

# PUBLICATION

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## Celebrating Women's History Month: Wonder Girl

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For those of us who came of age before Title IX mandated equality in sports, the school sports opportunities for girls were limited – mostly to cheerleading and field hockey. There were few competitive college women's team sports and no professional women's sports teams. But that did not mean those boomers didn't throw a softball, shoot hoops or have big athletic dreams. Women then did not have a Michael Jordan or a Tiger Woods, but we did have Babe.

Although her name may be unfamiliar to a young generation of sports fans, Babe Didrikson Zaharias was perhaps America's greatest all-around athlete, male or female. Don Van Natta Jr., author of *Wonder Girl: The Magnificent Sporting Life of Babe Didrikson Zaharias*, described her thus:

No athlete excelled at more sports and games than Didrikson. She was an all-American basketball player, a two-time Olympic track and field gold medalist and a golf champion who won 82 tournaments, including an astonishing 14 in a row. One of the 13 founding members of the L.P.G.A., Didrikson became the first woman to play against men in a PGA Tour event and the first American to win the British Women's Amateur Championship.

She was also an outstanding baseball, softball, tennis and billiards player, diver and bowler.

Mildred Ella Didrikson was the sixth of seven children born in the coastal oil city of Port Arthur in southeastern Texas. Her mother, Hannah, and her father, Ole, were immigrants from Norway. She claimed to have acquired the nickname "Babe" (after Babe Ruth) upon hitting five home runs in a childhood baseball game. Although the story is likely a fiction, it is clear she set out from a young age to become the greatest athlete of all time – male or female!

Even though Babe wasn't limited by her gender – she even tried boxing – she found women's opportunities to compete limited. As a result, Babe left high school to work for a company called Employers Casualty Insurance and to play for their basketball team, the Golden Cyclones. While at Employers Casualty she took up track and field, and within a year and a half, Employers Casualty sent her to Chicago to compete for a spot on the Olympic team at the AAU amateur track and field championships in Evanston, Illinois, on July 16, 1932, the qualifying meet for the 1932 Olympics.

In *Wonder Girl*, Van Atta describes this as Didrikson's most spectacular athletic achievement. "As a one-woman track team, Babe Didrikson won five events: broad jump, baseball throw, shot put, javelin, and 80-meter hurdles, all within three hours. In the competition, she accumulated 30 points; the secondplace Illinois Women's Athletic Club, which included 22 athletes, accumulated 22 points. She single-handedly won the national track team championship." Zaharias's performance was arguably the most amazing feat by any athlete, male or female, in track and field history.

In the process, she qualified for three Olympic events: the 80-meter hurdles, high jump and javelin. Ironically, women were only allowed to enter three Olympic events at that time because they were considered too weak to compete in more than that number.

Not surprisingly, Zaharias was a favorite to win at the 1932 Olympic Games at Los Angeles, and she did. She won gold medals in the javelin and the 80-meter hurdles, and a silver medal in the high jump. In winning these medals, she broke four world records. Zaharias also made a world-record high jump, but because she went over the bar head first instead of leading with her feet, the jump was disqualified. (Current high jumpers all jump head first; Zaharias was later given credit for tying for first place in the event.)

Almost overnight, she became the most famous female athlete in the world. In the press reports of the time, she was nicknamed the "Iron Woman," the "Amazing Amazon," and "Whatta Gal Didrikson."

Although just five feet five inches tall, she was physically strong and unabashedly proud of her prowess. Didrikson was reported to show up in the clubhouse before a tournament and bellowed to her female competitors: "The Babe's here! Who is going to finish second?" "What seemed boastful to some," said Harry Paxton, in Babe's 1955 autobiography, *This Life I've Led*, "were plain statements of the truth as she saw it." Her boldness and braggadocio were qualities that endeared Babe to her fans.

But she had her detractors as well. These same traits aggravated critics who perceived her outspoken self-confidence as arrogant and unladylike.

It would be much better if she and her ilk stayed at home, got themselves prettied up and waited for the phone to ring.

