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Title:
The Automatic Champion

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Summary:
“Babe” Didrickson Zaharias was a phenomenal athlete. This Texan ran, jumped, rode horses, and played basketball and baseball—with tremendous flair. Here is the story of her career. We can learn a great deal about what it takes to become a champion in any area of our lives from her example.

Keywords:

Article Body:
“Babe” Didrickson Zaharias was a phenomenal athlete. This Texan ran, jumped, rode horses, and played basketball and baseball—with tremendous flair.

In the Olympic tryouts in 1932, she won five first places in track and field events. In the games of that year in Los Angeles, she won a gold medal in the women’s 80 meter hurdles, a gold medal in the javelin throw, and a silver medal in the high jump.

After the Olympics, Zaharias turned to golf. Although she started from scratch, she won the National Women’s Amateur and the British Women’s Amateur.

The press hailed her as a “natural athlete.” They often referred to as an “automatic champion.”

But the real story behind Zaharias fairy-tale success was her painstaking diligence. Her success came from studied repetition. In every sport she undertook, she was methodical, deliberate, and persistent. She was neither “natural” nor “automatic.”

When, for example, she played golf for the first time, she did not automatically master the game. Instead she studied the game carefully, covering all its complex skill sets, under the tutelage of the finest golf teacher she could find. She looked at all the elements of the golf swing, broke it down into

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parts, then put it all together in a fluid movement.

Besides using an analytical approach to understand the game, Zaharias also locked the information into her motor nervous system through exhaustive practice. She would spend as many as 12 hours a day on the golf course, hitting as many as a thousand balls. Her hands would often becomes so sore that she could hardly grip her club. She stopped only long enough to tape up her hands before picking up the club again.

Zaharias learned to play golf the right way. She started out by hiring an exceptional teacher. She analyzed each part of the golf swing then put them all together in a fluid motion. She practiced for about 12 hours a day. She exercised self-discipline and self-sacrifice. And she didn’t doubt herself. Her previous successes had created an enduring self-confidence. She believed that if she applied herself she would be a golf champion. She proved this belief true.

Zaharias took a risk. She risked her reputation as an athlete by trying something new. She also risked the time and money it cost her to perfect her new sport.

Above all, she was methodical in the way she went about inventing herself as a champion golfer. She chose a gifted teacher, studied all aspects of the game, and put her new knowledge into practice, converting theory into motor learning, coordination, and stamina.