

NARRATIVE TEXTS

“Babe” Didrikson Zaharias, Athlete, 1911-1956

“I knew exactly what I wanted to be when I grew up,” declared the scrappy girl from Beaumont. “My goal was to be the greatest athlete who ever lived.” In the eyes of many sports aficionados, Babe Didrikson Zaharias achieved exactly that.¹

Her first nimble forays into athletics occurred in her backyard, where her Norwegian immigrant father had built wooden gymnastics equipment. She smacked the ball so hard in sandlot baseball games that neighbor boys named her “The Babe” after Babe Ruth—an appellation she much preferred over her given name, Mildred.

She played every sport her high school offered: volleyball, tennis, golf, baseball, basketball, swimming. As the school’s basketball star, she attracted the attention of a recruiter for a company team in Dallas. Babe led his Golden Cyclones to a national championship and was named All-America basketball player for three straight years.

When her boss decided to organize a track-and-field team, Babe promptly competed in all events. She represented her team single-handedly at the AAU nationals of 1932, where she won the team championship, broke four world records, and qualified for the upcoming Olympics.

The champ stirred indignation with brash, exultant comments like “The Babe’s here! Who’s coming in second?”² Yet her Texas bravado lifted the spirits of Americans suffering from the Great Depression. In the 1932 Olympics, she won gold medals for javelin and hurdles. She took silver for high jump in a disputed decision, then came home to bouquets of roses, a shower of confetti, and a welcoming band.

Barred for a time from amateur athletics, Babe cheerfully did promo tours, performed vaudeville acts, and played harmonica to support her family. After some thought, she decided to make golf her next career. She proceeded to win 82 tournaments, including every women’s golf title in existence.³

The only battle Babe ever lost was to cancer. Following a colostomy, she defied medical predictions by returning to the golf circuit, but resurgent cancer claimed the life of “the world’s outstanding all-round feminine athlete”⁴ at age 45.



Quotations

*It’s not just enough to swing at the ball. You’ve got to loosen your girdle and really let the ball have it.*⁵

*You can’t win them all—but you can try.*⁶

*Winning has always meant much to me, but winning friends has meant the most.*⁷

Photo

Caption: “Babe Didrikson competing at the hurdles—As a child she had practiced by running and jumping over hedges in her neighborhood.” Texas Sports Hall of Fame, Grand Prairie.

Endnotes

¹ Quote appears in Susie Kelly Flatau and Lou Halsell Rodenberger, *Quotable Texas Women* (Abilene: State House Press, 2005), p. 133, and in “10k Truth Sports Quotes by Babe Didrikson Zaharias,” http://www.10ktruth.com/the_quotes/babe.htm (April 29, 2005). Major sources for biographical information in this article are Ann Fears Crawford and Crystal Sasse Ragsdale, *Women in Texas: Their Lives, Their Experiences, Their Accomplishments* (Austin: State House Press, 1992), pp. 295-306; Mary Beth Rogers, Sherry A. Smith, and Janelle D. Scott, *We Can Fly: Stories of Katherine Stinson and Other Gutsy Texas Women* (Austin: Texas Foundation for Women’s Resources, 1983), pp. 25-37; and Mary Kay Knief, “The Babe,” in Francis Edward Abernethy, ed., *Legendary Ladies of Texas* (Dallas: E-Heart Press, 1981), pp. 175-82.

² “10k Truth Sports Quotes,” online.

³ Golf accomplishments from Knief, “The Babe,” p. 180; and Mary Beth Rogers, Ruthe Winegarten, and Sherry Smith, *Texas Women: A Celebration of History* (Austin: Texas Foundation for Women’s Resources, 1981), p. 73.

⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, cited in Knief, “The Babe,” p. 178.

⁵ Rogers et al., *We Can Fly*, p. 36; Knief, “The Babe,” p. 181; “10k Truth Sports Quotes,” online.

⁶ *Quotable Texas Women*, p. 131; “10k Truth Sports Quotes,” online.

⁷ *Quotable Texas Women*, p. 56.