

# Lifestyle

Joey Seymour

## Top 10 Greatest Lesbian Athletes

As with many top 10 lists, they are very subjective. In regards to this particular list, I looked at not only athletic accomplishments but GLBT community service as well. For the next five editions of the LN, we will count down to who is number one of this list of incredible women.

### # 10 – DIANE WHIPPLE

Born on January 21, 1968, young Diane Whipple quickly developed impressive athletic skills. She moved to Manhasset, New York, where she

was raised mostly by her grandparents. In high school, Diane focused her abilities on lacrosse where as a two-time All American at Manhasset High, she was given the nickname, “The Whip” She led her squad to their first ever State

Championship in 1985 and graduated in 1986. Diane was accepted to Penn State University, where playing on the lacrosse team for the Nittany Lions, she assisted greatly in the team’s two National Championships (1987 and 1989). During her senior year she was named Penn’s State’s Female Athlete of the year.



Diane Whipple

Diane began training for the 1996 Olympics, hoping to make the Cross Country team and was devastated when she failed to qualify for the team. However, her disappointment did not last long; she competed for the United States lacrosse team, started the women’s lacrosse team at the University of California, San Diego and later became the head coach for the women’s lacrosse team at St. Mary’s college in Moraga, CA.

Diane was living in San Francisco with her long time partner, Sharon Smith, when only a few days after her thirty-third birthday, she was brutally attacked by a negligent neighbor’s two dogs. The seventy-seven wounds she sustained caused a fatal amount of blood loss and Diane died in the hospital later that day.

Her death caused a nationwide debate on not only dog bite laws but also the rights of same sex partners in the matters of death or serious injury. Sharon Smith was awarded 1.5 million dollars in a civil suit against the dog owners. In 2007, family, friends, and past teammates began the Diane Whipple Foundation which donates funds to girls looking to learn about and play lacrosse.

### # 9 – NATALIE COOK

Born on January 19, 1975 in Townsville in the state of Queensland, Australia, Cook had her aspirations set on becoming a doctor. While attending Corinda High School she took up the sport of beach volleyball. Her skills quickly developed and in 1994, she began to shift all of her efforts



Natalie Cook

on becoming the best volleyball player in the country.

Representing Australia, in women’s beach volleyball at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, GA, Natalie Cook

and her partner Kerri Pottharst, brought home the bronze medal. Four years later, in Sydney, Australia, the two women captured the gold medal.

Along with her appearances at the 1996 and 2000 Olympic Games, Natalie also competed in the 2004 Games in Athens and in 2008, finished 5<sup>th</sup> at the Beijing Games.

Beyond Olympic competition, Cook and Pottharst were named to the Order of Australia, the country’s highest honor and dubbed the team of the decade.

Cook penned an autobiography, *Go, Girl! A Journey from Bronze to Gold* in 2001. Then in November of 2008, she married her long time partner, Canadian women’s volleyball player, Sarah Maxwell.

Natalie recently announced, via her website, that she is preparing to compete at the 2012 summer Olympics in London.

Contact the author by visiting [www.joeyseymour.com](http://www.joeyseymour.com)

By Joey Seymour

## Top Ten Greatest Lesbians Athletes - Numbers 7 & 8

### # 8 – HELEN STEPHENS

Born in Fulton, Missouri on February 3, 1918, Helen Stephens utilized her upbringing on a farm as the basis for her athletic training. While attending Fulton High School, Stephen's coach, W. Burton Moore, noticed that the 6 ft tall fifteen-year-old had incredible speed. He began to train her to properly sprint. A local newspaper dubbed her, "The Fulton Flash." Helen was a standout star in high school, winning multiple national championships.

In the summer of 1936, she was selected to compete for the United States in the upcoming

Olympic Games being held in Nazi controlled Germany. Stephens wrote of her confliction to compete due to her concerns with the treatment of the German Jewish population. Yet, she also had a dream to bring home gold for the United States.

Her dominance and world record setting pace in both the 100 meter individual race and 4 x 100 relay, not only allowed her to win gold at the games but also found her in two incredibly awkward and uncomfortable positions. First, the Olympic committee tested her gender to verify that she was in fact a woman. She

passed the test and then successfully sued the magazine which had created the doubt.

