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Never one to hold back, an animated Babe coaxes the ball into the hole on the 18th green at Chicago's Tom O'Shanter Country Club in the Women's All-Pro Golf Tour on May 4, 1950.

Photo: AP Images (AP Photo/Ed Maloney)

Long before the “Battle of the Sexes,” there was Babe... The Babe Dirikson Zaharias Museum by Debbie Z. Harwell

In 1973 when Billie Jean King was carried into the Astrodome on a litter reminiscent of Cleopatra to take on Bobby Riggs in a tennis match billed as the “Battle of the Sexes,” she grabbed the attention of a nation excited to test the ideals of Second Wave feminism. While the match generated tremendous hype, in reality, the greatest female athlete in modern times had stopped competing two decades earlier. Only one woman ranks in the top ten of the 100 greatest athletes of the twentieth century—“Babe” Didrikson Zaharias—a woman who rewrote the record books in a time when gender expectations limited the opportunities of women athletes and questioned their femininity.

Babe was born Mildred Ella Didrikson in Port Arthur, Texas, on June 26, 1911. She moved to Beaumont three years later and received her nickname at an early age while playing with boys in the neighborhood who said she could throw and hit homeruns like baseball great Babe Ruth. As a student at Beaumont High School, Didrikson competed in every sport open to women. While playing in a basketball game against Heights High School in Houston, she caught the eye of Colonel M. J. McCombs, a scout for the Employers Casualty Company of Dallas. Like many businesses in that era, the firm maintained athletic teams that competed as part of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). McCombs recruited Babe to work as a secretary for Employers to maintain her amateur status while playing on the company's basketball team. This opportunity appealed not only to her desire to compete at a higher level, but also provided a source of income for her family during the Depression. Babe received approval to take a brief leave from high school to complete the season with Employers' Golden Cyclones and, in the process, began one of the most illustrious careers in sports history.¹

As a high school and amateur athlete, Babe won competitions in swimming, diving, bowling, track and field, tennis, billiards, basketball, softball, and baseball. While playing for the Golden Cyclones, she was a three-time All-American in basketball from 1930-1932. Nothing up to that time, however, matched her accomplishments in track and field. Representing



Shown here practicing her winning form on the hurdles, Babe competed for the Employer's Casualty Company of Dallas in AAU track and field events.

Photo courtesy of the Mary and John Gray Library Special Collections and Lamar University Archives, Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas.



Babe, on the far left, was a three-time All-American in basketball from 1930-1932 while playing on the Golden Cyclones sponsored by Employers Casualty Company of Dallas.



Babe demonstrates her form in the javelin, in a pose reminiscent of ancient Olympians.



Babe won several swimming and diving competitions.



The Western roll style of jumping caused Babe to receive the silver rather than gold medal despite having tied for the highest jump.

