

The Greatest of All Time?

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The recent resurgence of public interest in women's athletics is notable. The average WNBA game attendance was up 48% this year over last. Nellie Korda and Rose Zhang have been fueling interest in the LPGA. A recent study by the Wasserman Collective speaks to the growing interest in and impact of women's sports – reporting that women's sports comprise on average 15% of total sports media coverage in 2022 – three times the average for the previous 10 years. ([https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindseyedarvin/2023/10/31/media-coverage-for-womens-sports-has-nearly-tripled-in-five-years-according-to-new-research/?](https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindseyedarvin/2023/10/31/media-coverage-for-womens-sports-has-nearly-tripled-in-five-years-according-to-new-research/))

Iowa's 94-87 victory over LSU in the Elite Eight of the 2024 Women's NCAA tournament averaged 12.3 million viewers on ESPN, according to Nielsen. That makes it one of the most-viewed games in any sport other than NFL football over the past year. https://www.espn.com/womens-college-basketball/story/_/id/39862514/iowa-lsu-rematch-shatters-tv-ratings-record-123m-viewers.

Iowa's high scoring guard, Catlin Clark among others, is credited with fueling this interest. As a guard for the University of Iowa in 2024, Clark became the all-time leading scorer in NCAA basketball, surpassing Pete Maravich's record of 3,667 points. <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=catlin+clark+iowas+basketball+what+position&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.

The Pop Quiz

If I were to ask you who was the greatest women basketball player of all time who would you name? Most in the know would say Diana Taurasi, of the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury with 10,646 points and still playing.

If I were to ask you who was the greatest women golfer of all time who would you name? Perhaps Annika Sorenstam, with 72 LPGA wins including 11 majors? Or Nancy Lopez from the 70's and 80's with 48 LPGA wins or Louise Suggs from the 1940's and 50's when amateur golf was dominate and the LPGA was in its infancy. She had 58 tour wins and won the British and US amateur championships and was a co-founder of the LPGA.

Some consider track and field events to be the purist form of athleticism – I bet you can name the US women who have been dominate track and field athletes. Recently the buzz has been about Sydney MacLaughlin who crushed the 400-meter hurdles world record earlier this year. But all time – maybe Flo Jo, Florence Griffith-Joyner with 3 gold medals in the 1988 Olympics- with her world records still standing in the 100- and 200-meter sprints. Or maybe Wilma Rudolph who in 1960 was the first American woman to win three gold medals in track and field and had lasting civil rights impact, - but most

would say Jackie Joyner-Kersey, 4 time Olympian and named greatest woman athlete of the 20th century by Sports Illustrated. <https://www.topendsports.com/world/lists/greatest-all-time/athletics.htm>.

The famously self-proclaimed “greatest” was Muhammad Ali, in August of 1963 (<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=i+am+the+greatest&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>), and one of the highest profile “smack-downs” of male sports arrogance was Billie Jean King’s 1973 defeat of Bobby Riggs in the Astrodome before a TV audience reported to be 90 million. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle of the Sexes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Sexes)).

But my last question is, if I were to ask you what American woman athlete combined all of these athletic accomplishments, qualities, and bravado into a 5 ft 7-inch frame, what you would say? Would she be the Greatest of All Time?

Track and Field

The sun was blazing that Saturday afternoon, July 16, 1932, as Babe Didrikson’s cab pulled up in front of Dyche Stadium in Evanston, Illinois. Five thousand people packed the stadium for the National AAU Women’s Track and Field Championship that would also serve as the American Olympic Committee’s qualifying event for the 1932 Olympics to be held two weeks later in Los Angeles. The meet consisted of 11 events in all. Five of these were trial qualifiers for the Olympics (100 m hurdles, 80 m hurdles, high jump, discus throw, and javelin throw. The others (50 yd. sprint, 220 yd. 4 x 110 yd relay, long jump, shot put, and baseball throw) were individual National AAU championships. (*Wonder Girl*, Don Van Natta, Jr. Little, Brown, and Company, 201, pg. 87.)

America’s elite women’s track and field teams were there – 250 athletes in all. The procession into the stadium was led by the drum and bugle corps from the local American Legion post. When the Illinois Women’s Athletic Club Team was introduced over the PA system the hometown cheered loudly for the 22 women who ran onto the field in bright yellow uniforms. The previous year, they had placed first at the AAU National Championship with a team total 26 points with second place (and 19 points) going to the 12 member Employer’s Casualty Team from Dallas, Texas. Babe scored 15 of the 19 points in that last year’s meet. (Van Natta, pg. 88)

Understandably, on that hot afternoon in Evanston when the PA system boomed “representing the Employer Casualty Company of Dallas, Texas – Mildred “Babe” Didrikson”, the crowd was not sure how to react when only one athlete ran onto the field waving. It quickly became one of surprise and approval. (Ibid)

A Diversion to Set the Stage

Her coach and supervisor, Col. M.J. McCombs had made the bold decision to send Babe to the AAU Nationals and Olympic Qualifier as the only member of the Employer's Casualty team, further alienating his already disgruntled teammates in the process. As sportswriters and authors, Johnson and Williamson put it, "Babe was a product- as well as a victim – of the times in which she lived." ("Whatta-Gal" The Babe Didrikson Story, William Johnson and Nancy Williamson, Little Brown and Company, 1975, pg. 23.). She grew up in poverty and near poverty. She was a first generation American – born in the U.S. to parents who were Norwegian immigrants. Her early years in Port Author and Beaumont, Texas growing up as a tomboy did little to give her social graces but ample opportunities to hone her extraordinary natural born athletic ability. In today's world of organized sports activities, Title IX, and athletic opportunity, many doors would be open to her. In her time, athletic competition among women was controversial. And the poor white immigrant, black, and native-born classes had even more barriers.

