The Alpha team had a lot of fun putting this list together. But we added a bit of science in there, too. Considering the merits of every sports star in the history of the world gets more daunting the more you think about it, so we had to set some rules.* To make this uber-list, you couldn’t simply be great; you had to be even better than that. A star’s “score” is affected by how dominant they were, over how long. How many medals they won, and how big the sport is globally. There are “softer” categories, such as charisma, and how much impact they had on their sport (thank you, Ivan Lendl, and goodnight). The brightest and best on this list are known and loved by people who don’t even follow sport that much. By default, we picked no one in action before 1900: if anyone wants to suggest a couple of ancient Greek wrestlers, go ahead, but properly organised sport on a wide scale is a modern luxury. The other rule we set was “no animals, no pastimes”, so don’t go writing in about Phar Lap, or Phil “The Power” Taylor. But, please, do tell us where we got it wrong. Just remember those rules…

*For full criteria details visit www.alphamagazine.com.au

The quality of the greats is often noticed more when they’re gone. When league’s greatest halfback quit in 2007, the teams he played for (Newcastle, NSW and Australia) went backwards. Even when Johnathan Thurston arrived, you scratched your head thinking, “He’ll have to do this for a decade to come close to Joey”. Johns combined brute strength with creativity with ball in hand or on boot.

Heather McKay
In the history of female squash, there’s McKay, daylight, more daylight, and then some other girls. The Aussie lost a match in 1960; in ’62, she lost another. Aside from that – from ’62 until her retirement in ’81 – she never lost again. With a record that unbelievable, it seems pointless to list the number of top tournaments she won, but it was a lot. She once won a final without dropping a single point.

Brian Lara
Do you understand what it means to make 400 in a Test match? Have you ever sat down and thought, “Holy crap, this bloke raised his bat eight times”? And what about the 10 times he raised it in his first-class record knock of 501no for Warwickshire. But the West Indian is one of the greats of any sport in any era because watching him play was like drinking Bolly on a beach.

Ted Whitten
"Mr Football" was captain of the AFL Team of the Century, but we don’t have space to list the Footscray man’s full CV here. Let’s just say no footy player in any era was as talented in every facet of our multi-skilled national game. If you’re American and you’re reading this, imagine a quarterback who was also a great first baseman and basketball point guard. Now you’re getting close.