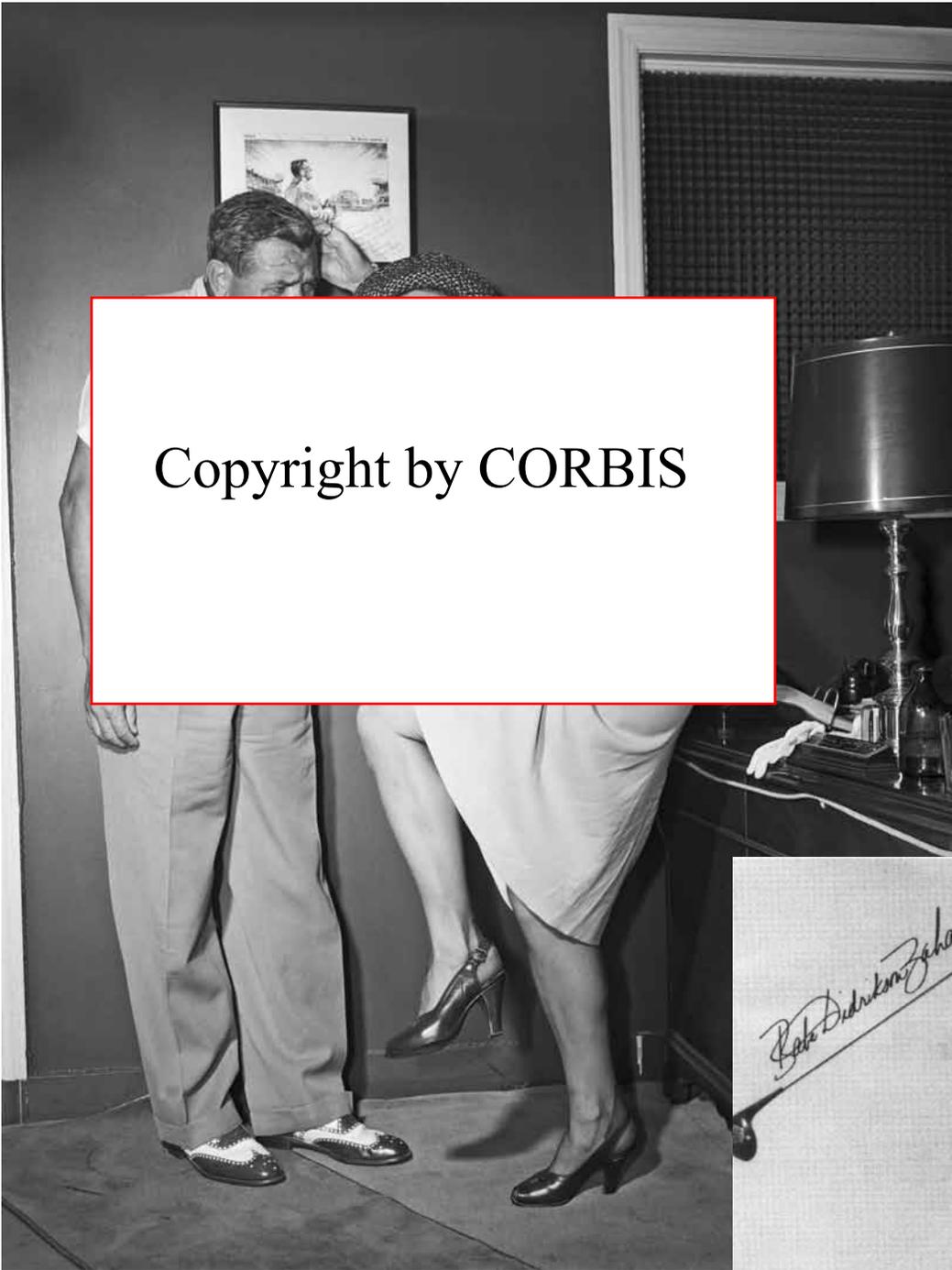
Employers Casualty at the women's AAU and qualifying tryouts for the 1932 Olympic Games, Babe competed in eight of the ten possible track and field events. She won six of them—all within a three-hour time span—and set world records in four, with one of those being a tie. Babe single-handedly won the tryouts with a total of thirty points; the entire twenty-two member Illinois Women's Athletic Club finished second with twenty-two points. This ranks as one of the greatest individual achievements of all time in a series of athletic events.²

When Babe attended the 1932 Olympics, the rules restricted women athletes to competing in no more than three events, leaving to speculation the question of how many medals Babe might have won based upon the pace she set at the qualifiers. She won gold and set world records in the javelin with a throw

**Babe's Winning Results:
1932 AAU and Olympic Qualifier**
(The latter four were world records)

Shot put: 39' 6 1/4"; Long jump: 17' 6";
Baseball throw: 272' 2"; Javelin: 139' 3";
80-meter hurdles: 12.1 seconds;
High jump: 5' 3 3/16" (tie)

