A title like “Track and Field’s All-Time Top Tens” needs some explaining. Top ten what? And how were they determined?

Since 1948, Track and Field News, the “Bible of the Sport”, has annually ranked the top ten athletes in each standard Olympic track and field event. They have become recognized as the definitive World Rankings. From the magazine itself: “The whole purpose of our World Rankings is to establish relative merit for the single season in question. The Rankings are not reflective of how the compilers feel athletes would finish in any kind of idealized competition. Ergo, the “best” athlete isn’t always number one.”

This book seeks to do the same—not in a season-by-season comparison, but to make an ordering of the all-time greats in each event by their career records. I want to use the same criteria that T&FN uses, but obviously I have certain problems since I am comparing athletes of different eras agains each other. Here are the criteria as described by T&FN, with the adjustments that I will make.

1. **Honors Won.** This means scoring high placings (with emphasis on actually winning) in major international competitions. It should be noted that the importance of a meet is relative to who competes in it, not how much stock an athlete might place in it. As important as major meets are, we should also note that no competition, not even the Olympics, is the be-all, end-all. We’re looking for people who maintain high standards over the whole year.

   I won’t change much here, except to substitute “whole career” for “whole year”. It’s true that legends are made at the Olympics. Nowadays, the major meets are the Olympics, the World Championships, and the Grand Prix Final along with a few others, but this was not always the case. The first few Olympic Games, along with the boycotted Games of 1980 and 1984, generally did not bring the world’s best together. Meets that have been considered “major” at one time or another include the World Cup, European Championships, Commonwealth Games, and the AAU and AAA championships.

2. **Win-Loss Record.** Simply put, an analysis of how athletes fared in head-to-head competition with their peers. But a win in a major competition might outweigh losses to the same person in a multiple number of minor ones.

   This both can and can’t be done in comparing athletes from different eras. For example, Jesse Owens never ran head-to-head against Carl Lewis. But it says “with their peers”; you can compare how each ran against their own competition. However, compiling career win-loss records would be tedious at best and often impossible. Since they are a great way to boil complex seasonal records down to a single number, I’ll substitute World Rankings for Win-Loss Record. Like Honors Won above, high rankings are important with emphasis on ranking #1. If two contemporaries are compared to each other, I may use a combination of World Rankings and Win-Loss Record where possible. Win streaks and undefeated seasons will also come under this heading.

3. **Sequence of Marks.** More concisely, performances. How fast you ran or how high or how far you jumped or how far you threw something. It’s very easy for the casual observer to place the most consideration on the last factor, when it should in fact be the opposite. We reward people who have proven themselves against other people, not against themselves.
Here’s the biggest problem when comparing athletes from different eras. The best marks of 100 years ago are not notable today to say the least. Unless I came up with something else, all the athletes in this book would come from the last 25 years. It is possible, though, to find mark-related accomplishments that can be considered in the context of their time—world records. I will consider the number of records that an athlete set, along with the length of time the record(s) stood and how much they improved on the existing record.

For most of the history of the sport, two lists of records were kept; one for metric distances and one for yards. I combined them into one list in each event area. In the sprints and horizontal jumps, altitude-aided marks were rejected. Furthermore, unratified but statistically valid marks (as determined by the Association of Track and Field Statisticians) were added to the list. The final result was something so unofficial that they only can be called World Bests.

Other assorted issues to deal with:

**Indoor competition.** *T&FN* says that for its World Rankings, it “plays only a small role, and is not considered at all in shorter running events, where small tracks add a whole new variable to the equation”. My rankings agree completely.

**Road competition.** Not considered in any way except for the marathon.

**Walking events.** They’re not in this book. I could be accused of denigrating the walks as an exercise in ridiculousness. The truth is that there’s little historical information available; the walks are totally ignored by the ATFS in their *Performances Through the Years* series.

