

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / PE Greatest Hits: Derek and Ryan Debate the Most Impressive Sports Statistic of All Time

Hey everyone, it's Ariel Hohwani and I'm Chuck Mendenhall and I'm Pete Z. Carroll and together we are 3Pac. Join us on the brand new Spotify Live app immediately after all of the biggest fights in combat sports and also during the weigh-ins because that's when the real drama happens. So what are you waiting for? Follow the Ring of MMA show right now on our exclusive Spotify podcast feed and come join the best community in MMA. Peace! We're out of here. Behind the festive decorated doors of the city, the most different scenes take place. While the one that has already been hacked off is the next one that slowly crosses the Christmas tree a little bit. And quite differently, you are already sleeping in the chair. What do these people think? The twinkling of Coca-Cola in their glasses. Behind every door there is a party and behind every fest a story. But everywhere there is Coca-Cola. Real Magic.

You heard it when we first aired the show and you want to listen again. Maybe you missed this week and you want to check it out or maybe you're looking at this feed for the very first time and you're trying to figure out, is this my kind of show? Well, I think this episode does a nice job of giving you a snapshot of what it is we try to do here on Plain English. We range widely across topics. Economics, technology, science, sports. We try to synthesize complicated ideas. We try to frame breaking news and big ideas in ways that you'll remember when the show is over. And we try to do it all relatively quickly. No BS, no filter, an espresso shot of news analysis. In today's episode, I talk with the ringer Ryan Rusello about the most impressive sports statistic of all time. This is of course a wildly subjective enterprise. And of course, that's the fun of it. So if you like sports and you're the sort of person who like me and so many of my friends loves debating sports statistics, I think you're really going to love this show. Happy holidays. And if you feel like giving this show a small gift, head to Spotify or Apple podcasts, wherever you get your podcasts, leave a five star rating, leave a review. If such a thing is possible, it goes a long way. Happy New Year and I'll see you in 2023.

Ryan Rusello, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for having me, man. Fire for this.

Me too. It is really awesome to meet you. I've been listening to you for years. When Bill Simmons, brief story actually before we get started, when Bill Simmons first called me to talk about doing a podcast with the ringer, he was like, so what kind of a pod do you want to do? How do you see the organization of each episode? I was like, well, of course, I would want it to be an interview podcast like you do, Bill. But honestly, the one thing that I'm sure I want to do is that Ryan Rusello has these cold opens that I love, that he would like keeps it in his voice and then opens up a bit for other perspectives. And I just love the way that you have just mastered the art of the cold open and I am doing my best week to week to emulate. So I just wanted to kick it off by embarrassing you on the record. I thought about giving you the compliment before we pressed record, but I think it's more appropriate for me to give it to you on the record.

Well, it probably took me about 17 years to nail it. So good luck.

I've been doing it for about 17 weeks. Yeah. I took me way too long, you know, because I treat now the open of the podcast like the open of a radio show. And I've said many times, which gets some pushback from writers and anchors, that the hardest thing to do is radio and 10 times harder than that is solo radio. So I had kind of jumped around

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little solo radio, not so much. And unless you're really consistently doing it every day for a couple of years, it's hard to figure out exactly what your voice is and how you want to close your monologues and all that kind of stuff. So now that you have a little bit more freedom and you can tweak things a little bit, I feel good about it now. So I appreciate you saying that, but it definitely it shouldn't take you as long. It took me way too long.

Well, I'm doing my best. It's good to have your guidance. So you, Ryan, you're here to help me complete a side project that I've been working on for the last few weeks, which is to figure out the most impressive sports statistic in American history. And just before we got on, I thought I should probably define impressive, both for you and for me and probably for the audience. I'm thinking of impressive as having two definitions or two components. Number one, the hardest to replicate sports statistic in US history. And number two, the most important, because some things are really hard to replicate, but like they're not actually that important. And so I'm trying to find like the intersection of difficult to replicate and really significant. So I built out this huge list of US sports accomplishments that surpass a totally arbitrary random threshold that I've made up. And that is my 50% test. That is, if the accomplishment is at least 50% greater than the next person in that relevant category, then congratulations, you are in the 50% club. And so I published this long list for the Atlantic of the 50% club members, includes Will Chamberlain, Nolan Ryan, Wayne Gretzky.

And I thought, what the hell, let's winnow these down and try to figure out the most impressive sports statistic in each sport. And then hopefully of all time. And who better to help me with that than Mr. Cole Dope and himself. So are you ready to do this?

Yeah, I'm ready. I can't wait to know what, you know, like I'm fired up to know what you're going to throw out there. And then because I put down a couple of my own where I was like, is this worthy of it? Is it mean too much to me? Because some of these historically, like I can't wait to get into it. Because some of them you just have to rule out as impossible. Like these things will not happen again. So it's almost like they're not worth talking about because they're just not approachable. But go ahead.

