46. Alpha

Leigh Matthews
In raw statistics, the West Indian all-rounder’s tally of 8032 runs and 235 wickets has been comfortably bettered by South African Jacques Kallis (10,277 and 258), yet stats don’t come close to describing Sobers’ dashing batting and versatile bowling. Just how exactly do you quantify having your breath taken away by brilliance?

Haile Gebreselassie
For a bloke with asthma, the smiling Ethiopian did just fine. Even during the past two decades of African dominance of distance running, Gebreselassie stands out. His massive medal haul includes two Olympic 10,000m golds. Sensing a physical decline, he took up the marathon – and broke the world record, twice, making it 26 world records for his career.

Nadia Comaneci
Was it not the Violent Femmes who said “10, 10, 10 for everything, everything, everything”? There was nothing violent about Romanian super gymnast Comaneci, whose three gold medals and unprecedented string of perfect 10s made her the darling of the ‘76 Montreal Olympics at 14, and still the only gymnast most of us can name.

Bobby Jones
The one man who owns the actual and only record for golf’s calendar grand slam. As he competed in his slam-completing 1930 US Amateur, it’s said every American over 30 was either glued to a radio set, or one of the 20,000 people following him around the course. He won 13 Majors, retired at 28, and was instrumental in developing the US Masters.

Valentino Rossi
Be it winning a championship in every class, claiming back-to-back titles with different manufacturers or amassing 100 grand prix victories for seven world championships, no other rider in modern racing has achieved so much. Whether Rossi is remembered for his stats or his comic post-victory antics, no one, not even his greatest rivals, can deny his magic.

Marina Navratilova
The original Martina was once made to drive from Sydney to Melbourne by an airline that wouldn’t let her take her pooch on board. This incident does not in any way detract from the winningsest record in male or female tennis history, which includes 18 singles slams and 31 in doubles and mixed. As Jim Courier would say, “Uh, that is absurd.”

Jerry Rice
If Jordan is “the greatest who will ever be”, Rice is similarly unlikely to be bettered as gridiron’s premier wide receiver. At one stage his nickname was “World” because there was no ball in the world he couldn’t catch. The San Francisco 49er finished with 1549 receptions, 22,895 receiving yards and 197 touchdown receptions, all records and by a very long way

Kelly Slater
Juggling the multi-multi world champ by statistics is very unsurfing. What is very surfing, is the way Slater’s style took in everything from skater tricks to big air and his influence on today’s World Tour is massive.

Mike Tyson
For three or four years, until life outside boxing conspired to pull him under, Tyson was the most frightening athlete on the planet. Although not a big heavyweight, he was intimidating and bull strong, and had skill and speed opponents simply couldn’t tolerate. When it all came together he was possibly the best heavyweight in history, but it couldn’t last.