

**The Other Babe:** Didrikson-Zaharias (Mildred Ella) as a child, brandished on the gym equipment built by her dad in their backyard. She was a shameless tomboy who excelled in every sport she played: Basketball, track, golf, baseball, tennis, swimming, diving, boxing, volleyball, handball, bowling, billiards, skating and cycling. When asked if there was anything she didn't play, she said, "Yeah, dolls."

She played sandlot baseball with the neighborhood boys and in high school displayed her extraordinary athletic abilities playing girls' basketball. Didrikson said she was nicknamed Babe early in her teens by boys awed at her long-distance homers. Her goal was to be the greatest athlete who ever lived, but few sports' opportunities were open to girls.

The trend in the 1920s was to eliminate interscholastic sports competition for girls due to "undue stress and morbid social influences" upon the female of the species. While girls intramural athletic games were deemed scholastically suitable, intermural school sports for girls all but disappeared until the 1970s, post Title IX.

Didrikson was neither a declared feminist nor activist for any kind of women's equality. Noticeably she was the antithesis of femininity. She dressed and acted boyish during her youth and on into womanhood. She was simply an athlete. But she "was" a female.

As a high school senior in 1930, Didrikson was recruited to "work" for a company, really a ruse as a way for her (women in general) to play basketball on their semiprofessional women's team, the Golden Cyclones. For two years she led the Cyclones to the finals. In one year they won the national championship and in both seasons Didrikson was All-American. Because of her, the company added ten track and field events to the women's sports program. Didrikson represented the company in each, literally, as a one-woman team in each.

At the 1932 Amateur Athletic Union Championships, she placed in seven of the ten events with a first place in five, a tie in one, and fourth in another. She set five world records in a single afternoon, won the team championship albeit she was the only member of her team. Her total of thirty points was eight more than the entire twenty-two member second-place team from the University of Illinois (Urbana).

These AAU Championships were the de facto US Olympic Trials and Didrikson qualified for five events in the 1932 Los Angeles Summer Olympics. She would enter in only three. Women, unlike men, were allowed to compete in only three. In all three, she won Olympic medals; two gold and one silver. She won the first women's Olympic javelin event (143 feet, 4 inches) and set a world record in winning the first Olympic 80-meter hurdles (11.7 seconds). In the high jump, she broke the world record. One sportswriter noted that he never encountered any man who could play as many different games as well as the Babe.

Looking for still another challenge, in 1933 she turned to golf which she had played in high school. It would be the sport for which she would become most famous. Though a petite 5' 5", she regularly hit the ball around 250 yards. She won the Texas Women's Amateur golf tournament in 1935, but was denied amateur status by the US Golf Association because her name had appeared in a car ad.

Since a professional golf tour for women did NOT exist, she competed in the 1938 men's PGA Los Angeles Open, an arena no other woman would again attempt to enter until Annika Sörenstam (2003), Suzy Whaley (2003), and Michelle Wie (2006), almost six decades later.

In the tournament, she was teamed with George Zaharias, a gregarious, well-known professional wrestler and sports promoter who was making a fortune as a stock villain. Though she never had much interest in men, they were married eleven months later. He would become her manager and advisor. But in the years of their marriage, Zaharias lost influence over his wife and she spent much of her time with Betty Dodd.

Reinstated as an amateur in 1942, she won the 1946-47 US Women's Amateur Golf Championships; the 1947 British Ladies Amateur Golf Championship (the first American to do

so); and three Western Opens. She dominated the women's amateur golf circuit winning seventeen straight amateur victories, a feat never equaled by anyone, including Tiger Woods.

She had won every golf title available and turned professional in 1947. Tallying both her amateur and professional victories, Didrikson-Zaharias won a total of 82 golf tournaments. She was the leading golfer, male or female, of the 1940s and early 1950s. With twelve other women, she founded the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) in 1950. In the mid-1950s, cancer curtailed her career and took the life of the other Babe.

Sources: *The Book of Women's Firsts*, Phyllis J. Read and Bernard L. Witlieb; Didrikson was a woman ahead of her time, Larry Schwartz <http://espn.go.com/sportscentury/features/00014147.html>; National Women's hall of Fame, [www.greatwomen.org](http://www.greatwomen.org); [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babe\\_Didrikson\\_Zaharias](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babe_Didrikson_Zaharias); *1001 Things Everyone Should Know About Women's History*, Constance Jones.