In 1848 the first national convention for the women's vote was held in Seneca Falls, New York. The major resolution coming from this was convention was scandalous indeed, "Be it resolved that men and women were created equal." (Johnson and Williamson, page 24). In 1869 In an 8-1 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the Illinois Supreme Court's decision to deny a women her law license in *Bradwell v. Illinois*, 83 US 130 (1872). Justice Samuel Miller wrote the opinion and based his argument specifically on the 14th Amendment, that the admission to practice law is not one of the privileges and immunities belonging to citizens. More famously, Justice Joseph Bradley authored the concurring opinion that commented more on the differences between men and women that precluded them from practicing law, specifically that "the natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life. (<https://www.illinoiscourts.gov/News/1331/Illinois-Supreme-Court-history-Myra-Bradwell/news-detail/>)

Eventually the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920, enfranchising 29 million women – an important step but not a cultural watershed in attitudes about equality. Early "green shoots" of progress for women athletes had started to emerge in the late 19th century and the early 20th. In the mid 1800's Amelia Bloomer introduced a new garb for women – scandalous at first but with growing acceptance as the century proceeded. Her skirt over ankle-length underpants provided much needed freedom of movement for women in exercise. Another notable sign of progression was the life of Eleanor Sears. This daughter of a Boston shipping magnate and a great-great granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson excelled at tennis, squash, riflery, horseback riding polo, swimming, sailing and marathon walks. Much in the public high society eye, she loved breaking barriers. When criticized for wearing "manly attire". She responded by introducing shocking costumes for swimming, figure skating, tennis, and sailing. "I began exercising the first time I fell out of my crib, and I don't plan to stop until I'm in my coffin," she said. (Johnson and Williamson, page 27).

By 1920 when Babe was attending school things were beginning to open. Women's basketball, which began at Smith College in 1891, was rapidly becoming the most popular sport and most public schools had teams. In 1920 America sent its first

women's team – swimmers – to the Olympics. The US Field Hockey Association was formed in 1922 and a US women's field and track team traveled internationally for the first time. (Johnson and Williamson, page 28). Universities including Purdue began to establish Departments of Physical Education for Women. Some called it the Golden Age of Women's Sports. (<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=golden+era+women%27s+sports&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>).

Rosemary's Dilemma

From 1960 until 1964 Rosemary Dawson was a star athlete at Herndon High School and then an outstanding Physical Major at Radford College from 1964 through 1968. She leads an amazing life - teaching and competing in a wide variety of sports. As great as it has been – she and we will never know what was missed. Her high schoolgirl's basketball team did include competition against other area high school teams. But the rules were different from boy's basketball. Teams had 6 players – not five. Three confined to the back court and three in the front court. Only three dribbles allowed. In her later high school years, two "rovers" could cross midcourt and pass restrictions were eased. And at women-only Radford College, interscholastic athletics were not allowed even though Radford was educating many of Virginia's future PE teachers. Rosemary's memory is that President Charles Martin set these policies along with the requirement that PE majors in uniforms wear long coats down to their knees when they walked across campus on the way to class. So, what happened to those green shoots that began in 1920?

My limited research leads me to multiple factors:

- In 1923 Lou Hoover, wife of President Herbert Hoover, organized a group called the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Association (WDNAAF) whose initial principal was to promote athletic competition for all rather than elite athletes. Their slogan, "a team for everyone and everyone for a team." According to Johnson and Williamson, this initial purpose became mixed with a miss-guided view that "the weaker sex should be demure and take its exercise out of the public eye, that competition on a interscholastic level was all-right for men but not for women, that women were biologically unfit for hard athletic competition." (Johnson and Williamson, page 30.) The WDNAAF had significant influence over future events. The National Association of Secondary School Principals issued a declaration stating that "Inherent evils in interscholastic competition among girls demand its suppression" and that "the spectacle of interscholastic contests among girls gives rise to undesirable and even morbid social influences". (Johnson and Williamson, page 31). The impact of the opposition by the WDNAAF was significant. In the opinion of the sportswriters Johnson and Williamson, "In scarcely seven years they had effectively squelched high-level competition for girls in nearly all American high schools and Colleges." Because of the WDNAFF and the "thousands of unenlightened physical education professionals who went along with it for so many years, competitive women's sports were so effectively crippled that" it was the 1970's before they began to

return to their level of popularity that existed before the WDANFF was formed in 1923 by Lou Hoover. (Johnson and Williamson, page 34).

