



When you take your daughters to soccer practice (or another sport's practice), recognize that not so many years ago, the accepted dogma was that physical activity would damage a woman's reproductive system! The authors both attended primary and secondary schools and college prior to the enactment of Title IX when there

were few, if any, organized sports for women. But, as we know today, women CAN be athletes and physical activity is a critical part of wellness. This month, we profile pioneering athletic women which is especially timely as we think about the Olympics now occurring in London. Just a short time ago, it would have been scandalous if a woman rode a bicycle! The historical women we want to bring to your attention are: Wilma Rudolph, Althea Gibson, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, and Kathrine Switzer.



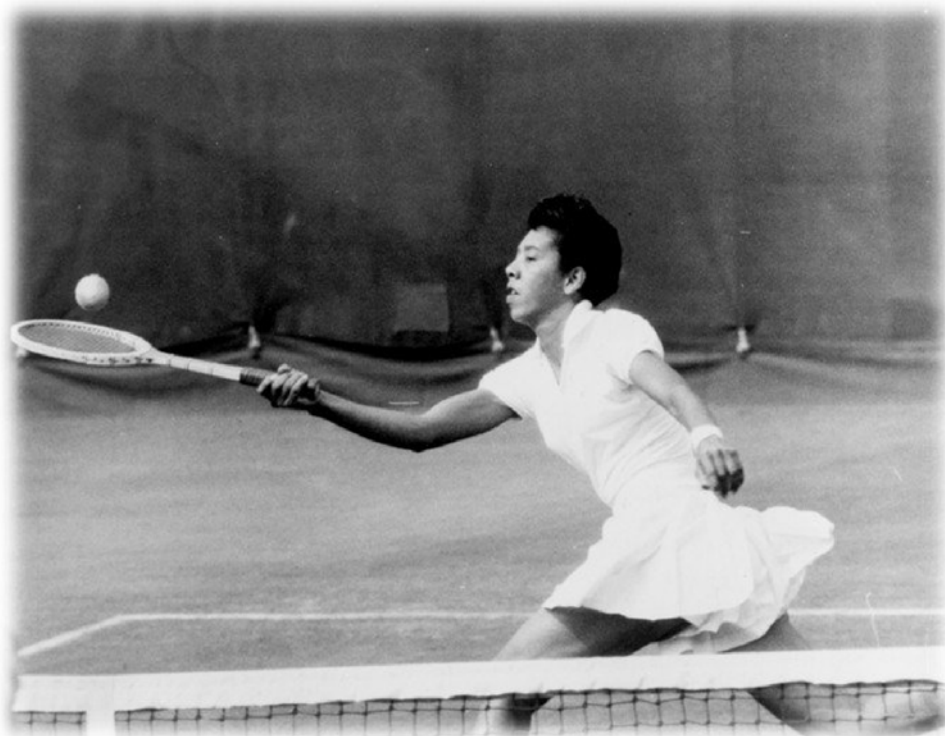
We begin with an amazing American Olympian. **Wilma Rudolph** was the first American woman to win three track and field gold medals in a single Olympics. She is often described as one of the

20th century's greatest track stars. At the beginning of her life, her athletic prowess was not so obvious. The twentieth child in a family of twenty-two children, Rudolph was born prematurely and developed into a sickly child. When her legs began developing unevenly, her mother received the diagnosis that Wilma had polio and that as her leg deteriorated, she would become unable to walk. But with intense therapy and the support of her family, by the age of twelve, she was walking without crutches, metal braces, or corrective shoes. Tutored at home until she overcame her physical ailments, Rudolph's athletic talents were not discovered until she was in high school.

At age 16, she won her first Olympic medal (bronze) as a member of the 4 x 100 relay team at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia. In Rome at the 1960 Olympics, as a result of her achievements, Rudolph was described as the "fastest woman in the world". She was the first American woman to win three gold medals: 100-yard dash, 200-yard dash and as a member of the 4 x 100 relay team. The 1960 Olympics were the first to be televised and Rudolph's victories, coupled with her inspirational story of having overcome physical and societal barriers to compete, produced a surge of interest in women's track and field. Inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, she paved the way for later African-American athletes, both male and female.

Like Wilma Rudolph, tennis player **Althea Gibson** broke significant racial barriers. She began playing tennis at an early age and in 1943 won the state Negro girls' singles championship, playing under the auspices of the New York Police Athletic League. While attending Florida A&M, she became the first African-American tennis player to enter the U.S. Open (1950). In 1951, she was the first African-American tennis player to be invited to play at Wimbledon. She was the first African-American to win the U.S.

Open (1957), the French Open (1956), and Wimbledon (1957). When she returned home to New York City from Wimbledon in 1957, she was feted with a ticker tape parade. Gibson won a total of five Grand Slam titles.