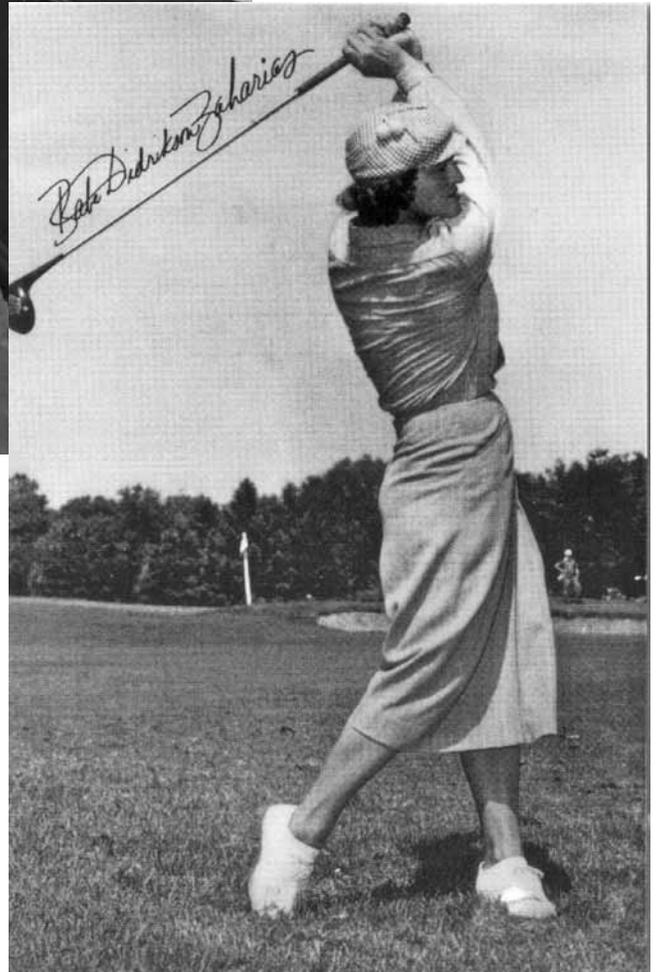
All photos courtesy of Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum, unless otherwise noted.