- The opposition by the IOC and the WDNAAF was supported by opinions from some medical experts including Dr Frederick Rand Rodgers of the New York State Education Department who issued a statement declaring that women should not compete in sports due to “physical differences.” He stated with certainty that, “the costs in terms of impaired health, physical beauty, and social attractiveness” for women competitors proved his point and that those who differed in their views were either feminists who violated nature themselves or psychologists whose methods were too crude to be valid. (Babe. The Life and Legend of Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Susan E. Cayleff, University of Illinois Press, 1995, pg. 15.)
- The International Olympic Committee opposed in principle the inclusion of women in the Olympics. The modern founder of the Olympics in 1894, Barron Pierre de Coubertin said to the athletes in the 1928 games, “As to admission of women to the Games, I am strongly against it.” The 1900 and 1904 games included women exhibition matches in a few sports – archery, tennis, and figure skating. In 1908 true competition was allowed three sports and exhibitions were added in swimming, diving, and gymnastics – all of which were considered “ladylike”. Finally, five track and field events were open to women in 1928 despite de Coubertin’s objections. (Ibid)

What were the prospects for a girl like Babe Didrikson in 1930 as she started her last year of high school at Beaumont High in Beaumont, Texas? She was born Mildred Ella Didriksen on June 26, 1911 in Port Arthur Texas to Norwegian immigrant parents Ole and Hannah Didriksen. She along with six siblings moved to Beaumont in 1915 after a hurricane devastated Port Arthur. A significant inland port city and near to booming oil fields, the local economy was rolling in the 1920’s. It was also a community with well-defined social strata – the 5% of the population who white immigrants were near the bottom. The 25% who were black had it worse. Between 1922 and 1924 the Ku Klux Klan controlled the town. (Cayleff, pg.32)

- Babe was an incredibly gifted athlete, but a mediocre student earning C’s, D’s and B’s in school. She was a complete tomboy – with few of the social skills and interests that were expected of and valued in young women. As an athlete the high school yearbook praised her but other than athletics, she had few close friends or social groups among other girls and boys. As best I can tell she had no romantic interests or experience.
- Babe had grown up in near poverty – working at several jobs while in school to augment the family budget. She knew how to work – a low-income immigrant had few of the social skills required to move up in society.

- Depression era Beaumont fared a bit better than most of the country, but layoffs and unemployment were rampant. Women's wages were about half of those of men – with an annual salary of \$500 being typical, the average American household income in 1930 was \$1,970.
- As to capitalizing on her athletic abilities – there were no college scholarships and no professional sports opportunities for women. Women's athletics were largely the domain of the privileged – who could participate in sports considered appropriate for the feminine sex.
- But there were exceptions. The American Athletic Union (AAU) which was founded in 1888 with the goal of creating common standards in amateur sport. and controlled amateur athletics in the US into the mid 1970s, had recognized its first women basketball tournament in 1923. Women's basketball became highly popular with the public.
- Employers Casualty Team which Col. McCombs represented, participated in a Texas-wide network of company sponsored teams that flourished in the 1920 and 1930's. It was essentially semi-professional ball. The companies were in it for the public relations and advertising that resulted from fans attending and newspaper articles. Companies recruited highly talented players from high schools, colleges, recreational and Sunday school leagues giving paid clerical positions in return for a commitment to play on the company teams. Often those women recruited had no secretarial or clerical experience or abilities but often received higher wages than those that did – as well as training, coaching, uniforms and equipment, and travel expenses. By 1920 the AAU relaxed its 1910 policy barring sanctioned women's play and listed 962 Texas women who had applied for permission to play.

At Beaumont High Babe did little other than compete athletically. She was on volleyball, tennis, golf, baseball, swimming, and basketball teams. The 1929 yearbook, the *Pine Burr*, called her "the star who seldom misses the basket." (Van Natta, pg 44). Col. McCombs was convinced when he saw her play a game at Houston Heights High School gym where he went to scout the star center for the Houston team. After Babe scored 26 points that February afternoon in 1930, she was greeted by McCombs outside her locker room with an offer to come to work at Employer's Casualty in Dallas for the salary of \$75 a month – a handsome amount in the Depression era .

Two weeks later Babe was in the starting lineup and became the leading scorer. She took her team, the Golden Cyclones, to the finals where they finished second losing by a point in the final. Babe scored 210 points in the 5-game tournament. Babe was named an All American forward after just 6 weeks in the league. Babe was respected by her teammates – but not universally appreciated. She hogged the ball and the spotlight. She played to the sportswriters and took every opportunity to be interviewed. Her brash and direct style and self-promotion rubbed many of her teammates- stars in. their own

right- the wrong way. Days after joining the team she self-proclaimed herself as the team's best player. In the words of one teammate – “She was out for Babe –honey, just Babe. We played as a team, we played as one. ...But, I don't know how her mind ran. She was not a team player, definitely not.” (Van Natta, pg. 56).

Col McCombs introduced Babe to track and field competition as the basketball season ended and after Babe became bored with the low-profile Employer Casualty softball team that had little public interest and exposure. Employer Casualty had previously disbanded its track and field team due to its high cost and lack of interest from the women under contract. McCombs liked the idea – there wasn't much to keep the team active during the hot Texas summer and the national women's track and field championship was coming to Dallas in July. With approval by the company President, McCombs met with the team members and asked for interest which was high. He asked those interested to pick one or two events. When Babe heard there were 9 or 10 different events she proclaimed to the group “I'm going to win them all!” While her teammates all laughed, they noted and later remembered her arrogance (Van Natta, pg 59).

