



16 Babe Ruth If any man is the embodiment of his sport, it's the Babe. A giant bear of a man, Ruth was a legendary right-fielder for the NY Yankees, decent pitcher, and, most vitally, colossal bat: his record of 714 homers stood nearly 40 years. His personality was equally enormous, taking in all the rabble-raising, drinking, sex and gambling he could manage. Which was a lot.



15 Sugar Ray Robinson A true Bronx hero from the era before Ali, the first Sugar Ray was an even better boxer. Robinson's amalgam of stamina, speed and savvy kept him at the top of the welterweight and middleweight divisions throughout the 1940s and '50s. Also known for his nightclubbing ways and cool cars, he was a post-war tonic for the depressed US.



14 Jack Nicklaus Before Tiger, there was Jack. The American won 18 Majors and was runner-up 19 times. Nicklaus owned golf, which wasn't easy to do in the era of Arnold Palmer and Gary Player. Many say it's a measure of Nicklaus' greatness that he overcame such worthy foes, although to be fair to Woods, he's so good it's quite possible no contemporary is worthy.



13 Emil Zatopek The acme of the modern distance runner was Zatopek, whose popularity was such that entire crowds would chant his name. His grimacing, head-rolling running style became famous, never more so than the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, where he topped off the 5000m and 10,000m golds with his first marathon a couple of days later – and won.



12 Ayrton Senna The shocking death of Senna at San Marino in 1994 brought to an abrupt halt a career of huge success and controversy. Such was the Brazilian's class and will to win, he often made his nearest rival, multiple world champion Alain Prost, look a trundler. He was as much renowned for his scorching fast laps and mastery of the wet, as his charisma.



11 Michael Phelps Phelps owns 14 Olympic gold medals, more than any Olympian, and after London, may have more golds than fingers and toes. Like any true champion, Phelps doesn't just win, but wins when it looks impossible. As evidence, we submit his miracle display in the 100m fly in Beijing, when he came from nowhere to win by a coat of nail polish.



10 Lance Armstrong There's a bell curve at work in sport. If you're kinda good, then few will waste their breath arguing about your status. But if you're an absolute legend, then look out: you are going to split the sporting community in half like a coconut. That's the case of the Texan, who turned the Tour de France into the Tour de Lance with seven straight wins from 1999-2005.



9 Carl Lewis Lewis epitomised the happy, brash attitude of the modern pro era of athletics in the 1980s. His defining time was the '84 Olympics, where he won everything he entered: 100m, 200m, relay and long jump – the first to do it since his hero Jesse Owens. The long jump was seen as his bonus event, but his '84 indoor world record still stands.



8 Roger Federer After this year's Wimbledon, the world was near unanimous that Federer was the best tennis player ever. That he's the best we've seen in the television era is beyond doubt. Take the Sampras serve, the Agassi groundstrokes and the craft of a McEnroe and you start to build yourself a Fed Express. We still rate Laver a racquet's string ahead of him.



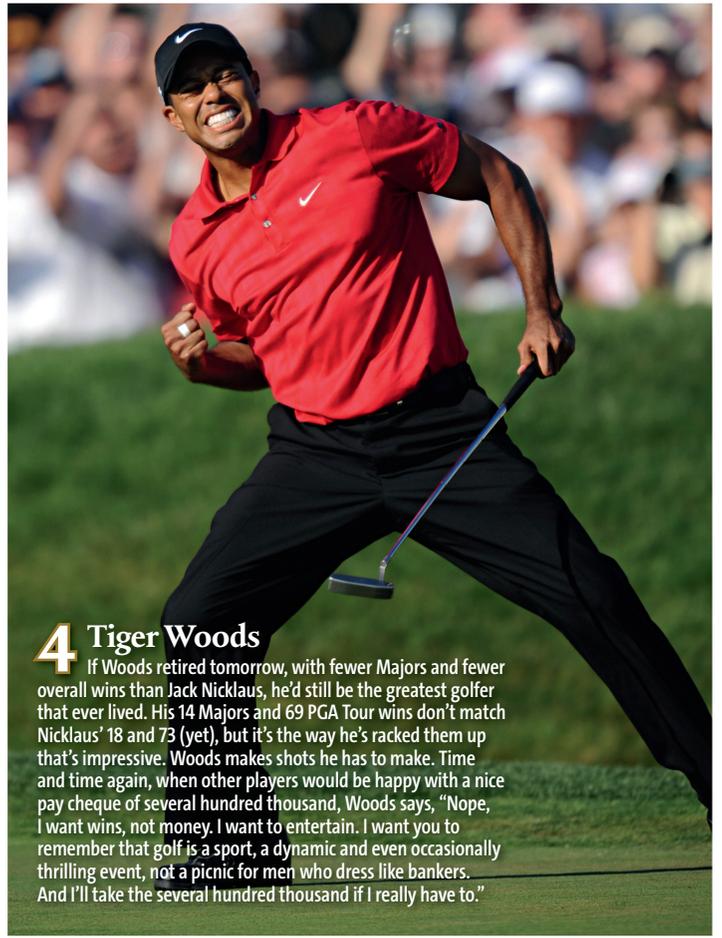
7 Pele It's difficult to grasp the scope of Pele's achievements. Years of sitting on committees and starring in Viagra ads have partly obscured the passionate Brazilian, who won the World Cup three times. Fair enough, there are the medals. But those who were there remember the breathtaking style and intelligence of his play.



6 Rod Laver Whiplash placements on the run; half-volleys transformed on the instant into dying drop shots; beaten but admiring opponents... Roger Federer? No, Laver, the first true artist of the court. His career is simply amazing: he won the grand slam twice – seven years apart and was world No.1 for most of the 1960s, winning at will on every surface available.



5 Diego Maradona Maradona played football out of a dream. His first goal against England at the 1986 World Cup is still rated the greatest ever and is the perfect example of his skills: twisting and turning seasoned internationals with barely a hint of effort, accelerating away and sliding the ball perfectly into the net. Easy. Except it's impossible.



4 Tiger Woods If Woods retired tomorrow, with fewer Majors and fewer overall wins than Jack Nicklaus, he'd still be the greatest golfer that ever lived. His 14 Majors and 69 PGA Tour wins don't match Nicklaus' 18 and 73 (yet), but it's the way he's racked them up that's impressive. Woods makes shots he has to make. Time and time again, when other players would be happy with a nice pay cheque of several hundred thousand, Woods says, "Nope, I want wins, not money. I want to entertain. I want you to remember that golf is a sport, a dynamic and even occasionally thrilling event, not a picnic for men who dress like bankers. And I'll take the several hundred thousand if I really have to."

RUTH, SAMPRAS, SCHUMACHER, SENNA, DI STEFANO, THORPE, WOODS, ZATOPEK; PHIL HILLIARD (PHELPS, WARNE), DARRELL TINDALE (DOOHAN)