

I'm Not Out of The Rough Yet! 'Babe' Didrikson Zaharias' Toughest Contest; Her Personal Fight Against Cancer and Her Efforts on Behalf of Cancer Education

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Internationally reknowned for her feats in the athletic arena, 'Babe' Didrikson Zaharias, the multi-faceted "Texas Tomboy" is widely remembered for her myriad athletic accomplishments. Her victories and near-legendary feats include: entering eight of the ten events scheduled at the 1932 AAU meet in Chicago, and winning or placing in seven of them; taking two gold medals and a silver at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics; scoring over 100 points in a basketball game; driving a golf ball 327 yards and winning 82 golf tournaments between 1935 and 1953. In short, she excelled in essentially every sport she undertook including bowling, swimming, softball and tennis.

Exceptional not only for the records she set and her short stint as a harmonica-playing stage entertainer Didrikson captured the American imagination with her Texas-sized bragging, quick quips to the press, and down-home frankness; she endeared herself to fans and close friends alike.

Didrikson was to need all of her bravado to confront and manage the most stressful and monolithic challenge of her life. First diagnosed with cancer in 1953, Babe was operated on for a malignancy of the lower rectum. From her first contact with the disease, Didrikson displayed her determination not to be incapacitated by her ailment. Interviewed from her hospital bed, she was concerned that she return to the golf tour quickly - and as victoriously - as pre-surgery. She did, in fact, return to golf in 1954; from then until her next hospitalization she won five more tournaments, including the U.S. Open for a third time.

Prior to her colostomy, which was a difficult and distasteful option for the ever-active Didrikson, she struck a classic "bargain" with her God. She promised that she would devote herself to cancer education (via early detection) and fund raising if she were spared and given a "second chance". True to her word, Babe began a series of efforts that followed through her three subsequent hospitalizations at John Sealy Hospital at UTMB in Galveston. A gracious subject for an innovative x-ray treatment designed to alleviate her recurring pain (1955), Babe's medical management attracted national attention. Her stated goal throughout in "going public" with her ailment was to minimize the fear, uncertainty and sense of isolation experienced by others in her condition.

To further her goals, Didrikson originated the Babe Didrikson Zaharias Fund, Inc. whose first task was to set up a tumor clinic at UTMB. Further, she hoped the Fund would assist in

establishing other tumor clinics and cancer treatment centers and in employing well-trained technicians and financing the most advanced equipment. Expressly for the purpose of helping needy people who were not able to pay for early diagnostic screening, the Fund succeeded because of the personalized efforts of Babe. Her labors included letters sent to numerous Sports Editors (nationwide) asking for their cooperation in publicizing and covering golf tournaments in their areas -the proceeds of which were to be contributed to the Fund.

In this little known arena, Didrikson distinguished herself in yet another realm as a champion. One of the first to go public with her cancer, she served as an inspirational model for others in similar situations. Further, her fundraising activities mark her as one whose concern for quality care extended beyond her own situation to others less materially fortunate. Upon her death, her athletic records and charismatic antics heralded her exceptional talent. In this, her final contest, her true mettle emerged as a compassionate human being whose concerns expanded to embrace medical humanitarianism.



Susan Cayleff spoke about “Babe” Didrikson’s fight against cancer.