

# "BABE" DIDRIKSON ZAHARIAS

## Bisexual U.S. Gold Medal Winning Olympic Athlete

(1911 – 1956)



Babe Didrikson's contributions to women's competitive athletics were unprecedented. She held national, Olympic and World records in track and field; led her team to two national championships in basketball; toured with all-male exhibition baseball teams; competed admirably in swimming, diving and bowling; and was the largest money winner in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) during her lifetime. At the 1932 Olympics, she entered three events (the limit for women at the time) and won two gold-medals plus a "gold-silver" medal in the high-jump – the only one awarded in Olympic history. Because of her androgynous look and rough manners, she was hounded by vicious press that labeled her a "Third Sex" and a "muscle moll." She loathed these charges and manipulated the media to reconstruct her image as she saw fit. Didrikson married professional wrestler George Zaharias in 1938. When she met a young golfer named Betty Dodd in 1950 they also became emotionally and physically intimate. The three lived together from 1950-56 in a tense, strained, and awkward liaison – a public life engineered to insulate a private one in which Didrikson and Dodd were the actual "couple." Didrikson retreated from the more "masculine" sports of track and field to the acceptably feminine – and upper-middle class – world of golf. She joined with five other women to found the LPGA, and continued to dominate amateur and professional women's golf for 18 years, winning most major titles – including 13 consecutive tournaments – and the first British Women's Amateur Championship (1947). She was voted "Associated Press Woman Athlete of the Year" – six times – as well as "Woman Athlete of the Half-Century". An uncompromising competitor, she believed in winning at all costs and sacrificed her body to do so. Her greatest challenge was her fight against colon cancer, which she lost on September 27, 1956, at the age of 45, with Dodd at her side. Babe Didrikson's extraordinary combination of fierce competitiveness and unwavering discipline in the pursuit of athletic perfection emboldened many women athletes to defy convention and redefine female athletic "norms," preparing the way for Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova who would follow her a generation later.

### Lesson Plan

#### LEVEL 1: CONTRIBUTIONS APPROACH

1. **Activate Prior Experience:** Before today, what did you know about the American "Athlete of the Half-Century-1950" named Babe Didrikson?
2. Read the biographical information on the plaque (above) then watch this clip: [www.youtube/watch?=01gtCE\\_JNhA](http://www.youtube/watch?=01gtCE_JNhA)
3. **Group Discussion:** As a young girl, Didrikson wanted to be the "best athlete" in the world. Examine her accomplishments and determine whether you would agree that she achieved this goal. Discuss your opinion with your group.
4. **Extend Knowledge:** How did Didrikson's marriage to professional wrestler, George Zaharias, change her personal and public life? How was her "friendship" with Dodd received by the public? Were these relationships assets or liabilities in achieving her goals?

#### LEVEL 2: ADDITIVE APPROACH

1. Review <http://www.biography.com/people/babe-didrikson-zaharias-9542047> and divide Babe's story into these sections: "Early Life", "Excelling in Different Sports", "Olympic Records", "Babe's Legacy". In your opinion, which aspect of Didrikson's life had the greatest impact women's lives in the United States?
2. Review [http://www.glbtc.com/arts/didrikson\\_m.html](http://www.glbtc.com/arts/didrikson_m.html) and explain how Didrikson dealt with being described as a "muscle moll," "mannish," and "unnatural" in the press.
3. **Website Investigation:** Analyze other LGBT athletes from <http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Athletics.html> and describe the common qualities that are shared by Didrikson and some of the other athletes listed. How do Didrikson's life and accomplishments compare to those LGBT athletes? How about to athletes of today? Describe the different challenges faced by LGBT and straight athletes.

#### LEVEL 3: TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH

1. Babe's early achievements were in baseball and basketball, followed by college success in track and field, which led to the Olympics. Clearly she excelled in all she attempted. Review the article at <http://www.geoffsmith.org/courses/babe.shtml> and explain what you think was the most compelling reason prompting Didrikson to pursue a career in golf.
2. Examine the website at <http://www.babedidriksonzaharias.org/> and view the videos and information. Why didn't Didrikson, who had achieved much notoriety, become a spokeswoman for any cause? What role do you George Zaharias or Betty Dodd play in that decision? Was there another factor?
3. Didrikson is often quoted as saying, "You have to play by the rules of golf just as you have to live by the rules of life. There's no other way." Describe how Didrikson did or did not "play by the rules."

#### LEVEL 4: SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH

1. After reading the biography of tennis pro Billy Jean King at <http://www.biography.com/people/billie-jean-king-9364876> compare King and Didrikson using a Venn Diagram (two intertwining circles) to note their similarities, differences, and common traits.
2. How would sports fans have reacted to Didrikson's relationship with Betty Dodd in the 1950's? Would the reaction have been different if Babe had been a male golfer? How accepting are sport fans today of LGBT athletes? How would you advocate for LGBT athletes today?
3. Soon after Didrikson was first diagnosed with cancer in 1953 she won her third U.S. Women's Open, followed by the Associated Press' Female Athlete of the Year title. How do you think cancer research might have been affected had she chosen to become a spokesperson? Create a poster illustrating a Cancer Awareness Campaign featuring Babe Didrikson.