Why tennis players are the greatest athletes

The author says when you compare all-around skills, tennis players outshine all others

THE GREATEST ATHLETES IN the world will descend on Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics: graceful sprinters such as Michael Johnson and Gwen Torrence, lithe gymnasts such as Dominique Moceanu, versatile decathletes such as Dan O'Brien, electrifying hoopsters such as Scottie Pippen and Shaquille O'Neal.

And, oh yeah, tennis players such as Pete Sampras, Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi.

It's a given that the stars of the tennis circuit will take a back seat to other Olympians this July and August. That's fine, but I've never understood why tennis players never get mentioned when fans and the media compare the skills and attributes of athletes. Superlatives flow when talk centers on great athletes such as basketball star Michael Jordan or baseball's Ken Griffey Jr., but when was the last time you heard anyone invoke the name of Michael Chang or Jana Novotna during such debates?

That's too bad, because when you measure the all-around skills of athletes in every sport, tennis players not only hold their own, they outshine even those athletes who will hold gold medals this summer. Tennis players truly are the world's greatest athletes.

What defines a great athlete? First, he or she needs to be skilled, possessing high levels of coordination, balance, finesse and instinct. Second, he or she needs to be mentally tough. Third, he or she should be in excellent physical condition. An athlete plays a sport that demands only one or two of these attributes, then I don't consider him or her among the elites.

This eliminates athletes in mostly "skill" sports such as golf or baseball, where eye-hand coordination is at a premium, but so are extra-large outfits. Superior "physical" athletes such as runners, cyclists and swimmers may impress with speed and stamina, but only because they repeat the same movement over and over. It's impossible to categorically rate football players because athletic talent swings from high for certain positions—cornerback, for example—to low for others, such as offensive linemen.

Gymnasts and figure skaters are fabulous athletes, but they're able to choreograph their own movements, never encountering an opponent trying to upset their routine.

Tennis and basketball players, however, have it all: speed and strength, eye-hand coordination and stop-and-start quickness, mental toughness and physical stamina. Yet where would you find people who would mention Andre Agassi in the same breath as Magic Johnson? Try the NBA Los Angeles Lakers locker room.

"People just don't understand. When a person can run, stop, jump—when you have to be so coordinated to succeed in your sport—that's an athletic person. Agassi, Sampras—they're the most athletic there is. Chang—my God, Chang's incredible, doing the things he does."

The speaker: Eddie Jones, Johnson's young teammate. The team's assistant coach, former Lakers star Kurt Rambis, agrees with Jones that tennis players rate high as athletes among other great athletes. "Unfortunately," says Rambis, "when people think about tennis players, a picture of John McEnroe taking off his shirt to reveal the body of a flaccid 12-year-old springs to mind."

Neither Jones nor Rambis wanted

BY DAVID HIGDON, Senior Writer
Ed.D., director of research and education at the Lexington Clinic Sports Medicine Center in Kentucky, "We tested Chang when he was 16, and he had everything, except height, that you look for in an athlete—strength, power, quickness, speed. He was in the above-average category across the board."

John Lucas, the former NBA star who also played World TeamTennis, says Chang could have been "an unbelievable defensive guard in basketball." Asked to rate the top five athletes he ever saw, coached or competed against, he rattles off Jordan, David Thompson, Dennis Rodman, McEnroe and Jimmy Connors. "They all are absolutely in the same class," he says.

Jack Groppel, Ph.D., co-founder of LGE Sport Science in Florida and an Instruction Editor for TENNIS, refers to tennis as "the sport of emergencies." It's an individual sport, a "thinking man's game," says Chang.

Sampras believes TV enhances the athleticism of basketball while it does the opposite for tennis. "Basketball looks more glamorous. Guys are jumping and slamming," he says. "In tennis, you can't appreciate how fast the ball is going, how quick the players are. Tennis players are underrated athletes."

Who does Sampras pick as the best athletes among tennis players? Chang, Stefan Edberg, Goran Ivanisevic, Cedric Pioline. You can bet that they would lavish similar praise on Sampras, perhaps the game's most gifted athlete since McEnroe.

Ask around the Corel WTA Tour and the names most often tossed out as athletic players are Graf, Jana Novotna and Gabriela Sabatini, who use Martina Navratilova as their barometer of greatness. "I'd like to think that athletes like Steffi and me, plus Sampras and Agassi, have put to rest forever the idea that tennis is a sport for sissies," says Navratilova.

As has been the case in Olympics past, few of these tennis players will get much airtime. It's unfortunate that during the greatest sports showcase, the greatest athletes will be relegated to late evening highlights.

Only a decathllete like Dan O'Brien (left) is put to the same athletic test that Andre Agassi endures over the course of five sets.