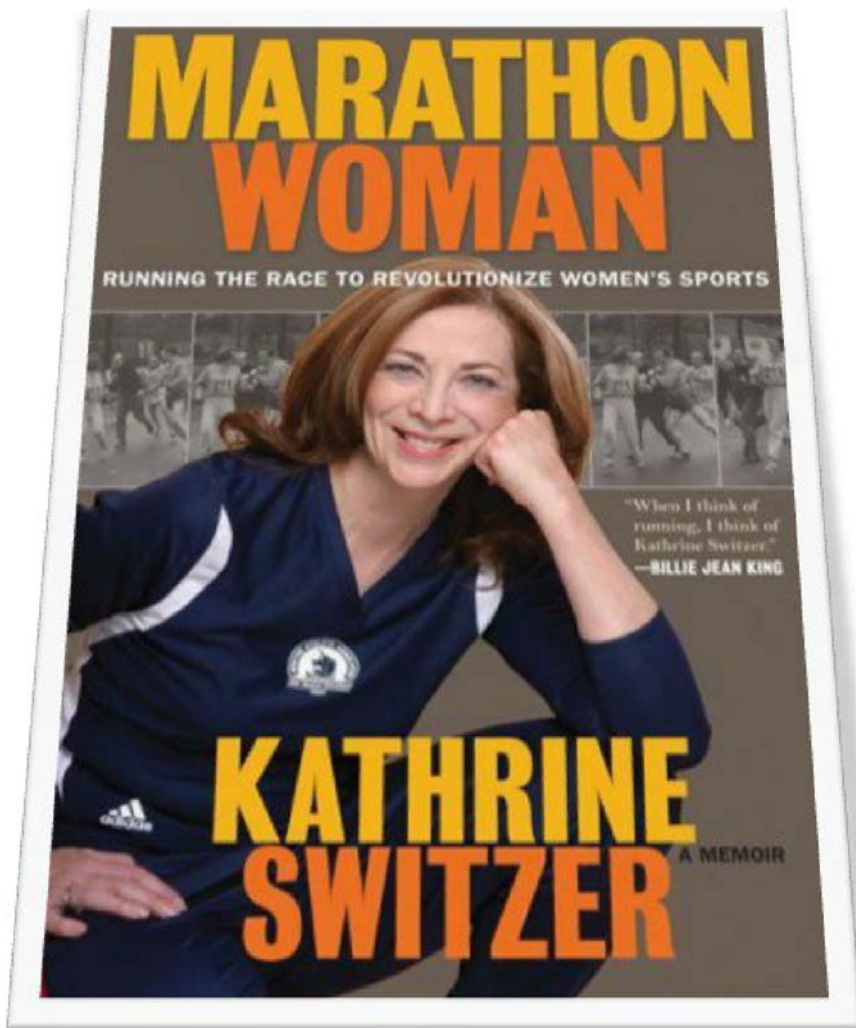
Her autobiography, *I Always Wanted to be Somebody*, appeared in 1958. Later, she became a professional golfer and was the first African-American to join the LPGA. She has been inducted into the National Lawn Tennis Hall of Fame, the International Tennis Hall of Fame, the National Women's Hall of Fame and several other Halls.



Another athlete of importance who excelled at every sport she tried was **Babe Didrikson Zaharias**. Called the world's greatest athlete of the first half of the 20th century, Zaharias has also been called one of the 10 greatest golfers (male or female) of all time. She is credited with helping to popularize women's golf. Zaharias was named Woman Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press six times (1931, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1950, and 1954). She did not take up golf until after she had gained world fame in track and field and All-American status in basketball. She also mastered tennis, played organized baseball and softball and was an expert diver, roller-skater and bowler. Zaharias won two gold medals (javelin and 80 meters hurdles) and one silver medal (high jump) at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles.

Zaharias was one of the six initial inductees into the LPGA Hall of Fame. In 1947, she had won 17 straight golf titles, including the British Women's Amateur, where she was the first U.S. winner. Her autobiography, *This Life I've Led*, was published in 1955. Her life story was made into a movie titled "Babe" in 1975. She has been featured on a U.S. postage stamp and inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Are you aware that women were not allowed to run marathons until very recently? **Kathrine Switzer** officially entered the Boston Marathon in 1967 as "K" Switzer, as women could not compete in marathons. When a race official tried to throw her out of the race, her running companion removed the race official instead. The "Boston Incident" of 1967 ignited the women's running revolution. "Marathon Woman" Switzer went on to run 35 marathons and won the 1974 New York City Marathon.



Inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2011, Switzer has dedicated her multi-faceted career to creating opportunities and equal sport status for women. Her career has included creating programs in 27 countries for over 1 million women that led to the inclusion of the women's marathon as an official event in the Olympic Games, changing forever the face of sports, health and opportunities for women around the world.

Whether you are a runner, a golfer, or participate actively in organized sports or even when you get on your treadmill, attend a yoga or Pilates class, remember these outstanding women athletes who paved the way for us.

Charlotte S. Waisman, PhD, co-author of *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America* (HarperCollins), is a national champion and advocate for women as a professor and keynote speaker. As an executive coach, Waisman coauthored *50 Activities for Developing Leaders* and *The Leadership Training Activity Book*. She is a principal with a consulting company specializing in leadership and workforce excellence initiatives.

Jill S. Tietjen, PE, co-author of *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America* (HarperCollins), is an author, speaker and electrical engineer. Her other books include the *Setting the Record Straight* series. Tietjen is a top historian on scientific and technical women. She is President/CEO of *Technically Speaking*, a consulting company that specializes in improving career opportunities for women in technology.

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