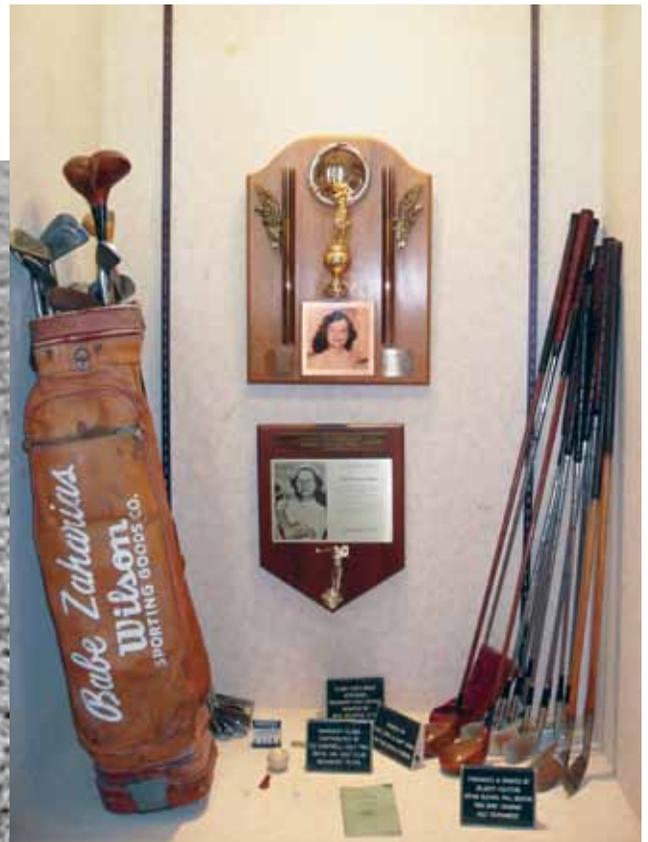
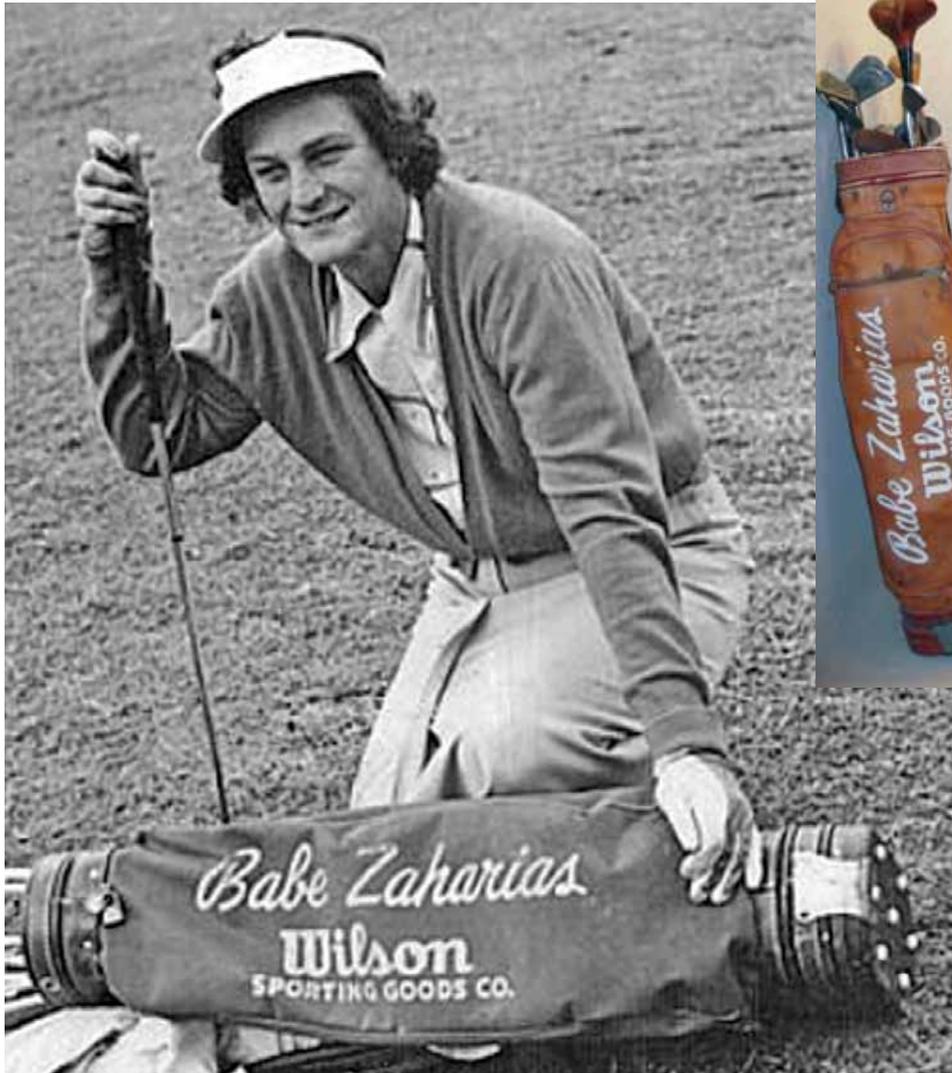
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Babe Didrikson Zaharias demonstrates her throwing technique for her namesake, baseball great, Babe Ruth. She competed in the baseball throw from 1930-1932, and continues to hold the record for the longest throw by a female athlete at 272' 2". The AAU dropped the event from competition in 1958.

Photo: © Bettmann/CORBIS



Although she excelled in many sports, golf became the one that defined Babe.



The Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum in Beaumont, Texas, houses artifacts such as Babe's Olympic medals, golf clubs, numerous trophies, and pictures.

Babe received an endorsement from Wilson sporting goods. The Wilson bag is one of many artifacts displayed in the museum.

of 143' 4" and in the 80-meter hurdles finishing in 11.7 seconds. Babe tied teammate Jean Shiley for a world record high jump of 5' 5 3/4". Both women were credited with the world record, but Babe received the silver medal instead of gold based on her questionable "Western roll" jumping style. The actual medal composed of half-gold, half-silver is the only one of its kind. Babe later received credit for a first-place tie and an Olympic record that stood for sixteen years.³