You're right. Some of these, as we're going to talk about, are they stand a test of time and others of them are punished by the test of time because there are such products of their era. Like we're going to talk about like Cy Young in a second. Cy Young has like a thousand complete games. It would take like a modern pitcher about 300 years to do that. And in a way that's, it's, it's incredible that he did it. But they're basically using pitchers like thoroughbred horses in the, you know, early 1900s. And so it's not no one's ever going to do that again. And it's partially because the sport was so different. So here's how we're going to do this. We're going to go sport by sport, football, basketball, baseball, individual. I am going to give you, Ryan, a list of nominees for the most impressive statistic and you're going to help me figure out the number one stat in each sport. So I thought, let's start with football, coming off the Super Bowl. Plus, I think it's probably the easiest category because there really are only two, I think, meaningful 50% club members. And those are Jerry Rice and Tom Brady. I tried to find more. I looked at sacks and receptions, career rushing stats. In all those categories, you've got a bunch of athletes

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that are clustered toward the top. Rice and Brady really stand out. So first, Jerry Rice, the 50% club stat is that he has 2,245 career receiving yards in the playoffs. That is 50% more than any other player. Probably my favorite Jerry Rice stat, receiving yards after 40, after turning 40 years old. There's only three players in NFL history that have caught a pass after turning 40. Brett Favre did it for negative two yards. Tom Brady did it for six yards. Jerry Rice has 2,509 yards after turning 40. Also holds a triple crown for receivers, for career numbers, incredible, obviously the greatest receiver of all time. Then he got Tom Brady, the GOAT, we can rush through this. The key 50% club stat is that basically if it's a Tom Brady playoff stat, it's in the 50% club, playoff wins, playoff touchdowns, Super Bowl wins, no other quarterback, has five, he has seven, biggest Super Bowl comeback of all time. It was 10 points. And then Tom Brady came back from 20 points down against the Falcons. So Jerry Rice, Tom Brady, how do you determine the number one statistic in NFL history? The playoff stuff is really unfair because you look at this accomplishment and you go, okay, this is insane. Like Brady played in 47 playoff games, which is more than 22 franchises have. So every single playoff number he's going to own, all the rice stuff I went through last night too. And you go, okay, is it a bit like, you know, Bernie Williams has all these postseason records that is completely different because the postseason in baseball has changed so many different times. So like congrats to Bernie Williams, you had a million more opportunities. So I looked up the rushing stuff, two man and, you know, Emmett Smith at 18,355 yards. And I thought, okay, well, the way the game is played, do we look at that as an unapproachable record? And it may be the case. I mean, Mark Ingram is the leading active guy at number 54 all time at 7,000, almost 8,000 yards. Emmett also beat Walter in like 36 more games. But there's still, that's not like outer space. It may be a different style of football. Running backs just aren't used to not getting the same number of carries, but it's, it's not impossible. So I wouldn't put it impossible. I think the Jerry Rice stuff is stupid. So I would actually probably lean Rice more than Brady, because if we just went some of the more traditional career statistics as great as Brady's are, Rice is still, I think what he's number one in reception yards at 22,895, he's 5,400 yards ahead of number two. And so sure, we pass a lot more and all this stuff, but the gap between Rice and the number two guy on some of these numbers that aren't just playoff influenced would, would have me give Rice the award here because Brady's regular season stuff as great as it is, isn't as dominant to the number two quarterback or won't be moving forward, even with his longevity as the playoff stuff is. Cause as great as the playoff numbers, I think you understand the point. It's like nobody else actually, like it's great. You're in those because you're great, but no one else has had the opportunity to accumulate those many numbers.

Yeah. His, his opportunities are also partly a product of the fact that he had arguably the best coach of all time. And so it's difficult to disentangle exactly how much responsibility there is there. Whereas with Jerry Rice, it's funny, I was prepared to debate you on this. I had Rice going in for the number one stat of all time in, in the NFL. I thought you were going to say Tom Brady, I do want to point this out. My favorite Tom Brady stat, and this came from a Boston sports radio host, Alex Barth. This is ridiculous. The NFL record for career completions is 67.8%. Tom Brady has made the conference championship 73.7%

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of the season since he's been the primary starter. So Brady makes the conference championship at a higher rate than any quarterback has ever completed passes.

That is stupid. That is, that is just insane. It's an amazing statistic. But I think at the end of the day, for most impressive individual stat, I think the gap that Jerry Rice has on career receptions, career yards, career touchdowns, and then all of the playoff stats on top of that, I think he probably is the statistical goat, even if he is the overall goat.

