

The GREATEST RUNNER

1960s and earlier

W

hen we first decided to

name the Greatest Runner of All Time—a designation that we took to calling, fondly, “GROAT”—we knew it would be tough. And it was. Over many long and contentious meetings, *Runner’s World* editors huddled together to discuss, debate, and dissect. We shared lists, took nominations, compared notes, and made our cases. We may have argued.

In the end, we decided it simply could not be done. The idea of selecting one greatest runner ever was absurd. Impossible.

We did it anyway.

On these two pages, you’ll see how. First, to impose some sort of order, we grouped our 32 finalists by their “era of dominance”—i.e., the time period during which they accomplished most of their athletic feats. We also used a deliberately broad definition of “greatness.” Beyond objective data such as world records and medal counts, we wanted to take the full measure of each runner’s success—considering, for instance, to what extent he or she has inspired others.

(And yes, some of these runners have been dogged by whispers of drug use. For the purposes of this exercise, we’ll set such rumors aside.)

No doubt, plenty of you will find something to disagree with. That’s fine. In fact, it’s more than fine—go online and tell us what you think, at runnersworld.com/groat. Meantime: Let the games begin...

Photographs left page, 1st column: Alamy (Rhodes, Nurmi, Clarke, Zátopek, Virén, Slaney); Getty (Bannister, Owens, Coe); AP (Elliot, Prefontaine, Rodgers, Shorter, Switzer, Waitz); Corbis (Bikila); 2nd column: Alamy (Owens); Getty (Zátopek, Pre, Waitz); right page, 1st column: Alamy (Zátopek); Corbis (headshot Zátopek); Getty (Gebrselassie); 2nd column: AP (El Guerrouj); Getty (Gebrselassie); Craig Cameron Olsen (Jurek); Alamy (Bekele); 3rd column: AP (El Guerrouj, Kourous); Alamy (Lewis, Moses, Powell); Getty (Samuelson, Cram, Johnson, Gebrselassie, Radcliffe, Ndereba, Farah, Bolt, Bekele); Craig Cameron Olsen (Jurek); Newscom (Mutai)



Leonidas of Rhodes *Ancient Greece*; won three running events—one of them in bronze armor and shield, all of them nude—in four consecutive Olympiads



Roger Bannister *Great Britain*; first man to run under four minutes for the mile, in 1954



Jesse Owens *U.S.*; took four golds at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, in 100 meters (m), 200 m, long jump, and 4 x 100 m relay



Paavo Nurmi *Finland*; set 22 world records from 1500 m to 20-K; won nine golds and three silvers in 12 Olympic events



Ron Clarke *Australia*; 17 world records; first man to break 28:00 for 10,000 m; nearly died during the 10,000 at the 1968 Olympics, then raced the 5000 m days later



Emil Zátopek *Czechoslovakia*; first to break 29:00 for 10-K; at 1952 Olympics, won the 5000 m, 10,000 m, and the marathon, his first, which he entered last-minute



Herb Elliott *Australia*; in August 1958, smashed world record for mile and for 1500 m; ran sub-4:00 miles 17 times; unbeaten at 1500 m and mile from 1958 to 1961



Abebe Bikila *Ethiopia*; first to ever win two Olympic Marathons—in 1960, which he famously won barefoot, and 1964

Bannister

Historic barrier-breaking trumps nude sprinting.

Owens

Yes, he won fewer medals, but he also publicly humiliated Hitler.

Zátopek

The killer competitor was gracious, too, later giving Clarke his 10,000 m gold.

Elliott

Bikila’s barefoot triumph makes for a compelling story, but Elliott runs circles around him.



Owens

He had barriers to break before he even got to the track.



Zátopek

That marathon he entered at the last minute? He set an Olympic record in it.

1970s



Sebastian Coe *Great Britain*; two Olympic golds at 1500 m, two silvers at 800 m; set 12 world records, three of which were in one 42-day span in 1979



Kathrine Switzer *U.S.*; first woman to enter and run Boston; won 1974 NYC Marathon; named Female Runner of the Decade by *Runner’s World*



Lasse Virén *Finland*; four Olympic golds in 1972 and ’76, taking the 5000 m and 10,000 m both times; in 1972’s 10,000 m final, fell in the 12th lap and still won



Steve Prefontaine *U.S.*; once held eight U.S. records from 2000 m to 10,000 m; known for his aggressive, front-running racing style; died tragically at age 24



Bill Rodgers *U.S.*; from 1975 to 1980, won NYC and Boston marathons four times each; ran 28 marathons under 2:15; in 1978, won 27 of 30 races he ran



Frank Shorter *U.S.*; won gold in 1972 Olympic Marathon, silver in ’76; U.S. cross-country champ, 1970–1973; credited with sparking ’70s running boom



Mary Decker Slaney *U.S.*; 36 U.S. records; in 1974, as a young teen, held three world records; set five world records, from the mile to 10,000 m, in 1982 alone



Grete Waitz *Norway*; among her numerous records and titles, from 1978 to 1988 she won nine NYC Marathons, setting the world record there in 1978, 1979, and 1980

Coe

As fond as we are of Switzer, Coe’s dozen world records just cannot be ignored.

