just like Babe.

As an amateur golfer, Babe won a record 13 consecutive tournaments in 1946 and turned professional in 1947. That year she became the first American to win the British Amateur Tournament and she dominated the Women's Professional Golf Association and the



later Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), that she and George helped found in 1950. As a pro she won 31 tournaments and 10 major championships including the U.S. Women's Open three times. She was the first to win the Women's "Grand Slam" in 1950 and was one of six original inductees to the LPGA Hall of Fame in 1967. Over her career Babe won a total of 55 tournaments.

According to numerous accounts, when asked about the secret of her amazing drive, Babe would often answer with one of her favorite quips, "Aw, I just loosen my girdle and take a whack at it." In 1950, she was named "Women Athlete of the Half-Century" by the *Associated Press* (AP) and in 1999, "The Greatest Female Athlete of the 20th Century." She had also been named AP's female athlete of the year six times.

BABE'S BIGGEST CHALLENGE

There was never any question that Babe was determined and tough. In 1953, when she was 42, the world would learn the true depth of her strength when she was diagnosed with colon cancer. Babe had surgery for her cancer, but the disease had already spread to other parts of her body. She received a colostomy and it was feared that she would never return to competition. Unbelievably, 14 weeks later she was back on the tournament trail and in 1954 she won the U.S. Women's Open by twelve strokes, colostomy bag and all. In fact, her last seven wins came after her diagnosis.

At a time when it was taboo and socially awkward to say the "C word" aloud, Babe used her international fame to bring attention to the disease and help raise money for research to find its cure. She was the first celebrity spokesperson for the American Cancer Society and was the centerpiece of a national fundraising campaign for the organization. In 1955, her cancer flared up again and she went under the knife a second time, to no avail. She died on September 27, 1956 in Galveston.

BABE'S LEGACY

While Babe may no longer be the household name she was in her heyday, those who know the history of sport definitely know her amazing story, and those in her hometown are especially dedicated to preserving her unique legacy.

In 1969, Ben Rogers founded the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Foundation in Beaumont "to preserve and promote the legacy of Babe." The foundation raised private funds to build the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum & Visitors Center that opened in 1976. Its final fundraiser was held at the premiere of the 1975 movie, *Babe: The Babe Didrikson Zaharias Story*, starring Alex Karras and Susan Clark. The small, free museum contains many of Babe's awards, trophies, photographs, and other memorabilia. It is located at 1750 IH-10 E. in Beaumont and is open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 pm.

Today, the foundation presents periodic donations to worthy charities and annually awards six endowed Lamar University scholarships in Babe's honor to "outstanding female athletes who exhibit role model characteristics to their peers." A golf tournament is also held in Babe's honor every summer at the Brentwood Golf Course in Beaumont. Numerous books have been written about Babe's life, and she penned an autobiography as well.

Current foundation president W.L. Pate, Jr., described why he believed Babe's legacy should and would endure:

"Babe, a woman who was born before women were allowed to vote, with no role model, became the iconic symbol for what women could achieve when they realized that the only limits were those put on themselves by themselves. She changed the cultural perception of women from those who would like to compete with men to the reality of true competitors, in and out of athletics."