Yeah, it's just, it's a monumental gap every time you look at Rice and the next guy. The receptions is a little closer, but receiving touchdowns, he's at 197. Randy Moss is number two at 156. Tio, who had an amazing career, is at 153. I mean, we're talking about almost 50 more touchdowns than the guys behind him. And I don't, you know, that's like, there are gaps. I mean, it's kind of the Gretzky stuff that we're teeing up here. You start looking at the gap between the top guy and the number two. I went ahead with him. I mean, if we're going to do the Brady Conference Championship percentage thing though, too, and the weird thing that's happened with NFL history is that it's been re, because they rebranded and the merger and the Super Bowl, a lot of the guys before that don't get enough love. And for Otto Graham to make 10 straight championship games, 10 straight seasons, he made the championship game because they're not labeled the Super Bowls, you know, for a very obvious reason. He gets completely overlooked historically. And we just look at the forward pass back then and go like, what the hell is this? You know, it's kind of like the Bob Coosy stuff that happens to him. We're like, I get it. Bob Coosy would have a hard time staying in front of Kyrie Ory. But you know, he was, it was 1950 when he started. So lay off.

Yeah. All right, cool. We're moving Jerry right to the finals. We're going to come back to him in just a second. We're going to move on to basketball. So in this category, there were so many different statistics that I picked on. I'm sure you've got your own. I tried to narrow it down to a top four and that meant cutting some of my favorite players. So number one that I had to cut LeBron James, maybe my favorite player in the NBA, but I couldn't really find a meaningful statistic where he's in the 50% club and I didn't want to do this like complicated bespoke statistic where I'm like the most games with 27 and seven after turning 35 while Mercury's in retrograde, like you can do it if you find enough little things, but it's just too complicated.

Another last second elimination that's never going to win the category, but this is just a fun as hell statistic that I was really happy to have unearthed. Nikola Jokic, one MVP after being the 41st pick in the NBA draft. No other league MVP was ever drafted lower than 15th. So no league MVP has ever been drafted in the 20s, ever been drafted in the 30s. And Nikola Jokic very well might win consecutive MVPs as the 45th pick. I think those are great. But my top four for greatest all time, most impressive NBA statistics are the following three. Number one, Curry's three point dominance. Steph Curry, 22 career games with Ted and more three pointers. No other player in the NBA has more than five. Number two, Will Chamberlain, 100 point game is iconic. Kobe got pretty close with 81, but his most stand alone statistic is that Wilt scored 60 points on 32 separate occasions. And that is more than every other basketball player in NBA history combined, 60 points

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on 32 separate occasions. Number three, Bill Russell, eight straight championships, 1959 and 1966. Only three basketball teams, Minneapolis Lakers, Chicago Bulls, Los Angeles Lakers, only those three have ever won three consecutive championships. No one's won four. Bill Russell won eight straight. And finally, I don't know exactly how to fit this in in my 50% club, but Michael Jordan is 6-0 in the finals. And that's not, that might be 50% club membership and by some token, but there's a kind of perfection to that statistic that almost no other stat in sports history has. So I had to put 6-0 in my final four here. So my NBA final four again, Curry, Wilt, Bill Russell, Jordan, do you have others you want to throw into the category and what's your pick in this category?

No, I don't actually. I think you pretty much nailed that. I think the assist thing would be the one where people look at Stockton being 3,000 ahead of Jason Kidd, who's number two. Chris Paul, as great as his career's been, he's still 5,000 behind Stockton. So I do think that that's one that kind of jumps out. It's just nobody pays enough attention to it. Stockton also leads steals by about 600 on Jason Kidd, 700 on Michael Jordan. So he's at 3,200. So there's some Stockton numbers that are in there that are crazy. And again, it's longevity and playing every single game and being the primary ball handler, throwing it to the number two score of all time where the Malone Stockton stats are incredible because of what they were with each other.

So the Curry part of it, I'm the biggest Steph fan ever, but it still feels so new. And I'm not saying anything is necessary to surpass him. He's the best shooter I've ever seen. He's the best shooter in the history of the game. I don't really think it's even debatable. There could be some version of a guy who comes along that takes a million threes and maybe puts up something that's at least to scale. It sounds ridiculous to say it out loud, but it's still this part of the game is still so new. I don't know. I wouldn't rule that part of it out.

If the Russell Championship is eight straight, does that kind of cancel out Jordan's? I mean, that sounds blasphemous, right? I'm just throwing that back to you.

Yeah, no, this is something I didn't include Jordan in my original article. And I got screamed at left and right. Like I didn't include him precisely because of the Russell stat. Russell did lose in the finals, right? He lost to St. Louis. So he doesn't have a perfect record.

And so you could argue that the perfection of Jordan's is its own special category that might shine brighter than Russell's. But Jordan wasn't even in my original article. So in my original article, just going off of that, it basically comes down to do you like wilt individual statistics? Or do you like Russell's team statistics? And this gets back, Ryan, to what you were saying earlier about the NFL stats that some of these statistics are more dependent on opportunity outside of individual contribution, more dependent on opportunity than others. So it's really about whether you want to go here, I suppose, with with individual dominance or just out of control team dominance.