New to the sport and with her intense practice ethic – McCombs pushed the team in practice and Babe pushed herself harder. After successful regional events the season finale was the AAU National Women's Track and Field Championship held on the SMU campus on July 4, 1931, with several thousand people in attendance. With 250 athletes competing the perennial favorites were the powerful Illinois Women's Athletic Club. By contrast the hometown Employer's Casualty team was only two months old. The Cyclones finished second to the Illinois favorites – but an unknown Babe Didrikson broke world records in the javelin throw, baseball throw and broad jump in which she finished second after being topped by Stella Walsh. Babe earned 15 of her teams 19 points. It was a breakout performance for a person new to the sport. She set her sights on the 1932 Olympics. (Van Natta, pg. 63.)

Few have experienced the metamorphous that Babe lived during the past months. From high school senior to the All-American basketball honors and national track and field records. Her second year with the Employer's Casualty Golden Cyclones was even more successful athletically. The basketball team won the national championship this time and Babe was again named as an All American. Again, Babe excelled in track and field. Her siege culminated at the national AAU meet in August of 1931 in Jersey City, New Jersey. Again, the Cyclones finished second – but again, Babe won three events and scored 15 of her teams 19 points.

After the AAU nationals the Dallas *Morning News* ran a half page picture of Babe pictures and declared she “was probably the world's outstanding all-around famine athlete.” (Johnson and Williamson, pg. 73.). This was a lot for a 20-year-old to handle and Babe did not handle it all that well. Given her prior life experience and circumstances this is not surprising, Reading various sources leads to a view of Babe becoming increasingly self-centered and self-promotional with a focus on proclaiming her own superiority to all who would listen. Her relationship with her teammates further deteriorated. Moreover, she was increasingly disgruntled and at odds with Col McCombs and the Employer

Casualty financial arrangements. Her salary had increased from \$75 to \$90 per month but she thought, perhaps rightly, that she was worth twice that amount. She contemplated various schemes to pressure a salary increase and incentive payments – including inducing and entertaining competitive offers from other teams.

During this time Babe's public persona was increasingly characterized in gender biased and pejorative terms. A Dallas Sunday newspaper supplement noted, "Her lines and features are almost wholly masculine, a husky voice, a direct manner of speech that often drops into the sporting argot, and an almost complete absence of feminine frills heightens the impression of masculinity." The article went on to describe a male reporter's fumbled attempt to ask Babe about her undergarments. After his awkward and improper enquiry Babe finally said, "Are you trying to ask me if I wear girdles, brassieres, and the rest of that junk?" When he stammered y-yes she replied "No – what do you think I am, a sissy?" (Johnson and Williamson, pg.74) Thus began a series of questions about her gender identity and preference that were to last most of her life and many think shape the second half of her life.

Back to Track and Field

As they say, the rest is history. Picking up where we left off on July 16, 1932 in Evanston, Illinois, Babe is the sole member of the Employer's Casualty team at the AAU National Championship which also serves as the qualifying event for the 1932 Olympics to be held two weeks later in L.A. Babe has entered 8 of the 11 events – skipping the relay for obvious reason and the 50- and 100-meter sprints. Including qualifying heats, she would be called to the starting line some 24 times. She ran from event to event, first shot put – hurdle heat – back for a high jump try – on and on for more than 2 and a half hours. Other competitors grumbled as starts were delayed allowing her to get there. Over and over Babe taunted them, "I'm going to win everything I enter," showing little regard for competitors. When the dust settled, the Employer Casualty Golden Cyclones (Babe's one member team) won first with a total of 30 team points. Their nemesis, the Illinois Women's Athletic Club was second with 22 points. Babe won gold in 5 of the 8 events she entered: broad jump, baseball throw, shot put and javelin, and 80 meter-hurdles. She tied for first in the sixth, high jump. In the process she qualified for three Olympic events – high jump, 80-meter hurdles, and javelin. She was on her way to LA.

On her way and with a predictable outcome. In the end Babe won two Olympic gold medals and one Silver medal. The process was in many ways vintage Babe. She managed to alienate many of her teammates on the chartered rain trip from Chicago before they reached the Rockies. She rarely spoke with her teammates or asked them about themselves or aspirations. Rather she barked at them, "I'm the greatest – no one's better than me. Babe Didrikson." Year's later Jean Shiley, Babe's hurdles rival said, "I've often wondered why she was so obnoxious. Maybe she never got the attention she needed as a child, or maybe she was trying to psych us out." Seemingly, she saw her teammates as her opponents. (Van Natta pg. 95.)

The thing was – Babe lived up to her arrogant proclamations.