Next, she was hit on by Adolf Hitler. According to Stephens, "He [Hitler] gets hold of my fanny and begins to squeeze. And he said: "You should be running for Germany." Hitler later asked Helen to spend the weekend with him in Berchtesgaden. She turned him down.

Upon her return to Missouri, Stephens became the first female to own, operate and play for a semi-professional basketball team, which was called the Helen Stephens Olympic Co-Eds. She also served in Women's Reserves for the U.S. Marines during World War II. After the war she worked as a researcher for the U.S. Aeronautical Chart and Information Service. She is a member of the National Women's Hall Fame.

Helen Stephens died on January 17, 1994.

### # 7 – KARRIE WEBB

Born in Queensland, Australia on December 21, 1974, Karrie Webb has been the LPGA's most consistent winner since splashing onto the professional tour in 1994.

She has recorded fifty professional titles, thirty-six of which have come while competing for the LPGA. Seven of her professional titles were won at majors. In 2001, after winning defending her U.S. Women's Open title, she completed a career grand slam, winning every LPGA major. In 2002, after the Women's

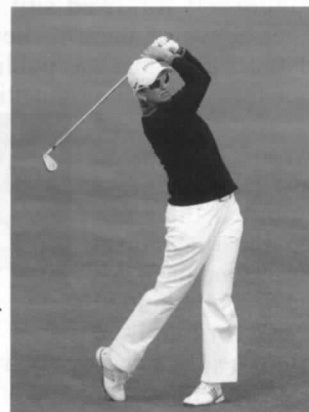
British Open was added to the list of LPGA majors, Webb won, earning her a Super Career Grand Slam.

Few women have dominated their sport in the way Karrie Webb has and in golf, only Babe Zaharias, Mickey Wright and Annika Sorenstam have struck more fear in the hearts of their opponents. Webb is currently ranked 12<sup>th</sup> all time in LPGA tour wins. She will pass Babe Zaharias and crack the top ten with six more titles.

Karrie Webb is the most successful Australian female golfer ever and the only non-American with more than five major's titles. On January 26, 2010 she was appointed a member of the Order of Australia, the country's highest honor, an honor that she shares with Natalie Cook.

Webb lives her long time partner, American golfer Kelly Robbins, who she defeated in two separate LPGA events in 1996.

Joey Seymour can be contacted by visiting his website, [www.joeyseymour.com](http://www.joeyseymour.com)



## Top Ten Greatest Lesbian Athletes

### NUMBER 6 – JANA NOVOTNA

It is the 1993 Ladies Finals match at Wimbledon. Jana Novotna, seeking her first grand slam title, is up 4-1 in third and final set against Steffi Graf. The lead begins to slip and then is erased. Graf wins and Novotna breaks into tears during the awards ceremony. Beyond that devastating loss, Novotna, now a member of the International Tennis Hall of Fame had a stellar career.



Born on October 2, 1968 in Brno, Czech Republic, Jana first burst onto the tennis scene in 1986, primarily as a doubles player but after tapping four-time Grand Slam champion, Hana Mandlikova as her new coach, Jana's singles career began to flourish.

Novotna's playing style differed from the power players coming up the ranks, such as Lindsay Davenport and Venus Williams. Even Steffi Graf competed from the baseline line, while Jana was a serve and volley player. However, the style would serve her well, with Mandlikova by her side both professionally and personally, Jana Novotna went on to win 22 singles titles, capped off by her thrilling 1998 Wimbledon championship. Her doubles career earned her 76 titles (5 Grand Slam) and 4 Mixed Doubles (all Grand Slams). She also won a bronze medal in singles at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta to go along with her silver medal in doubles from the same games and her silver from the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul.

After an incredible 14 years on the WTA tour, Jana Novotna retired in 1999. She continues to play in exhibition matches and acts as an ambassador for the sport of tennis.

### NUMBER 5 – DIANA NYAD

Born in New York City on August 22, 1949, Diana Nyad was a multiple state champion during her high school years. Her dreams of becoming an Olympic swimmer were shelved, when at the age of 14 she was raped by a trusted family friend and at 16 she suffered a viral heart condition which kept her on bed rest for five months.

In 1974, 25 year-old Diana began competing in marathon swimming, which takes place in the open water. A year later she captured the hearts of the country after completing a swim around the island of Manhattan. Yet, it was her next swim, swimming from Florida to Cuba, that gained major international coverage. After

swimming for 42 tumultuous hours and only a few miles from shore, Diana was pulled out of the water due to weather conditions. The swim did not count for any records because she had not completed it by touching land.