You also have to have an understanding of whether you want to go back to the history archives and watch some of these games and understand how different it was. Because I think it's fair to be deferential towards these previous eras, and that this is how the game was played. And these are the guys that played in it. And you just just a broad brush, wipe them all out because they're not as athletic as guys playing today. That's

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that's unfair. I always joke that I think Eddie House, if you played in the 50s, there'd be statues of Eddie House outside of the high school basketball. Like if you just time traveled Eddie House, you just wouldn't even know what to do with the guy. They also Jerry West has always pointed this out, he goes, you guys can carry the basketball today, because we had to stay on top of the basketball with the way we dribbled. There wasn't this gather stuff. I mean, we've invented a new way to travel on the some of these step back like gathers to the side on three point shots. So even though everybody's more athletic and all these different things, there's one thing that kind of stands out of the big numbers though, the rebounding numbers are ridiculous because the way they they bring the ball up and they shoot immediately. And guys weren't as good at shooting shot selection was not as strict. They just got out and ran, they got out ran and they put up shots all over the place. So you'll look back at some of these great NBA players and then you start looking at the shooting percentage, you go, what the hell happened here? Which is why Wilts almost 24,000 rebounds is number one. Look at some of the rebounding numbers these guys had for Wilts career average 23 a game, Bill Russell's number two at 21,000 plus. I mean, we're talking about, listen to these guys in a playoff game having 40 rebounds. So yes, they were awesome. And I want to be respectful, but I also want to point out that some of this rebounding stuff that you'll see is just never going to happen again. It just look at go back and look at the shot attempts by season. Will also was taken, I think 11 plus free throws a game on top of all of this. So when I look at some of the Wilts stuff, there's two that jump out. It's the hundred point game and it's averaging 50.4 points per game in a season over a full season that was this whole season. So yes, the game was different. Yes, they got more shots up. I think that impacts the rebounding stuff and you can tell what will today wouldn't get. Okay, fine. But you could still attempt to get a hundred points in a game today and only one guy got to 80% of it.

There's a great Brian Windhorst article in ESPN from earlier this year where he was essentially celebrating the historical absurdness of Chamberlain's 1961-1962 season. Let me just read you from that article, quote, Chamberlain averaged 50.4 points per game. That's the highest ever and no one is close. Michael Jordan is the only other player besides Chamberlain to average more than 37. Chamberlain averaged 39.5 shots per game, the highest ever and no one is close. No one else has averaged more than 30. Another mark to stand forever is his 48.5 minutes per game average. He was never substituted out that season. He only missed eight minutes of one game after he was ejected in the fourth quarter. He averaged 48 minutes because more than 48 minutes because he played seven overtime games. It's just ridiculous. To me, the only thing that keeps Chamberlain's 1962 season from sheer immortality is that his team didn't win the finals because, again, he lost to Russell. Again, we find these two statistical champions clashing against each other. Yes, it was 60 years ago, but still, I feel like as long as we're isolating not the greatest athletes of all time, not the greatest basketball players necessarily, but the most impressive sports statistic, it has to come down to either Chamberlain's 1961-62 season or Russell's eight straight championships.

Well, you're asking me what's harder to do, 11 championships in 13 seasons or 50 a game or 101 game. I would just go, if I had gone to my head, I'd just say pull the trigger. There's no right answer, and both answers also seem impossible to argue against or argue

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for in the face of facing one of these other ones. When it comes down to Russell and Will, I mean, there's a whole other path we can go down where Russell clearly was wired the right way. Will throughout his entire career had people questioning what his deal was, and some of those later Lakers years, you can read some of the stories where it's just kind of reminds you that as much as things change, I'll go back and read stuff, and it's hilarious how much the way the coverage is in the 1960s. Hell, it goes back to Ted Williams and Babe Ruth, and I'd read people with early hot takes columnists being like, you're never going to win them with this guy. It's 1924. It's crazy. So we actually kind of are very repetitive when it comes to stuff. I mean, the same thing is done in any political history. So I don't want to compare. I don't want to do this under the idea that, okay, we're comparing the two guys. It's just the two accomplishments. And no one's going to tell me that 11 and 13 is possible, but it still feels more possible than 100 points in a game. Yeah. If you're going to move one wilt stat to the finals of this exercise, what is the statistic that you want to move to the finals? Is it the 100 point game?

It's probably 50 a game. Okay.

All right. What do you think? I mean, you want to push back on that? Because like I said, when we're doing this, we're trying to put together the number one seeds, and it's only one per sport. There's going to be one left off that it feels ridiculous leaving it off. But maybe it's just the math in my head where I go, I think 50.4 a game over a full season is still harder than 100.

I think it is too. Look, I'm going to get screamed at no matter what, I bumped to the finals. Like people have incredible emotional attachments to the statistic that represents their favorite moment of sports, their childhood, their favorite time like researching sports statistics. If you were that kind of nerd, to me, I made this commitment to the 50% test because I thought it was a great benchmark to compare athletic accomplishments across sports. And the number that passes that or gets closer to passing that four wilt, it is averaging 50.4 points per game. When the highest sense then is Michael Jordan going out of his mind in the late 1980s, scoring 37 points per game, 37 isn't anywhere close to 50. I feel pretty good putting wilt's 50 points per game in the finals.

