

## Lesson #51

### Breaking Barriers in Women's Sports: Babe Didrikson Zaharias

Growing up in Beaumont, Texas in the early 1920s, Mildred Didrikson did not face the racial barriers Ora Washington and Althea Gibson faced. Instead, she fought gender discrimination and the absence of sporting opportunities for female athletes.

As a young girl, Mildred attempted any sport or game available, winning at marbles, foot races, and contests of throwing and jumping. Even hopping the hedges on her street was a sport for Mildred. She played baseball with neighborhood boys, quickly earning her nickname “Babe” after baseball’s famous Babe Ruth. Years later, a reporter asked if there was anything she didn’t play. She quickly answered, “Yeah. Dolls.”

As a teenager, Babe set out to become the best female athlete who ever lived. In high school she excelled at every sport offered, especially basketball. During the 1930s, businesses sponsored women’s teams to advertise and attract customers. The Employers Casualty Insurance Company of Dallas hired Babe, and she led its basketball team, the Golden Cyclones, to two national championships.

The Golden Cyclones also competed in track and field. In 1932, Didrikson was sent—as a one-woman team—to the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) track championship. It was a meet to qualify for the US Olympic team. In a single day, she participated in ten events, dashing back and forth across the field, setting four world records, and winning six events. In just three hours, she earned enough points to be the winning team!

This stellar performance secured Didrikson’s spot on the 1932 US Olympic team. By rule, she could compete in just three events. She chose javelin, high jump, and 80-meter hurdles. Didrikson won gold, setting world records in javelin and hurdles. (She told the press her “hedge hopping” had finally paid off.) Didrikson also achieved a world-record in the high jump but was awarded only a silver medal because of her controversial jumping style.

Olympic fame did little to help Didrikson earn a living. She turned to golf but found her working-class background had not prepared her for the country club scene. With determination, she changed her image and worked relentlessly on her game. In 1938, Babe met and married George Zaharias who also became her manager.

For the next 18 years, Babe Zaharias dominated women’s golf, becoming the first female athlete to earn over \$100,000. She won 82 tournaments, often by wide margins, and she helped create the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), which opened doors for generations of female athletes.

When she was diagnosed with cancer in 1953, Zaharias was determined to win that battle too. At a time when cancer was not talked about, Zaharias used her status to raise money for treatment and research. She lost that fight in September of 1956, at age 45.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias is enshrined in seven sports halls of fame. The Associated Press and ESPN Sports Network chose her as the top female athlete of the 20th century. Her passion to compete took her a long way toward achieving the goal she had set for herself as a teenager.



**Babe Zaharias earned over \$100,000 playing golf.**

Credit: Department of Commerce, Florida

- RI.7.1 1. What barriers did Babe Didrikson face growing up in Beaumont, Texas?
- A) Opportunities for females to compete in athletics were limited.
  - B) Only African Americans could compete at tennis and basketball.
  - C) All women's sports were celebrated and promoted at country clubs.
  - D) all of these
- RI.7.1 2. How did Babe get her nickname?
- A) She had a baby face.
  - B) She was the youngest in the family.
  - C) She was very good at baseball like Babe Ruth.
  - D) Her friends thought she was a crybaby.
- RI.7.1 3. How did "hopping the hedges" prepare Didrikson for the Olympics? Use evidence from the text.
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- RI.7.4 4. Match each term with its clue.
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|---------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| _____ stellar       | A) event in which runner jumps over barriers |
| _____ javelin       | B) nonstop; determined                       |
| _____ hurdles       | C) outstanding; star-like                    |
| _____ controversial | D) honor; cherish                            |
| _____ relentless    | E) spear thrown for sport                    |
| _____ enshrine      | F) debatable; disputed                       |
- RI.7.2 5. What is the main idea of the text?
- A) Babe was a track and field star at the 1932 Olympics.
  - B) Babe dominated women's sports and paved the way for female athletes.
  - C) Determination and hard work helped Babe when she took up golf.
  - D) As a child, Babe competed in any sport that was available.
- RI.7.3 6. Why was golf a wise choice for Babe Didrikson?
- A) It gave her a way to earn a living and led to the creation of the LPGA.
  - B) Being an Olympic star was a moment; being a golf pro was a career.
  - C) She was able to win 82 golf tournaments, earning over \$100,000.
  - D) all of these