Nyad began training even harder for her next swim which would start on the island of Bimini in the Bahamas and end in Florida. Nyad finished the 102.5 mile trek after two days of continuous swimming while shattering the world's record in distance (beat by Australia's Susie Maroney in 1997).

After the feat, Nyad gave up swimming and began successful careers as a sports broadcaster, business woman, author and philanthropist. In 1986 she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame and the International Swimming Hall of Fame honored her in 2003.

At the time of this writing, Diana Nyad, at the age of 60, has postponed plans to complete the swim from Havana to Key West this year due to bad weather. She now plans to try again next summer.

## Top 10 Greatest Lesbian Athletes

### Number 4 – Martina Navratilova

In 2006, Billie Jean King called Martina Navratilova, “the greatest singles, doubles and mixed doubles player who’s ever lived.” When looking at her record of accomplishments, there is no denying it. No other player, male or female, has come close to the level of success that Martina has had on the tennis court. Even today, the 54 year old who was recently diagnosed with breast cancer, continues to compete at high levels on the exhibition circuit.



Martina Subertova was born on October 18, 1956 in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Her parents divorced when she was only three years old. In 1962, her mother Jana married Miroslav Navrátil, whom Martina took her last name from (in feminine form) and became her first tennis instructor. Her father remarried as well but committed suicide when Navratilova was eight years old.

At the age of 16, Martina won the Czechoslovakia National Tennis Championship. Two years later, in 1975, she turned pro, thus beginning a career the likes of which had never been seen before or since. In singles competition her record stands at 1,442 wins to only 219 losses. She holds 167 singles titles (a record for men and women) with 18 of them coming from Grand Slams. In doubles Martina won 747 matches, losing only 143 with 177 titles (once again a record for men and women) with 31 titles coming from Grand Slams.

In 2006, Martina partnered with Bob Bryan, only a few weeks before turning 50, and the pair won the U.S. Open Mixed Doubles Championship. It was Navratilova’s 10<sup>th</sup> Mixed Doubles Grand Slam Title. Since that title, Martina has focused on competing in exhibition matches while promoting the sport of tennis. While her accomplishments on the tennis court may never go unmatched, it is the doors that she opened up for lesbian and gay athletes and the struggles she went through to break down barriers, which endear her most to the LGBT community.

Navratilova’s first personal struggle came in 1975 when the government of Czechoslovakia accused her of becoming too “Americanized” and wanted her to focus on schooling instead of tennis. While at the U.S. Open that year, she asked for and was

granted political asylum, officially becoming an American citizen in 1981. Later that year she became one of the first well known athletes to publically out herself. When she split with her partner Judy Nelson in 1991, the two became involved in a vicious legal battle.

Beyond tennis, Martina is an activist for the HRC and PETA. Famously she went to Colorado in 1992 to speak out against Amendment 2, which would have denied gays and lesbian legal protection from discrimination. In 2000, the HRC awarded her with the National Equality Award. She has authored five books, including an autobiography and three mystery novels.

Martina Navratilova is one of those rare athletes who dominated her sport at a time when the competition level was extremely high. She is a multifaceted individual whose accomplishments both on and off the court, will stand the test of time.

### Number 3 – Sheryl Swoopes

In October 2005, Sheryl Swoopes was riding high after just winning her third WNBA MVP Award. She was the face of the league and along with her Houston Comets teammates, served as the bench mark for success in the early years of the WNBA. One sports columnist referred to Swoopes as the



“female Michael Jordan.” Yet, she was struggling inside with a decision that would liberate her personally but would potentially bring about a wave of negative feelings from a fan base that adored her. In an exclusive interview with ESPN the Magazine; Swoopes came out, making her the most prominent athlete in a team sport to come out while still competing. She told LZ Granderson,

“I’m just a point in my life where I’m tired of having to pretend to be somebody I’m not. I’m tired of having to hide my feelings about the person I care about.”

Born on March 25, 1971 in Brownfield, Texas, young Sheryl was raised by her mother Louise and her three older brothers who taught her how to play basketball. She began playing at the age of seven in a local children’s league. Her abilities shown through and it wouldn’t be long before Sheryl was shattering collegiate records.