All right, we're going to move on to baseball. Before we get to my final four, some last second eliminations that I had to make. I eliminated Ricky Henderson stolen base record. It's awesome, but I'm just not going to end up saying that Ricky Henderson has the best statistic in baseball history. You've got a bunch of stuff.

That sounds very anti-Ricky. It's not anti-Ricky Henderson. I love him. He's great. It's just you're not going to be the number one here. I'm sorry. It's going to be someone who hit a lot of home runs or struck out a lot of people. That's a bit of foreshadowing. Do you want to make a quick pitch for Ricky Henderson? Just winning the whole damn thing right now because we could do it. The stolen base stuff is out of control.

No, he's at 1406 stolen bases. He's 468 ahead of number two. That's what I was always looking for. I was looking for what's a normal consumable stat that we still think is, because we could get really weird. I looked up Bonds Intentional Walk record. He was walked on.

Oh, we're getting there.

All right.

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No, no, no.

I don't want to ruin it.

Hold Bonds Intentional Walks. We're going to get very weird with Bonds Intentional Walks. Funny thing at Ricky Henderson before we end the Ricky Henderson segment, he set the single season record for stolen bases when he was 23. Then he played another 22 years and set the record and led the leagues again in stolen bases at the age of 39. He led the league in stolen bases at the age of 39. That is just absolutely insane. Anyway, we are not putting Ricky Henderson into the finals of this category. We talked about the Cy Young stuff. 511 career wins in 749 complete games. That is amazing. It's hilarious. It's from an era of baseball that does not resemble this era of baseball at all when pitchers are being used like essentially indentured servants. They would throw nine innings, go home, drink four whiskeys, ice the arm, come back the next day, throw another nine innings. Very impressive. It's just nothing like that's going to happen again. Two really emotional records that I didn't put into my top four, but Ryan, if you want to bump them in, I would probably allow it. You've got Ripken's 2,632 consecutive games, and you've got Joe DiMaggio's 56 game hit streak. They're both iconic. They're both potentially unbreakable, but there are other people who got close in each category. Obviously, Ripken edged out Lou Gehrig. As for DiMaggio's 56, Pete Rose has a 44 game hit streak. That's a little closer than some of the other records we're about to touch on.

Young, Ripken, DiMaggio, are any of those records to you in the pantheon enough that you really want to continue to consider them for best in baseball history?

The wins thing is, you're right. We were sitting here talking about basketball and how different it is and how it's evolved and the shot taking and making has changed. The pitching stuff is just dumb. I used to go back and look at that stuff all the time. It doesn't even matter.

I mean, Si Young's got 511 and the next guy's in the 400s, and no one else is above 400.

I looked up the active numbers. Verlander has 226 wins because he has a contract going into the next year. That puts him at 70. Nobody's going to win 300 games again.

No, that's right.

I mean, 511 is a foreign language. The Ripken number, no one wants to break that record ever again.

No modern athlete will go, you know what I want to do is play in every game.

So that one is disqualified because no one actually wants to break it.

I will say something really dumb about DiMaggio Street.

I don't know how my brain works, but normally it is the math part of the argument.

And I've seen different presentations proving how ridiculous the streak is and how impossible it is. I just can't believe there haven't been more people that have taken a swing at this thing that have challenged it. I don't know why I feel that way because I know how hard it actually is.

I mean, Tony Gwynne, I looked it up, 25 game hit streak. That's his longest. Tony Gwynne, maybe the best command in the batter's box, but no one's going to touch this one. It's been 80 years. And what do we got? We got Willie Keeler, 45 games, Pete Rose, 44. I remember Jimmy Rollins

had one of the scope of two seasons in 05 and 06 at 38 games. I remember being a kid and, you know, turning on Paul Molliter highlights, being like, oh, my God, I got another hit.

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I just could never believe that there wouldn't be somebody who just has an unbelievable command. But now the game has changed so much that nobody's really changing their approach with two strikes. And that's what all these guys did. So this thing's actually more untouchable now with all the emphasis on loft and everything else that we see. I mean, two strike, the approach is not different at all, which I think is still kind of ridiculous at times. And also is why we have so many pitchers putting up insane numbers because guys just don't even care about making contact with two strikes. They don't want to change their approach. So I have a hard time eliminating it because it has been 80 years, despite everything that I just said.