Pre

Because when was the last time you saw a Lasse Virén poster on some kid’s bedroom wall?

Shorter

A photo finish, but Shorter galvanized a generation of runners with that gold in Munich.

Waitz

Respect to Slaney, but we’re afraid this one isn’t even close.



Pre

The outspoken Oregonian left a legacy of quotes that inspire to this day.




Waitz

Shorter is amazing. But Waitz’s longevity (nine NYC titles!) puts her over the top.

of ALL TIME TOURNAMENT




From his humble roots to his famously awful form to his brutal training methods, the man is grit personified.



ZÁTOPEK
He had Pre's drive but not his recklessness.

VS



GEB
He broke his own marathon WR—at age 35.

ZÁTOPEK

At one point he reportedly trained with his wife on his back. His wife!

GEB

A long-running master in three mediums. And who can resist that smile?

FINAL FOUR

PRE

If you still need convincing, see our feature on page 80.

BEKELE

Jurek is tough, but Bekele was hardened in the crucible of elite track.

HONORABLE MENTION

They didn't make our initial cut, but these runners are still undeniably great

Tirunesh Dibaba	Pheidippides
Ryan Hall	Jim Ryun
Dean Karnazes	Alberto Salazar
Bernard Lagat	Paul Tergat
Billy Mills	Sammy Wanjiru



El Guerrouj

Running long and slow can get you far. But only so far.



Geb

We love you, Joanie. But in this matchup, Geb's depth and breadth win out.



Jurek

He's simply run stronger for longer—albeit in a different arena.



Bekele

Both great artists, but Bekele mastered two mediums to Bolt's one.

1980–2000

Hicham El Guerrouj *Morocco*; golds include two Olympic, four World Champs, and three World Indoor Champs; world records at 1500 m, mile, and 2000 m



El Guerrouj

Lewis amassed a heap of medals, but many were for jumping, not running.

Carl Lewis *U.S.*; in 1984, matched Jesse Owens's mark of four golds in a single Olympics; won gold at 1988, 1992, and 1996 Olympics; eight-time world champion



Kouros

Never heard of the guy? We know. That makes him even cooler.

Yiannis Kouros *Greece*; owns every men's road world record from 100 to 1,000 miles and every road and track record from 12 hours to 6 days



Edwin Moses *U.S.*; 400 m hurdler extraordinaire; won gold at 1976 and 1984 Olympics, bronze in '88; broke world record four times; won 122 races in a row



Joan Benoit Samuelson *U.S.*; won inaugural Women's Olympic Marathon, in 1984; her second Boston win, in 1983, was a world record by two minutes



Samuelson

She inspired so many women to run—and she's still at it, as a master.

Steve Cram *Great Britain*; mile world record, 1985–1993; PRs at 1500 m, 1 mile, and 2000 m remain U.K. records; set three world records in a 19-day span in 1985



Geb

Do we have a bias toward distance runners? Yes, we do.

Michael Johnson *U.S.*; four Olympic golds and nine World Champs golds, all in 200 m, 400 m, or 4 x 400 m relay; broke 44 seconds for 400 m 22 times



Haile Gebrselassie *Ethiopia*; four-time Berlin Marathon winner; prodigious at distances from 1500 m to marathon, including cross-country; 27 world records



2000s

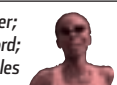
Paula Radcliffe *Great Britain*; marathon world record holder; ex world champ in marathon, half-marathon, and XC; won three London and three New York marathons



Radcliffe

Another close race between two fierce competitors. This one goes to the world record holder.

Catherine Ndereba *Kenya*; four-time Boston winner; two Olympic silvers; ex-holder of marathon world record; in 1999, ran world bests at 5-K, 12-K, 15-K, and 10 miles



Scott Jurek *U.S.*; winner of Hardrock 100, Badwater Ultramarathon, Spartathlon, and Western States 100-Mile—seven years in a row; U.S. 24-hour record



Jurek

He's indefatigable. And fueled by plants!

Asafa Powell *Jamaica*; former 100 m world record holder; has run sub-10 seconds for 100 m a record 88 times



Mo Farah *Great Britain*; current Olympic champ in 5000 m and 10,000 m; holds slew of British and European records both indoor and outdoor



Bolt

Sorry, Mo—Usain is simply more dominant. Plus, his signature pose is cooler than yours.

Usain Bolt *Jamaica*; first man to earn six Olympic golds in sprinting, in 2008 and 2012, at 100 m, 200 m, and 4 x 100 m relay; world record holder in all three



Kenenisa Bekele *Ethiopia*; current world and Olympic record holder at 5000 m and 10,000 m; 11-time World XC champ; unbeaten at 10,000 m from 2003–2011



Bekele

In a few years Mutai may overtake him. For now, Bekele wins out.

Geoffrey Mutai *Kenya*; in 2011 ran fastest marathon ever at Boston, a 2:03:02; NYC Marathon course record holder; sub-60-minute half-marathoner



For more on these entries and to share your own opinions, go to runnersworld.com/groat.