

Ella “Babe” Didrikson Zaharias (1911-1956)

Mildred Ella (Babe) Didrikson was born June 26, 1911, in Port Arthur. One of seven children, she had an active family who encouraged her to develop her athletic skills. She got her nickname from neighborhood boys she played baseball with, who thought she batted like Babe Ruth. A talented basketball player as well, she was recruited out of high school by Employers Casualty Company of Dallas to do office work and to lead the company's semi-pro women's basketball team, the Golden Cyclones. Between 1930 and 1932 she led the team to two finals and a national championship and was voted All-American each season.

Her exceptional ability and versatility prompted the company to expand its women's sports program beyond basketball. She represented the company as a one-woman team in eight of ten track and field events at the 1932 Amateur Athletic Union Championships. She placed in seven of the eight events, placing first in five of them, tying for first in another, and placing fourth in yet another - breaking four world records in the process. Her

performances in the javelin throw, hurdles, and high jump qualified her for the 1932 Olympics, where she again broke world records in all three events. She won gold medals in javelin throw and hurdles, and took silver in the high jump on a technicality (she cleared the same height as the top finisher but went over the bar head first, a foul at that time).

She received a hero's welcome on her return to Texas. To support her family, she turned professional to earn what she could from her status as a sports celebrity. She toured and did vaudeville before deciding to become a championship golfer, since it was one of the few sports that accommodated women athletes. She entered her first tournament in November 1932, and at her second, the Texas Women's Amateur Championship the following April, she won the title. Classist complaints from the wealthier and more mannered competitors prompted the national golf associations to rule her ineligible to compete as an amateur, barring her from tournament play.

Undaunted, she resumed her lucrative routine of exhibition tours and endorsements, wowing audiences with drives that regularly exceeded 240

yards. She met George Zaharias, a well-known pro wrestler and sports promoter, at the Los Angeles Open. They married on December 23, 1938, and Zaharias began managing his wife's career. She regained her amateur status in 1943 and went on to win seventeen consecutive tournaments before turning pro in 1947. In 1948 she helped found the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) to ensure that women golfers would have a tournament circuit. She was the LPGA's leading money winner between 1949 and 1951. In 1950 the Associated Press voted her Woman Athlete of the Half-Century.

Sadly, in 1953, Didrikson Zaharias was stricken with intestinal cancer. She triumphed again - despite predictions that she would never play championship golf again, she was in tournament competition fourteen weeks after surgery. The Golf Writers of America voted her the Hogan Trophy as comeback player of the year. In 1954 she won five tournaments, including the US Women's Open.

She played for cancer benefits and maintained her cheery public persona, but in June of 1955 she was forced to enter John Sealy Hospital at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston for further diagnosis.

Unfortunately, the best medical care available at the time was unable to stop the cancer's spread. Didrikson Zaharias spent much of the remaining 15 months of her life in the hospital. In September of 1955 she and her husband established the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Fund, which financed a tumor clinic at UTMB. She died at John Sealy Hospital on September 27, 1956, at the age of 45. She was buried in Beaumont.

Though her exuberance, confidence, and skill at marketing herself irritated some fellow athletes, she was the most famous female golfer of her time and remains one of the most accomplished and famous female athletes of all time. Her achievements are legendary: voted Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press six times, winner of every women's golf title, three-time US Women's Open winner, and four-time world champion. She established a national audience for women's golf and was the first woman ever to serve as a resident professional at a golf club.

Source:

<http://studentorgs.utexas.edu/wrc/cool.htm#babe>

Babe's Major Victories

- 1948:** U.S. Women's Open
- 1950:** U.S. Women's Open, Title Holder's Championship
- 1952:** Title Holder's Championship
- 1954:** U.S. Women's Open

Babe's Other Professional Victories

- 1948:** All American Open, World Championship
- 1949:** World Championship, Eastern Open
- 1950:** All American Open, World Championship, Miami Weathervane, Western Open
- 1951:** All American Open, World Championships, Ponte Verde Open, Tampa Open, Fresno Open, Texas Open, Miami Weathervane
- 1953:** Sarasota Open, Babe Zaharias Open
- 1954:** All American Open, Sarasota Open, Serbin Open, National Capital Open
- 1955:** Tampa Open, Peach Blossom Classic

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