- She won gold in the javelin with a world and Olympic record-setting gold.
- Her second win was the 80-meter hurdles with another world and Olympic record time of 11.7 seconds. It was vintage Babe as her teammate and opponent, Evelyn Hall embittered after 50 years still felt she won the tight photo finish. As Babe crossed the finish line she had yelled to Hall, “Well, I beat you again.” Hall’s teammates gave her the thumbs up thinking she had won – the judges debated 30 minutes, Fifty years later Hall felt that Babe’s high profile public image influenced the judges to give Babe the victory.
- Her third event was the high jump – the last event of the meet. Babe’s chief competitor was her teammate, Jean Shiley. After eliminating other competitors, they were in a jump off for the win and the Olympic record at 5 ft 5¼ inch. Both cleared the distance – but the judges ruled that Babe’s western roll style jump was illegal because her feet crossed the bar first. Many others, including most of the US team thought that she had been fouling all day, but Shiley had declined to call a foul. On the last jump the judges called it - awarding Shiley the Gold and Babe silver and denying her three-gold medal prediction. Babe’s teammates cheered Shiley’s win and Babe’s loss.
- Big predictions, big performance, drama before the press she courted, teammates turned off. Vintage Babe.

Before she headed back to Texas for several triumphant parades, the legendary sportswriter, Grantland Rice - Dean of American sportswriters, who was impressed by Babe’s performance, invited her to play golf with him and several other sports writers including Paul Gallico of the New York Daily News. The invitation might have been life-changing for the Babe.

Almost overnight, 21 year-old Babe Didrikson had become a national sensation. She milked the sports press for every drop of publicity. Outspoken, outlandish, and backing it all up with remarkable athletic achievement – she made great copy. She was a favorite of Grantland Rice who in hyperbolic overstatement called her, “the greatest athlete of all mankind for all time.”(Johnson and Williamson , pg. 111) The New York Times named her “America’s Girl Star of the Olympics”. The Associated Press voted her “Female Athlete of the Year” for 1932. She was greeted as a hero upon returning to Texas from the L.A. Olympics – in Dallas greeted by 10,000 people, including the mayor and a parade through the city – and a similar greeting in her hometown of Beaumont.

For Babe the burning question was how she could cash in on all this new-found fame. The life long financial insecurity that she demonstrated was on full display. She came from a background of near poverty. The country was sinking deeper into the Depression. Babe knew her career as an elite athlete was time-limited. And the amateur ethic prevailed across almost all of women’s sports. Without an agent to guide

her, no financial expertise, and a brash and increasingly controversial public image, she did not handle things well.

- They started well. The Illinois Women's Athletic Club offered Babe \$300 a month wages to leave Employer Casualty and join their team – four times her current salary. She immediately showed the letter offering to Homer Mitchell, President of Employer's Casualty who immediately agreed to match the offer and Babe immediately accepted.
- “What I really wanted to do at this point was to become a golfer” said Babe as she referenced the encouragement, she was getting from Grantland Rice. ([This Life I've Led](#), Babe Didrickson Zaharias as told to Henry T Paxton, A.S. Barnes and Company, pg. 68.). Every day after her job at Employer's Casualty she would put in long hours on the golf course, and she spent lunch breaks putting on the carpet in the company president's office. Babe was relentless in her athletic practice commitment - but reality was there was little opportunity for financial gain for women golfers in 1932. Elite golf was an amateur sport. The best tournaments were amateur events. The best players were backed by wealthy families and personal fortune. And the game was largely played at exclusive country clubs open to the wealthy and upper social classes. Babe's background had done nothing to prepare her for this world.
- And then Babe made a critical misstep. In search of transportation, she visited a Dodge dealership and left with a brand-new red Dodge coupe. Transaction arrangements were later debated and are still murky now. The dealer said she borrowed the car. She later said she arranged \$69 monthly payments. But when newspaper advertisements in Chicago and Dallas started running ads for the coupe that included pictures of Babe running the hurdles and a statement in quotation marks comparing the speed, stamina, and strength needed in athletics to that needed in automobiles, the damage was done. On Dec 5, 1932, the AAU suspended Babe from participating in amateur events. The penalty made her ineligible to play on the Employer's Casualty Teams in basketball and in AAU track and field events. The AAU maintained that she had received the Dodge in return for advertising endorsement and she had profited from athletics and was suspended until she could prove “beyond a doubt” that the Dodge advertisement was not due to “an act of omission or commission” on her part. (Van Natta, pg 133).
- The AAU decision had been made with no notice to Babe and no chance for her to present her case. She was furious. It threatened her Employer's Casualty role, and her eligibility for AAU athlete of the year awards. She mounted a strong rebuttal with statements from the auto dealership, and Dodge's ad agency that Babe had not authorized the ad. It was obvious that the wording was not in Babe's normal vernacular. But as the inquiry continued, Babe made another critical mistake – she lost patience and withdrew her appeal letting the AAU make the decision for her to turn professional even though she had no long-term game plan or commitments. Reportedly her telegram withdrawing the appeal arrived

just a few hours before the AAU was about to lift the suspension. (Van Natta, pg. 136).