You know, Ty Cobb at 366, that batting average. I don't think anybody's ever going to touch that again. So now I'm really curious as to what you got to. So I'm not making an argument for it until I know what the rest of your options were. Yeah, no. So, I mean, once that I heard from a lot of a Boston fans when I made a big deal about Joe DiMaggio's hit streak is that, and I checked this out, Ted Williams had a higher batting average over those 56 games than Joe DiMaggio during the 56 game hit streak, which is kind of just an incredible accomplishment within an accomplishment. All right. So here I mean, you could, you'd argue that means he was more productive and they don't even get me started about comparing Joe DiMaggio to Ted Williams because honestly, if you go back and look at all this stuff, it's not close, but it's still 56 in a row. That's right. So what are you going to do? Yeah. And that gets to another thing about statistics, which is that at the end of the day, when we choose our number one, some of these are quirky, and some of them are important, right? Like getting one single 56 games in a row and batting, you know, 250 over that 56 game stretch. Was that what it was? It wasn't exactly that.

I just want to make sure. For example, for example, that is quirky, but not significant.

Winning A straight championships, scoring 50 points a game, like that, that is a level of significance above quiriness. Anyway, moving on, these are my four big baseball stats to close. Okay. Barry bonds early 2000 stats. I don't want bonds to win the category, but here's a brief reminder of what he did after turning 36. In 2001, he broke the home run record. In 2002, he led the league in batting average on base percentage, slugging percentage and total bases. In 2003, he won MVP for the third straight year. And in 2004, people stopped pitching to him. The previous non bonds record for intentional walks was 45. That's William McCovey set in 1969. Bonds walked 120 times in one year. He basically tripled the intentional walk record in one year. So bonds early 2000 numbers, yes, the clear, yes, the steroids. It's still so outlandish.

Number two, and this is another tough thing because of the era of baseball, but you look at Babe Ruth's 1920s and the whole thing is just stupid. Yes, he played 7000 years ago. The stats are still insane. In two different years, he hit more home runs than any other team. He had six years with 135 RBIs and 135 walks. That's more than all other players in major league history. Once you start, you can't stop. His entire 1920s is one like Mount Kilimanjaro over at Serengeti of other players. Number three, my favorite player when I was a kid, Nolan Ryan. Ryan gets into the 50% club for his no hitter record. He has seven. No one else has five. Andy career walks record hilariously. He has 52% more career walks than number two, Steve Carlton. But the entire career is just ridiculous. He tied or set the career record for years played, total strikeouts, strikeouts in a year, wild pitches, no hitters, one hitters, and two hitters. Finally, Pedro Martinez in 2000. From a 50% club perspective, his ERA was 49% lower than the next lowest in baseball. That was Kevin Brown. I'm going to count that

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in the 50% club. It's the highest adjusted ERA ever in the middle of the steroid era. I'm a Yankees fan. I grew up in the 1990s. The huge Yankees fan. Pedro Martinez in the year 2000 is probably my vote for the most impressive baseball accomplishment of my lifetime. There's my top four, Bonds, Ruth, Ryan, Pedro. Who else you got? I can't believe we're this on the same page about Pedro. I didn't know that you were a Pedro guy. I'm not a Pedro guy. I'm a Derek Jeter guy. I got into baseball in 1996 when there was a rookie for the New York Yankees named Derek. I hated Pedro, but hate forces you to pay attention to someone. I was paying very close attention in 1999, 2000. He was just on another planet, and he was doing something that made no sense at the time. That Pedro 2000, he had a 1.74 ERA, the second highest, or I should say second best ERA in the American League. Forget the Kevin Brown part of it. In the American League, the next best ERA was Roger Clemens at 3.7. He was almost two full runs better than the next guy at the peak of the steroid era. The league average ERA was over five, and opponents hit 167 against Pedro that year, which depending on what you look at, some sortables, it's either the lowest ever in the history. Think about this. The peak of the steroid era has arguably the lowest opponents batting average against. There's this other reliever that I think only pitched 20 innings that technically qualifies, who is slightly ahead of him, and then I think there's a whip number in there too. You're right. His adjusted ERA stuff is so off the charts that I always bring it up. He's the best pitcher I've ever seen. I don't want to hear about anybody else. I watched it every single time my schedule was around Pedro's schedule because I was a big red socks fan back then. I had a number of things that I would turn down for a chance at Pedro tickets. Guys in town, I'd be like, no, Pedro's pitching today. Are you kidding me? That's what it was. And I know as a Yankees fan, you're probably like, well, it wasn't all that intimidating, and it's very funny though, because if you think of Pedro, the Yankees figured him out better because they faced him so many times. It was the same thing with Rivera on the red socks side of it. When you keep getting to see, they weren't at superhero levels against each other the way you would think of. So for the regular season and the seasons around it, I just don't know if anyone cares about it just to DRA enough to even put this in there. That's why I'm shocked you did. I was going to bring it up thinking there was no chance it was going to be entered into this. To me, it's more impressive than the Nolan Ryan thing. But again, that's kind of the whole in Pedro's game is that it's not longevity. So if we're going that one season, I love to keep it in. I'd probably replace Nolan Ryan with the DiMaggio streak and the bonds part of it. The funny thing is with his attentional walks, they kept walking him after he was done. He wasn't even a threat as much anymore. And then the rest of the league still hadn't figured out that maybe you can pitch to this guy a little bit more here. And it's funny that you don't want to touch any of the home run stuff. I'm going to go ahead and say Pedro, but I'm totally biased. I am totally biased. But lining up what he did in that year where nobody could get anybody out and he was in the one sevens. I just don't know if people will care about it. I think you get a lot of pushback from this. Yeah, there's a part of me that wants to give this award to Babe Ruth, because Babe Ruth, it's not just that the statistics are remarkable. It's also that the statistics are important in a way that a lot of the other stats we're talking about aren't, because his dominance pulled the game. It was the Steph Curry effect on steroids. He pulled the game toward an evolution that even with that evolution, no one's actually defeated or overcome