In 1933 Babe decided to make a career in golf, a game she had previously played only intermittently, because golf offered women greater opportunities for competition. Additionally, golf was considered more appropriate feminine behavior. Just two years later, Babe entered the Women's Texas Amateur Tournament at the River Oaks Country Club in Houston. Even though golf provided a friendlier venue for women athletes, class discrimination emerged as a new obstacle for Babe. When she entered a driving competition, several others withdrew to

show their distaste for her working-class background. Zaharias biographers indicate that the championship round pitted Babe against a socialite from Dallas, Peggy Chandler, who made it clear she did not want lower-class women like Babe in the tournament when she said, "We don't need any truck driver's daughters in our tournament." The crowd, however, loved the animated Babe and cheered her to a win over Chandler. It was a hollow victory, however. Following receipt of complaints from the upper-class competitors, the United States Golf Association rescinded Babe's amateur status — despite having reviewed and granted it before the tournament — in the "best interest of the game." As a result, Babe sat out three years to regain her amateur status.⁴

Despite her many achievements in a variety of sports, Babe is most noted for her accomplishments in golf. She met her husband, professional wrestler George Zaharias, when the two were paired together in a Los Angeles tournament, and he helped to



Babe sets up a putt at the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Open held at the Beaumont Country Club in April 1953. She won the tournament just days before being diagnosed with colon cancer.

Photo courtesy of the Mary and John Gray Library Special Collections and Lamar University Archives, Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas.



In 1981, the U.S. Postal Service honored Babe's memory with an 18¢ stamp.

manage her career after they wed in 1938. She won seventeen consecutive amateur tournaments and every major professional tournament at least one time, several more than once. She was the first American to win the Ladies British Open Amateur, and the first to win both the British and U.S. Opens. In total, she won eighty-two tournaments, thirty-one as a professional, and reigned as the leading money winner from 1948 through 1951. She qualified for and competed in three PGA tournaments, making the three-day cut. When asked the secret of her success she said, "You've got to loosen your girdle and let it rip."⁵

In April 1953, just a few days after winning the Babe Zaharias tournament in front of the hometown crowd in Beaumont, doctors diagnosed Babe with stage IV colon cancer. She had a colostomy, but sadly, the cancer had already spread to her lymph nodes. Undeterred, Babe began taking practice swings with her clubs before the doctors released her from the hospital. Just fourteen weeks later, she entered the All-American tournament where, despite difficulties, she placed fifteenth; a few

days later she took third at the World Golf Championship. After struggling early in 1954, she took second at the St. Petersburg Open, and then won five major tournaments that year, including a twelve stroke victory in the prestigious U.S. Women's Open at the Salem Country Club in Peabody, Massachusetts. Her scores, 72-71-73-75, for a total of 291, came within three strokes of the best performance by a man in the U.S. or British Open up to that time.⁶

Babe died on September 27, 1956, at the age of forty-five in John Sealy Hospital in Galveston, Texas, and was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Beaumont.