**Drugs/Doping.** As the years have gone by, few other issues have given me more problems than this one. It is obvious that this book is riddled with cheaters, although we may never know exactly which ones. Suspicion runs so deep that virtually all highly successful athletes of the last 25 years have been accused of drug use at one time or another. No matter how hard it is for me to avoid it, this is not the place for a rant against the sport’s leadership and how they allowed this to happen.

There is strong circumstantial evidence that drug use has dropped off (at least in certain events). Two near-simultaneous events brought this about: Ben Johnson’s positive test at the 1988 Olympics, and the implosion of eastern Europe’s state-sponsored sports programs. From about 1989 to the present, the performance levels of world-class throwers and female middle-distance runners have been far lower than those throughout the 1980s. It can be inferred that since these are the events that are most affected by testosterone-like drugs, their use is down. The picture is not so rosy all over, though. In 1989 a short piece in *Track and Field News* warned about the new drug EPO and its effects on endurance. Throughout the 1990s, performances in distance races exploded.

So what to do? Some cheaters do get caught and suspended. Just one has admitted to a career of drug use, though; the Canadian government investigated Johnson in the wake of his positive test, and he told his story on the witness stand. Although it was derided as a circus at the time, Canada’s Dubin Inquiry (named after the judge who presided over it) is still the only instance of a governmental agency investigating its own athletes for a history of drug use. Apparently the Canadians’ sense of honor and fair play superceded any worry that other athletes or even an entire system would be exposed. No other country can claim to have such high morals.

So Ben Johnson is totally wiped out from these pages; it’s as if he never existed. I cannot do the same with others, though. If an athlete tested positive and served a suspension, it will be noted and the reader is left to pass judgement as he wishes. With rare exceptions, rumours will be ignored. Even if it’s naïve, I’ll assume innocence unless guilt was proven.
Professionalism. For most of the history of the sport money was the big sin, not drugs. Nowadays we see things differently. While I’m not here to document or explain the origins and development of the amateur system, a little background is helpful.

Running, jumping and throwing have been around forever, but they became the sport we know in the mid-19th century at elite British and American colleges. Some of those who competed wished to continue after their school days were over, and the gentleman’s sports clubs were born. The amateur code was a response to multiple issues; foremost were a need to avoid the corrupting influences of wagering and for the upper classes to compete while not appearing plebean.

Early amateurs did not attempt to separate their sport from money, though. They were not above competing against professionals, and cups, belts, and other prizes awarded to amateur champions were often listed by their value. In addition, the gate receipts from meets went into the club’s coffers, so a single top-class athlete that drew large crowds could fund lavish comforts for his club-mates (such as with Lon Myers and the Manhattan A.C.).

Whatever the origins, as soon as control of amateur sports went to any national level the amateur code was used as a political tool. Since there never was any time that money was completely separate from track and field, everyone was guilty but only some were prosecuted—the definition of fascism.

The rankings in this book are based solely on athletic accomplishments, so professional marks are included provided the athlete competed under rules reasonably similar to those we accept today. Most of the time, though, the pros could only compete against each other and that often meant solo efforts against the clock or measuring tape. And as it was said above, “we reward people who have proven themselves against other people”, so they still receive some penalty.

World Rankings. Track and Field News’ first world rankings covered the 1947 season. Since these all-time rankings include athletes from before that time, we have a problem. I did a LOT of research and came up with a yearly top three for each event, and then filled in the rest of the top ten rankings by the world list of best marks. It’s an imperfect system to be sure, but the best that I could do without spending years globe-hopping to obscure libraries while learning to read a dozen or more languages. For years in which there was little international competition, such as during the World Wars, I picked just the #1 athlete in each event and used the world list to fill out a top five.

Starting Points. The sports of running, jumping and throwing are as old as the human race. The modern sport of track and field as we now recognize it is far younger than that, though, as it became somewhat standardized in the mid- to late-19th century. I used 1880 as the beginning of my history of the sport as it was the year of the Amateur Athletic Association’s formation. Our sport’s history is tied to amateurism, and the formation of the AAA solidly cemented the amateur movement. Many of the events in this book were not commonly contested in 1880, though, so each of them will have their own starting point as described in the individual chapters.