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some of the stuff he has. I mean, we could go into like, you know, OPS plus, on base plus slugging percentage adjusted for a competition and stadium. He has all sorts of records there, but he did stuff that changed the game and dominant at the same time. So there's a part of me that wants to give it to Babe Ruth, but it's really hard to get over what you've already pointed out in just a few minutes ago, this sort of anti recency bias that the game has changed so much in basketball

and baseball that it does this little bit of a disservice to award people for a game that's 100 years old. And for that, I feel fine giving it to Pedro Martinez. I think it's the most statistically unusual and impressive accomplishment of my lifetime in baseball. I think it's that special. And I hate the guy as Yankee Stan. I wouldn't push back on Ruth though. I just didn't know what the one specifically you were, because if you're saying a cumulative thing here, we're talking about somebody who completely changed the game in a way very few people have ever done in their sport. And if you go from 1921 on when he passes Roger Connor for career home runs,

he leads baseball in home runs from 21 to 73 until Aaron passes. The dominance that he kept adding to his own record that in 21, he's already the all-time career home run leader at 162.

And it goes basically another five decades. So if you want to give me, if it's an overall thing, importance and all that kind of stuff, it's hard to take Pedro's 2000 and say, okay, it's what Babe Ruth was from a bigger picture. It's technically back looking at it. So I don't know what the ruling here is. And again, I defer to you. It's your podcast. So if you want to go Ruth, I'm not going to push back on it.

All right. I thought about this a bit. This is not just about most impressive accomplishment. It's about most impressive statistics. So even though I am going to give Pedro the more impressive accomplishment, the statistic that I think speaks loudest from this list is Babe Ruth hitting more home runs than any other team in two different years.

I think that captures the outlandishness of the accomplishment and predicts everything that you just said. Of course, the player who hit more home runs than every other team is going to, in a matter of years, break the all-time record for home runs and set it for decades to come. So I think for me, that's going to be, that's the statistic that I'm going to bump into into the finals. All right. We have one more category before we get to the finals of all finals, which is individual sports. A couple necessary last-minute exclusions. Serena Williams, Nadal, incredible, the go-to-the-respective sports. I just don't, you look at the records and they don't, they're not exceeding someone like Steffi Graf or obviously Djokovic Federer by the kind of margins that a lot of these other stats are. That leaves some Olympics records and also a golf record. So Simone Biles, 19 world championship gold medals, the most decorated gymnast in history, that's one entry. Michael Phelps, 23 gold medals, nobody else has 10. And then Tiger Woods. It's a little bit complicated to find golf statistics that pass the kind of threshold that I'm setting up, but this is just a wild accomplishment. From 1997 to 2013, Tiger was a combined 126 under par in major championships. Number two was Steve Flesch, finishing 251 strokes behind him at 125 over par. Finn Meckleson was third at 128 over par. So that's completely insane. Also, he's the only player, this is Tiger, in modern history to win all four major awards in a row and the only player to win any major by 10 or more strokes. And he did that twice in the 97 Masters and the 2000 US Open. So to me, this category is really about