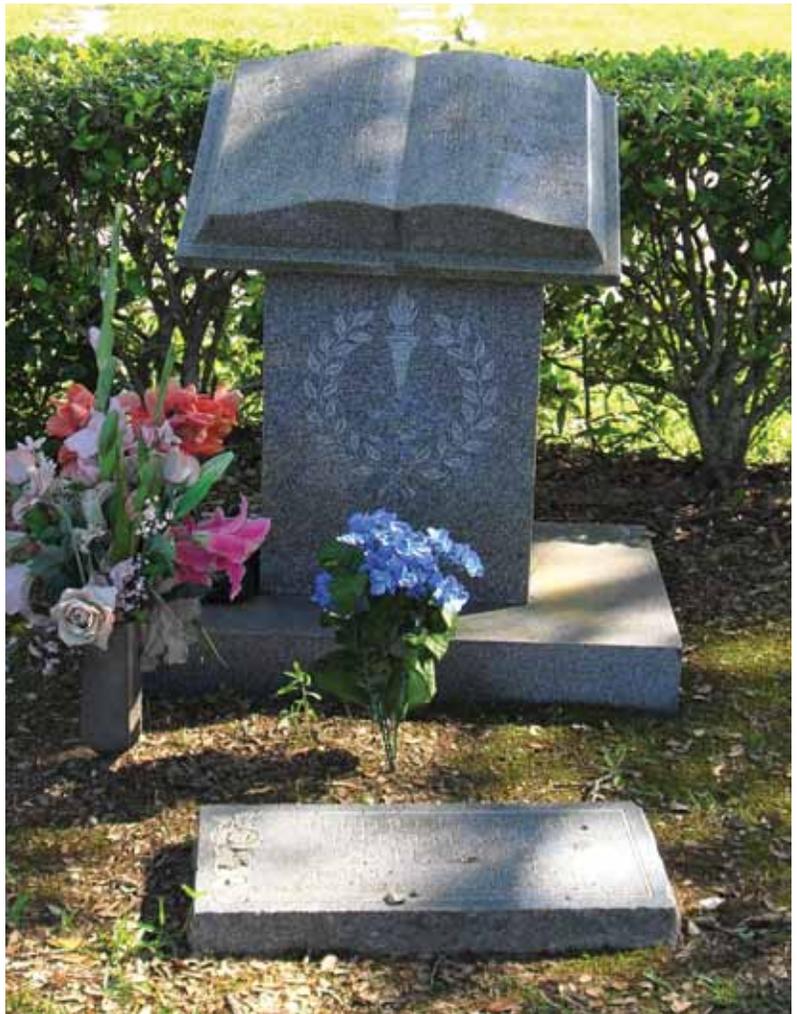
Over the course of her career, Babe received recognition as the Best Female Athlete of the First Half of the Twentieth Century and was named Woman Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press six times, in 1931, 1945-1947, 1950, and 1954. No other athlete, male or female, has been named Athlete of the Year that many times. One of the founders of the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) in the 1950s, Babe is a member of the Ladies Golf Hall of Fame, the Helms Athletic Foundation Golf Hall of Fame, and the World Golf Hall of Fame. Additionally, she was inducted into the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame, U.S. Track and Field Hall of Fame, National Women's Hall of Fame, World Sport Humanitarian Hall of Fame, and International

Women's Sports Hall of Fame. Babe is the only woman ranked in the top ten of the twentieth century's 100 best athletes as listed by the Associated Press (AP) and ESPN; she placed ninth and tenth respectively. On the AP list, she is not only the highest rated woman, but also the highest ranked golfer. Without any media fanfare about a "Battle of Sexes," she excelled and let her actions do the talking.⁷

The Babe Didrikson Zaharias Museum in Beaumont, Texas, opened in 1976 and is operated by the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Foundation. It sits amid soccer fields in Babe Zaharias Park and displays artifacts such as Babe's Olympic medals, golf clubs, trophies, and pictures that chronicle her career. The foundation, which has no paid staff, is a driving force behind Lamar University's Women's Athletic programs in honor of Babe. It provides five endowed scholarships for women and has set a goal to provide scholarships to unfunded and fifth year female athletes, as well as for those planning to attend summer school. Their annual golf tournament, in its thirty-second year, provides the major source of funding for the scholarships.⁸

The Babe Didrikson Zaharias museum is located at 1750 East IH-10 in Beaumont; it has no admission fee and is open 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily except Christmas, (409) 833-4642. The Mary and John Gray Library Special Collections and Lamar University Archives, at Lamar University in Beaumont is the repository for several hundred items in the Babe Didrikson Zaharias collection, many of which can be viewed online.

Debbie Z. Harwell received her M.A. in Women's Studies at the University of Memphis and is currently working on a Ph.D. in history at the University of Houston. A Houston native, she serves as Managing Editor of *Houston History*.



The marble book over Babe's grave marker reads:
"It's not whether you win or lose, but how you played the game." "Babe"

AP TOP 100 ATHLETES OF THE 20TH CENTURY

1. Babe Ruth
2. Michael Jordan
3. Jim Thorpe
4. Muhammad Ali
5. Wayne Gretzky
6. Jim Brown
7. Joe Lewis
8. Jesse Owens
- 9. Babe Didrikson Zaharias**
10. Wilt Chamberlain