As a member of the Texas Tech Lady Raiders, Swoopes led the 1993 team to the NCAA Women’s Basketball championship. In the championship game vs. Ohio State, she scored an impressive 47 points which broke the NCAA record for points in a championship game, a record that had been held by a man, Bill Walton. Due to her successful run in the 1993 season with Texas Tech, Sheryl was named 1993 Sportswoman of the Year to go along with the Naismith College Player of the Year award that she won. As triumphant as her collegiate career was, Swoopes’ Olympic and WNBA career would promote her to the upper echelon of basketball superstars.

In 1996 at the Olympic Games in Atlanta, the U.S. Women’s Basketball team, in which Swoopes was a starter, gained a great deal of popularity during their remarkable run to the gold medal, thus the idea for the WNBA was finally able to become a reality. The league kicked off its inaugural season in 1997. Swoopes was drafted by the Houston Comets but missed the first six weeks of the season after giving birth to her son, Jordan. The Comets won the WNBA title that year. She would lead the team to three more consecutive championships while being named league MVP three times.

The U.S. Women’s Basketball team won gold in 2000 at the Sydney games and again in 2004 in Athens, with Swoopes as a member of the squad. Nike even designed a shoe, “Air Swoopes,” making Sheryl the first female basketball player ever to have a shoe named after her.

After eleven years with the Comets, Swoopes was traded to the Seattle Storm and in 2009 she was waived, ending her WNBA career. Today, Swoopes, along with her long time partner, Alisa Scott, is committed to raising her son and serving as an ambassador for women’s basketball. She has served as a mentor to the San Francisco Rockdogs, an all gay basketball team while also competing internationally for teams in Russia, Italy, and Greece. She hopes to one day legally marry Scott.

Swoopes’ courage to come out at the height of her career has created a path for future athletes, who hopefully will no longer fear having to hide their feelings.

Contact the author by visiting [www.joeyseymour.com](http://www.joeyseymour.com)



## Top Ten Greatest Lesbian Athletes-Top Two

We've reached the end of our countdown, but before I announce the top two athletes on the list, here is a quick recap of 3 – 10.

Number 10: Diane Whipple

Number 9: Natalie Cook

Number 8: Helen Stephens

Number 7: Karrie Webb

Number 6: Jana Novotna

Number 5: Diana Nyad

Number 4: Martina Navratilova

Number 3: Sheryl Swoopes

Number 2 – Babe Didrikson Zaharias

No athlete on this list can compare to the versatility and dominance in more than one sport, than the other "Babe," Babe Zaharias. At a time when women were banned from most golf courses in the country, Babe ruled the game. When it was frowned upon for females to be athletic, Zaharias' accomplishments in track and field were unmatched. She also achieved success in basketball, an avid bowler and expert diver. The lasting impact of Zaharias is that she challenged the ideals of femininity and won.

Born in Port Arthur, Texas on June 26, 1911, Mildred Ella Didrikson was the sixth of seven children born to Norwegian immigrants, Ole and Hannah. Ironically, Babe's first foray into the world of competition came when she won the South Texas State Fair championship for sewing in 1931. After graduating from High School, she had a short career as a recording artist. She was signed by Mercury Records and even had a hit with a song called "I Felt a Little Teardrop." Yet, it would be the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles that set Babe on the path to becoming a professional athlete.

At the age of 21, Babe Didrikson traveled to Los Angeles and came away with two gold medals (80 m hurdles and Javelin throw) and a silver medal for high jump. After the Olympic Games she competed in amateur Basketball, even starting her own team, Babe Didrikson's All-Americans but by 1935 all of her attention shifted to golf.

In 1938, she became the first woman to compete in a PGA event against men. It would be another sixty years before another female golfer attempted the same feat. At the tournament in Los Angeles, she met her future husband, George Zaharias. George was a professional wrestler who saw a great opportunity to promote his wife. Whereas the marriage was never a romantic one, the two, working together made her the most famous female golfer of her era and possibly all time.

Zaharias joined the LPGA in 1947 and won 17 consecutive titles, a record that still stands today for both men and women. During her competitive years, there were only three LPGA Major Championships, the Western Open which she won four times, the Titleholders Cup, three victories and the U.S. Women's Open, which she also won three times. The associated press named her Female Athlete of the Year five times.