- Early characterizations of Babe as a “tomboy” had evolved into press speculation about her sexual preferences and gender. Her behavior was judged against the narrow bounds of appropriate feminine behavior that existed in the 1930’s. But Babe did little to rebut the rumors and in fact set her apart from other women athletes. Her dress, grooming, language and behavior was decidedly unfeminine by norms of the day. Paul Gallico, of the *New York Daily News*, the sportswriter she and Grantland Rice had beat in the L.A. golf match that followed the Olympics led the charge. Babe had challenged him to a sprint up the 18th fairway and playfully mocked him as he tried to keep up with her and then again as he missed the putt on the 18th to lose the match. His October, 1932 article in *Vanity Fair* spoke about his curiosity about her with his attraction to the bearded lady and albino girl at the circus sideshow. He went on to say, “after the golf match nobody knew whether to invite her into the men’s locker room for a drink and bath” or not, and described her as a “19-year-old boy-girl who would have been right at home there” and as “not quite female,” using the word boy more than a dozen times to describe her. (Cayleff, pg 92). The damage only grew. By 1933, to many across the country, Babe would be the “Muscle Moll” example of what mothers and fathers did not want their daughters to grow up to be. (Van Natta pg 144)

In Babe’s own words, “These years I’m talking about were a mixed-up time for me. My name had meant a lot right after the Olympic Games, but I had sort of been down since then. I hadn’t been smart enough to get into anything that would really keep me up there.” (Didriksen-Zaharias, pg 85.). Babe floundered and struggled her way through 1933 and 1934 and into 1935 using her declining fame to generate cash and publicity in a variety of ways – not all of them attractive. Public appearance and auto endorsement were one thing. Vaudeville performances and exhibition basketball and golf were another. And barnstorming with the bearded men of House of David traveling baseball team which often including riding donkeys around the bases may have been the low point. To her credit she was struggling to support herself, her extended family, and to pay for her father’s extensive medical care. She also continued to aspire to a professional golf career and tried to bankroll money to allow that.

It was a rough period, but some good things did happen. Johnson and Williamson note that Babe later claimed she earned more than \$40,000 during a three-and-a-half-year period of barnstorming and exhibitions. This was at a time when US Congressman earned \$8,000 per year. More importantly she became increasingly focused on her golf game. During the spring and summer of 1933 with \$1,800 in savings she drove herself and her parents to LA for the summer where she dedicated herself to her golf game. A young professional instructor, Stan Kertes, took her under his wing and she got her first real professional instruction, staying through the summer. Babe practiced relentlessly, often hitting 1,500 balls a day. She continued to work on her game during stints back at Employer’s Casualty during subsequent periods in ’34 and ’35. Employer’s was very good to her – including providing country club privileges for her to practice and some

time with the pro. During the summer of 1935 she toured the country with Gene Sarazen playing 18 exhibition matches in a month's time. At the time Sarazen was at the top of the game, a 6-time major tournament winner and one of the best in the world.

By the Spring of 1935 Babe had developed enough confidence in her game to enter the Texas State Women's Golf Championship in April at the River Oaks Country Club in Houston. Nearly 200 women entered the qualifying round. With an 84 Babe was among the 36 players to enter match play. She won her first 3 match play rounds to put her into the finals against Peggy Chandler, a perennial favorite and Texas USGA member who had said before the tournament that they didn't need "any truck driver's daughters in their "event .(Van Natta 124). The format was match play -18 holes in the morning and 18 more after lunch. Babe closed Chandler out on the 35th hole.

Babe was on her way – next stop the Women's Southern Amateur in Louisville – her second stop on the amateur tour. But not so fast. "She is a pro. She must go." That was the message to the USGA from Mrs. Willard Sullivan of Ashland, Va., the secretary of the Women's Southern Golf Association. Social contacts, politics, connections, took over. The USGA ruled her a professional – "in the best interests of the game." A pro in one sport was a pro in all sports. For once, Babe held her tongue despite the outcry in the press. She knew that the USGA would be the body to decide her future eligibility and any chance of reinstatement. Moreover, she had recently acquired new mentors, advisors, friends and allies in the couple Bertha and R.L. Bowen of Fort Worth. R.L was President of a Fort Worth Power Company and his wife, Bertha, was an influential member of the group that organized and ran Texas women's golf. They became lifelong friends. Bertha (B.B.) also organized Babe's make over – or at least the makeover of her public image.

B.B. Bowen was furious about the USGA's decision which she attributed to a class discrimination and favoritism toward the social elites-even though she was one. In response she reconfigured the amateur tournament she and her friends staged in Fort Worth into the Women's Texas Open with both amateurs and professionals invited. Babe was not only invited to enter, but the Bowen's also invited her to be their house guest for three weeks before, during and after the tournament. It was during this visit that the bond between the two developed. Babe became B.B.'s project. She taught her to tone down her behavior and language, to fit into the country club circles, how to dress and even buying her a new wardrobe at Neiman Marcus. She taught her how to use make up and encouraged her to let her short bob haircut grow out and be styled in a wave.

Babe's recent \$2,500 contract with P. Goldsmith and Sons (a Cincinnati-based sporting goods company), including the release of a new line of clubs in her name, together with money saved from her tour with Gene Sarazen, provided the funds for her to travel back to California to focus on her golf game. In a small rental house, she and her parent and two siblings lived together while she focused on improving her game and her public image. Goldsmith arranged some exhibitions for her and Stan Kertes coached her. Thousands watched her hit practice balls. Sportswriters including her old nemesis

Gallico took note of the new feminine Babe. She made a point of presenting herself in a new light. By today's standards their articles describing the "old Babe" and the new feminine version seem blatantly sexist and demeaning to women. Babe was honing her golf and her image for the high society golfing world she hoped to enter.