This remark by Joe Williams, sportswriter for New York World-Telegram, typified the attitude of some toward Babe who, with her square jaw, short cropped hair, man-style clothing and machismo, did not fit the traditional ideals of femininity. In addition to an androgynous personal style, Zaharias defied other gender stereotypes. She was financially independent and remained single, supporting herself and earning a great deal of money – more than most men – through endorsements, stunts and appearances--including a stint in Vaudeville.

The more notoriety she achieved as a single independent woman, the more reporters denounced her as "boyish," "mannish," "unfeminine," "unpretty," "not-quite female" and a "Muscle Moll." Whisper campaigns suggested she was a lesbian.

At first Babe had been indifferent to what people thought or said about her, preferring to let her athletic achievements speak for themselves. But following the Olympics, there were few venues in which she could compete and thus ward off the personal barbs. According to Susan E. Cayleff, author of *Babe: The Life and Legend of Babe Didrikson Zaharias*, the comments "wounded Babe deeply and helped precipitate her rejection of all things masculine."

In the mid-1930's, Babe began transforming her image, donning hats, dresses, lipstick, perfume and nail polish. She denied ever having boxed and refused to discuss her accomplishments as an All-American basketball player and Olympic track and field star. She gave up the single life and married a professional wrestler, George Zaharias, known as "The Crying Greek from Cripple Creek."

When Babe was 21, she started seriously playing golf – a more "ladylike" sport – the sport she is best remembered for today. She would drive as many as 1,000 balls a day, take lessons for five or six hours, and play until her hands were blistered and bleeding.

Not long after, she was winning championships. In January 1938, she competed in the Los Angeles Open, a men's PGA (Professional Golfers' Association) tournament, a feat no other woman would even try until Annika Sörenstam, Suzy Whaley and Michelle Wie almost six decades later.

She went on to become America's first female golf celebrity and the leading player of the 1940s and early 1950s. She would go on to win three U.S. Opens. By 1950, she had won every golf title available, and was the first American to win the British Women's Amateur Championship. Eventually, she was one of the 13 founding members of the L.P.G.A.

Zaharias had her greatest year in 1950 when she completed the Grand Slam of the three women's majors of the day: the U.S. Open, the Titleholders Championship and the Women's Western Open. That year, the Associated Press, which had chosen her as the "Female Athlete of the Year" six times for track and field and for golfing, named her the "Greatest Female Athlete of the First Half of the Century."

In 1952, she had a cameo role in the Spencer Tracy-Katharine Hepburn film "Pat and Mike." Hepburn played a college physical education teacher who excels at just about every sport there is. The film carries a powerful feminist message as the athlete rejects the fawning fiancé who would rather have her stick to being "the little woman" and forget about succeeding. Babe would have approved that message.

Zaharias was diagnosed with colon cancer in 1953. After undergoing cancer surgery, she made a comeback in 1954. She took her tenth and final major with a U.S. Women's Open championship one month after cancer surgery.

With typical dedication, Didrikson became a crusader against cancer. She spoke openly about her illness in an era when public figures preferred to keep theirs a secret. Her cancer recurred in 1955, and despite her limited schedule, she managed to gain her last two wins in competitive golf.

The brash, tough-talking Texan who spent her life hurdling obstacles placed in her way by chauvinistic sports fans, sexist reporters and class-conscious golfers could not overcome this last hurdle. On September 27, 1956, Zaharias died of her illness at age forty-five.

On the morning she died, President Dwight D. Eisenhower honored her:

She was a woman who, in her athletic career, certainly won the admiration of every person in the United States, all sports people all over the world, and in her gallant fight against cancer, she put up one of the kind of fights that inspire us all.

Her legend, as they say, lives on. The Associated Press followed up its 1950 declaration by voting Zaharias the "Woman Athlete of the 20th Century" in 1999. In 2000, Sports Illustrated magazine also named her second on its list of the Greatest Female Athletes of All Time, behind Jackie Joyner-Kersey. Babe is the highest ranked woman, at number ten, on ESPN's list of the 50 top athletes of the 20th century.

You can celebrate women's history by checking out more about Babe, including photos at [ESPN SportsCentury](#).

Autobiography: This Life I've Led, My Autobiography (1955)