



Didrikson, Mildred "Babe" (1911-1956)

by Tina Gianoulis

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There is perhaps no athlete, male or female, in recorded history who excelled in as many different arenas as Babe Didrikson. An All-American basketball player, a record-setting Olympic gold medal winner in track and field, and a world famous golfer, Didrikson could also give an impressive performance in sports as diverse as baseball, boxing, swimming, billiards, and archery.

The Associated Press named her Female Athlete of the Year six times between 1932 and 1954, and Female Athlete of the Half Century in 1950, but it was not only Didrikson's performance on the field that made her an important public figure. Insolent, charming, and confident to the point of conceit, Didrikson became what few women athletes have been able to manage--a larger-than-life controversial sports star.

Born on June 26, 1911, in Port Arthur, Texas, Didrikson grew up in the south Texas town of Beaumont, the daughter of working-class Norwegian immigrants. Running in the streets with the neighborhood kids, she developed a cocky self-reliance and a toughness that would remain with her throughout her life.

She also began to develop her athletic skills, leaping hedges as she cut through lawns, and playing baseball with local boys. In high school, she was the high scorer on the basketball team, which led, in 1930, to paying work on the semi-professional team, the Golden Cyclones.

In 1932, Didrikson entered an Amateur Athletic Union track and field championship. As a one-woman team, she entered eight events and won six, setting world records for the high jump, the 80-meter hurdles, the javelin, and the baseball throw. The same year, she won Olympic gold medals for the javelin and the 80-meter hurdles.

In 1934, Didrikson began to play golf, the sport for which she would become internationally known. Not only did she win fifty-five professional and amateur tournaments with a record-setting seventeen wins in a row, but she brought her working-class bluntness and tomboyish swagger and dash into the sedate upper-class world of golf. Didrikson's flamboyant, irrepressible personality was a magnet for the press, and she loved the attention, playing up the outrageous side of her nature.

Although the press followed Didrikson closely, it did not always treat her kindly. From the beginning of her career, she was labeled a "muscle moll," "mannish," and "unnatural." Reporters often described her looks in unflattering, if not outright insulting terms. While they lauded her athletic victories, they implied that she could only succeed because she was lacking in femininity.

These hints and rumors of perversion and deviance got under even Didrikson's self-confident skin. They helped motivate her movement from track and field to the more feminine world of golf. They also prompted the longer, waved hairstyle and dresses that she began to wear in the mid-1930s. And they were



Top: Babe Didrikson with husband George Zaharias in 1938. Above: Didrikson (left) with Betty Dodd.

very likely a stimulus to her marriage to professional wrestler George Zaharias in 1938.

While Didrikson remained married to Zaharias until her death from colon cancer in 1956, the real love of her life was probably another woman golfer, Betty Dodd. Didrikson and Dodd met in 1950 at an amateur golf tournament in Miami and became close friends almost immediately.

As Didrikson's marriage grew increasingly troubled, she spent more time with Dodd. The women toured together on the golf circuit, and eventually Dodd moved in with Zaharias and Didrikson. Victims of the homophobia of the times, they never used the word "lesbian" to describe their relationship, but there is little doubt that Dodd and Didrikson were intimate and loving partners. "We always had a lot more fun when he [Zaharias] wasn't around," Dodd recalled, according to Didrickson's biographer Susan Cayleff.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.