In January of 1938 Babe entered the Los Angeles Open – a regular tournament on the men's PGA tour. She entered with no expectation of winning – at the urging of a sports promoter. She was paired with several other "promotional" entries including George Zaharias, a 235-pound professional wrestler known as "the Crying Greek from Cripple Creek." He played the villain's role in the vaudeville-like performances and often was paid \$15,000 per night. Babe later called it love at first sight. There's was a whirlwind romance, and they were married on January 3, 1938.

Babe hadn't played good golf in her first PGA tournament but it was a turning point in her life and career. Their romance was real – her first real love that my research identified. George was financially well off and could provide the backing it would take for her to forgo professional gold for 3 years to regain her USGA amateur status if she decided to. He was also a diligent sports promoter, having gained that experience in pro wrestling. And he also filled the role as Babe's agent – not to mention financial investment manager. And his virile public image as 235 pounds of muscle served as a counterpoint to her new feminine persona.

In April of 1939, it was time for their honeymoon. George had made all the arrangements – two laid back weeks at a rented cottage in Hawaii. That was just the first step for George the sports promoter. They left by ship from Hawaii for an extensive series of exhibitions in Australia and New Zealand over 3 months. Babe played several dozen exhibitions with Australian and New Zealand pros and George had arranged 16 wrestling exhibitions for himself. In October they returned to their rented duplex in L.A. That fall they both made big career decisions. At George's urging, Babe decided to file notice to regain her amateur status with the USGA. To do so she would need to forgo all professional earnings for the next 3 years. George's wealth made this possible and she could still play in the few professional tournaments that existed for women as long as she took no financial benefit or prize money. Babe was bored with exhibition golf and wanted to compete at the highest level. George, for his part, decided to give up wrestling and devote himself to promoting sports – especially Babe's career.

Babe filled the 3-year waiting period working on her game, playing tennis, bowling, and playing the occasional tournament of exhibition open to her. Her golf improved. As it turned out – most amateur tournaments were cancelled during these war years. Finally, on January 21, 1943, Babe was reestablished as an amateur by the USGA. Six weeks later she won her first tournament with her newly established credentials -the Midwinter Women's Golf Championship at LA Country Club with a double eagle on a 405 uphill par 5 - a 250-yard drive and a holed 6 iron from 155 yards.

Babe's golf career would span the next 12 years. She won 82 golf tournaments over her life. She played as an amateur from 1943 to 1947, when she turned professional again

and became one of 6 founding members of the LPGA. During 1946–47 she won an amazing string of 14 amateur tournaments in a row. She won a total of 41 LPGA tour events. She won 10 Major championships, was the first American to win the British Women's Open and also the first to win both the British and US Women's Opens. (<https://www.lpga.com/lpga-hall-of-fame/babe-didrikson-zaharias>).

Babe had softened her public image, language, and appearance, but her underlying personality remained unchanged. She found ways to dominate the spotlight, she belittled her fellow competitors, and she always looked for ways to gain advantage on and off the course. She was financially driven – demanding appearance money from LPGA sponsors when no other players received it. She was the public's favorite golfer and she never let anyone forget that. “ ‘Hey girls, Babe's here' she'd announce as she breezed into the clubhouse before a tournament. “Now who's going to finish second?” (Van Natta, pg 267). Her behavior was particularly troubling to Louise Suggs, regarded as one of the best tour players and now in the LPGA Hall of Fame. From 1950 to 1955 Suggs won 25 professional tournaments compared to Babe's 29. When she won the British Women's Amateur the year after Babe won it, she got little press coverage. Their rivalry became increasingly tense over the years. Years later Suggs described her as “Very charismatic. A bully.” (Van Natta 266.). Betsy Rawls described a 1951 incident when Babe grabbed her harmonica and began playing it loudly while Suggs was playing out on the 18th green. That same year Suggs also reportedly watched Babe move her ball from a stand of trees and take an illegal drop some 50 feet away in the fairway. Suggs refused to sign Babe's scorecard according to Rawls and several others. (Van Natta , pg. 267).

The early years on the LPGA tour were challenging. Babe, the big-name draw was increasingly difficult and demanding. Her husband George was increasingly a problem – driving Babe for more appearances and money and exhibiting obnoxious and embarrassing behavior. He had ballooned to 350 pounds and consumed enormous amounts of food and alcohol. The tour was run by the players who argued about issues at meetings, stayed in ramshackle hotels, ran promotional events and occasionally had to tend the sub-standard course venues. There were 30 women on tour – so each had great pressure to play all the events. The prize money was not very good – in 1953 Betty Hicks won \$3,750 but spent \$3,335 on travel expenses and caddies. In 1953 the players demanded that Babe, who had just been elected President of the league, call an emergency meeting to discuss the appearance money issue. They believed that Babe was getting bonus payments and appearance money for playing while no others did. Babe, who with George's resources and her own very substantial earning from exhibitions and endorsements was better off than most but refused to disclose or discuss the bonus money issue. Harsh words were spoken – “I'm the star and you are in the chorus” she told the other players. “I get the money. And if it weren't for me , half of our tournaments wouldn't be.” (Van Natta pg. 272)

Babe's declining relationships with other top tour members contrasted with her supportive attitude toward some of the young, new members. Most notably, Betty Todd,

a young Texas golfer who joined in 1951 at the age of 19. Bertha Bowen, who knew the Dodd family in San Antonio, asked Babe to look out for Dodd as she joined the tour. Bowen noted that Dodd was from a good family and had advantages, but her appearance was a mess. "She would go around looking just awful". (Van Natta, pg 270.).