It seemed like nothing would stop Zaharias until she was struck with colon cancer in 1953. While fighting the illness, she continued to golf both against women and men on the PGA tour. Yet, on September 27, 1956, Babe succumb to her illness with Betty Dodd, a fellow LPGA tour player and her reported partner, by her side.

Since her death, she has been named Woman Athlete of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by the Associated Press. *Sports Illustrated* named her second on its list of the Greatest Female Athletes of all time and she is the highest ranked woman on ESPN's list of the greatest athletes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, at #10. While her career may have been short lived, she will always be remembered for the path that she paved for future female athletes by making it okay to put down the sewing machine and achieve athletic excellence.

Number 1 – Billie Jean King

She may not have as many titles as Martina Navratilova nor was she as versatile an athlete as Babe Didrikson but there is no doubt that when it comes down to who has done the most to open doors for not only lesbian athletes but all female athletes, Billie Jean King stands alone. Her accomplishments on the tennis court are outstanding, but her charitable work off it is just as impressive.

Billie Jean Moffitt was born in Long Beach, CA on November 22, 1943. She grew up playing football in her front yard with older brother, Randy who went on to be a pitcher in MLB for 12 years. She knew that she was interested in sports but it was not until she picked up her first racquet and began hitting on the public courts in Long Beach, that



Billie chose to focus all of her attention on tennis. At the age of 15, she was competing in her first Grand Slam at the 1959 U.S. Championships.

To list all of the titles in which Billie Jean King has compiled during her impressive 24 year career would take more words than allotted for this article but it is important to note that she was ranked number 1 in the world for six years. Her career record is 695 wins to only 155 losses in singles and 87 wins and 37 losses in doubles. In total, singles and doubles Grand Slam titles, Billie Jean King amassed 41 championships.



Despite all the titles, the moment in Billie's professional career that most people instantly remember is the 1973 "Battle of the Sexes" where she took on and beat male player and former champion, Bobby Riggs, in front of a crowd of 30,500 at the Houston Astrodome. She championed the cause of equal pay for female players and began the WTA in 1973, which was the first women's players union. A year later she started the Women's Sports Foundation and in 1974, along with her husband Lawrence King whom she married in 1965 and divorced in 1987, introduced World Team Tennis, a team format in which both recreation and a professional league continue today.

In regards to the LGBT community, King's forced outing in 1981 made her the most prominent athlete to come out. Her long time partner, Marilyn Barnett sued King for palimony and it cost Billie almost every dime she had ever earned playing tennis as well as all of her endorsement deals. Yet, she rose above it as she always has and used the situation as a chance to finally embrace who she was. After retiring in 1983, King went on to serve as coach for United States Fed Cup Team.

To this day, King, along with her partner, former WTA player, Ilana Kloss, work hard to champion equality in sports. The stadium at the site of the U.S. Open in Flushing, New York was named for her in 2006 and on August 19, 2009, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Obama.

Billie Jean King is an American icon whose determination and ability made her royalty on the court and whose heart and passion have made her a saint off of it.

Joey Seymour can be contact by visiting his website at [www.joeyseymour.com](http://www.joeyseymour.com)

## Top Ten Lesbian Athletes of All Time – Rap Up

Now comes the time when the debate occurs, as it does with every top 10 list. Yet, what cannot be disputed is the impact that these women had on their individual sport(s) as well as women's sports in general and the LGBT community. Maybe Martina, Sheryl, or Babe should have been number one, but the fun in analyzing these lists comes from the personal connection one has to the athlete. You may have been sitting in your living room as a child watching Billie Jean King take on Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes" match or remember vividly when Jana Novotna broke down and began to cry on the shoulder of the Duchess of Kent after her 1993 Wimbledon loss. You may have watch in awe with the rest of the world as Diana Nyad swam alone in open waters from the Bahamas to Florida in 1979 or have been a season ticket holder for the Houston Comets while Sheryl Swoopes was dominating the WNBA. It is these memories that make sports so wonderful; they capture our imaginations and our hearts. These amazing athletes have in some way played a pivotal role in your life, whether you are aware of it or are just realizing it now.

This list was a pleasure to work on and at times I argued with myself regarding who should end up where, however, if you have been inspired by their stories and the barriers in which they broke down, then it does not matter who was number one or number ten.

Joey Seymour can be contacted by visiting his website, [www.joeyseymour.com](http://www.joeyseymour.com).