In 1951 Babe and George invited Dodd to visit them at their home in Tampa and from then on Babe became close friends with the 20-year younger Dodd. The two women traveled together, developed a joint musical act making appearances on various shows including Ed Sullivan's, and created speculation in the media about the full nature of their relationship. Dodd put her golf career on hold – first to travel with Babe and soon to care for her. In the spring of 1952, she traveled back to Beaumont with Babe after they had played a swing of west coast tournaments in which Babe's play was poor. In extreme pain, they flew back and drove directly to the Hotel Dieu Hospital where her long-time family physician diagnosed a strangulated femoral hernia in her left thigh. She was anemic and extremely exhausted. After surgery she flew to her home in Tampa to recover under doctor's orders to not play golf until he released her. In August she was approved to play in the World Championship – finishing third – and then winning Women's Texas Open. In all 1952 was a dismal year for her – winning 4 of 20 tournaments and ending fifth on the money list with \$7,500 in winnings. (Van Natta pg 289). Back in Tampa over the holidays she did not feel well, and she continued to feel and play poorly in the early spring of 1953. By this time Dodd was living with her and George in their Tampa home. When Babe complained of her fatigue, Dodd urged her to see her doctor in Beaumont. Finally, she took the advice.

On April 6, 1953, after examining her in his Beaumont office, her physician ordered her to go directly to Fort Worth and see a proctologist the next day. He immediately took a biopsy – it revealed rectal cancer – he prescribed surgery as soon as possible – removing her rectum and a portion of her colon and leaving her with a colostomy bag. In a state of shock, they drove back to the home of R.L. and Bertha Bowen where they had been staying during the biopsy and return visit. The surgery was scheduled in Beaumont in 10 days. Dodd called and learned the news and headed for Texas.

Babe's cancer was national news. So many letters, cards, and telegrams came in they were delivered each day in a big wicker clothes hamper. Bobby Jones, Ed Sullivan, and Bob Hope sent get-well wishes. Dr. Robert Moore, a specialist at the University of Texas Hospital in Galveston agreed to come and perform the operation which was on April 17, 1953. The four-hour procedure went as expected but the colostomy would be permanent, not temporary. Worse still, the post-op pathology showed positive lymph nodes. Dr. Moore told George and Betty Dodd that the cancer would return – but advised that they not share this news with Babe. (Van Nata, pg 300).

A few days later George traveled back to Florida to attend to some business affairs. Betty Dodd stayed with Babe – sleeping on the couch and taking over her care including changing the colostomy bag. After 31 days in the hospital Babe, George and Betty Dodd headed home. Her golf clubs had been in her hospital room throughout the stay. They were in the car trunk.

At a time when cancer was not usually spoken of publicly and when a cancer diagnosis was usually not publicly revealed, Babe was admirably open about her disease and treatment. She took the disease on as another athletic hurdle, "When you get a big setback like that, no use in crying about it...you have to face your problem and figure out what to do next." In this public position she did a great service to cancer patients everywhere. Giving hope and encouragement and using the opportunity to encourage donations for cancer research.

The doctor's had been clear she would not be able to compete in golf again. Fourteen weeks after her surgery, 5000 people gathered around the first tee at the LPGA's All American at Tam O'Shanter Golf Course in Illinois. She finished the tournament in the middle of the pack. A few days later a third at the World Championship on the same course.

Then in early 1954 – at the Tampa Women's Open, a play-off loss to finish second at St. Petersburg and then on Feb 20, 1954, a 18th hole victory over Patty Berg to win the Serbin Open at Bayshore in Miami. Finally. The US Women's Open held that year at Salem Country Club in Massachusetts. A long tough course with 18 holes on the first two days and then 36 on the final day. Babe shot a 72-71-73-75 to win her third US Open by 12 strokes over Betty Hicks. She was 15 months from her surgery. And she did it with a colostomy bag. In the club house she called her doctors to thank them and share the credit.

Over the next two years, she competed in some tournaments in 1955 winning the Peach Blossom in Spartanburg, S.C. And she used the time to create, with George, a cancer research foundation, and to visit cancer patients around the country, and to record her autobiography. She continued to live, with George and Betty Dodd, at their home in Tampa. Intense back pain took her back to the hospital in Galveston for several additional procedures. She made it past her birthday and was honored by a surprise party, remembrances from golfers and celebrities around the world and greeting from President Eisenhower. On Sept 27, 1956, Babe's fight came to an end. She died with George at her side in the University of Texas Medical Branch hospital in Galveston.

If I could ask Babe who is the Greatest of All Time – I know exactly what she would say.