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Simone Biles, the world championship gold medals are obviously impressive. But to me, this is really about Michael Phelps, more than double in the total number of Olympic gold medals or Tiger Woods just dominating in the late 90s and early 2000s. So do you have other entrance into the individual category and how would you shake it out between Tiger and Phelps? I know for me, it's easier to consume the Tiger number because the way you just laid it out, you're like, wait, everybody's over. And he's that many under. Like, what else are we talking about? Now, sometimes I'll see what the Serena Williams argument, like they'll argue, okay, well, she has this many championships and Jordan only has six. I'll be like, okay, but if Jordan had a chance to win four rings every year, he would have more than six. And that's what we're talking about with the slams in tennis. And it's the same thing with medals. You know, some people are going to have a higher medal count because their discipline has so many more opportunities to medal. So as absurd as the Biles numbers are, and Phelps on top of it, it's harder for me to put that into context because they're in a sport what allows you to do far more. There's just way more opportunities to go ahead and medal, even if you're the all time medal leader to begin with. And I feel the same way about Nadal and Federer and Djokovic at some point, like you just, if you had four NBA championships every year, Jordan would have more than six. I don't know why this is that hard. But I think sometimes people just try to be different about it. Although Serena's longevity, hers is absolutely ridiculous for as long as she's gone in a sport that isn't very forgiving. So I would go with Tiger because there's nothing else to compare it to. I mean, I actually didn't know that number, how far away everybody else was from him. So I would submit that one. Yeah, I'm with you on that. I'm going to go Tiger as well. The Michael Phelps stuff is extraordinary. The thing about Tiger is that the amount of competition that exists within golf right now is just extraordinary. And with some of these Olympic sports, you get specialization that sometimes can win at the competition. But Tiger's out there doing something that thousands and thousands, millions of people around the world are trying to be the best at and dominating at a level that's unlike anything we've seen in this sport. So I think Tiger's 97 and 2013 numbers are going to be are going to be my ticket to the finals. I do want to call out, this is not 50% club worthy, but it's going to be an amazing Disney movie one day, Bob Beaman's Long Jump in the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. Did you come across this in your research? Yeah, I knew all about it because we used to, I actually ran a track in high school. So people would go, do you know about this? And it was always kind of cool the first time somebody would learn about Beaman, especially as we've seen like everyone, athletes have evolved, we're faster, you know, we're doing bigger things. I shouldn't say we Jesus. Maybe I should say is the human race. But the every time I see somebody learn about the Beaman jump for the first time, it's like, wait, what? And it was like a super hero for the first, you know what I mean? So go ahead. Yeah, let me unpack for people who haven't heard it. So 1968, Summer Olympics, Mexico City, this is a period where new long jump records are typically set or exceeded by maybe one inch, a half an inch every year. So Bob Beaman enters the 1968 Summer Olympics. And the all time record

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and the all time record is 27.5 feet for the long jump. He didn't beat that existing record by one inch, two inches, three inches would be quite a bit. He beat it by 22 inches. The 22 inches, two feet, basically, the jump was so long that it was famously beyond the measuring equipment that was available to the Olympic judges and they had to pause the competition for several minutes to figure out what just happened. And he was so shocked that when he learned that he had broken the record by almost two feet, he collapsed and experienced what doctors later described as a cataplectic seizure. He did recover. And the jump itself is, I believe, still an Olympic record, but not an official world record, but breaking a record like this by essentially 11 times the amount you would expect the record to be broken. It's just a fun one off. All right, let me jump us to the finals and remind you and myself and listeners where we are up to now. Okay, so we went NFL first and decided that the winner for NFL statistics would be Jerry Rice and his career numbers. Then we went to the NBA and we awarded a tie between Russell's eight consecutive championships

and Wilt's 50.4 points per game average in the 1961-1962 season. Then we went into baseball and at the last minute, I rested the award away from Pedro Martinez and gave it to Babe Ruth, exceeding the home run totals of every other team. And finally, in the individual sports category, we gave it to Tiger Woods for basically smashing everyone else between 1997 and 2013 in major championships. In addition to those one, two, three, four, we're going to add a statistic that I bumped to the finals that got a buy in whatever tournament style organization this is, and that is Wayne Gretzky's all-time assists numbers. Wayne Gretzky is the NHL all-time leader in goals. He is the all-time leader in assists. He is therefore the all-time leader in points, which are awarded for both. But the crazy mind-bending thing is that Gretzky finished with so many assists that even if he never scored a goal in his entire NHL career, he would still be the NHL's all-time leader in points. That is insane when I learned it. Maybe that's just something that all hockey fans know top of mind, but I did not realize that and that completely blew my mind. So Gretzky is in with a bullet to the finals. Ryan, how do you parse this final esteemed category of American sports records? It's Gretzky. So I went into it trying to figure out a way that it wouldn't be Gretzky, and when I did it all over again, I landed on Gretzky again. So the thing I look at is this. He's at 2,857 career points. You made the great point about taking out all the goals. He's still ahead of Jagger. So Jagger is at 1,921 points. So if you do some really basic math here, we're talking maybe 67% of Wayne's accomplishment. Karim Abdul Jabar is the all-time leading scorer. LeBron is going to pass him here in a couple years. Karim has 38,000-plus points. Karim Malone was second at almost 37,000. So if we looked at the Wayne Gretzky gap to Jagger in overall points and applied that percentage to Malone and Karim, it would basically be like taking 11,000 points away from Karim Malone, and yet he'd still be number two on the all-time scoring list. And to be fair, as we've talked about with football and the style of play and some of the early baseball stuff, and then also the basketball and the rebounding numbers, I'm sure some could argue, well, look at the all-time goal seasons. Wayne's got the most, 92 and 81 and 82 season. You've got to dig here. A Vechkin had 65, 14 years ago. Stamco's had 60, 10 years ago. Just guys scored more goals back then. But to say that as if we have to reexamine with a different lens of what Wayne did, that's so dismissive. I don't even like saying it as a caution to not say it. So I don't know how that one is taught because it's not Si Young with 511. This isn't a century ago. We're not prepping for World War I.

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Cars exist and they're being driven on the roads. And I remember, I'm more of a kid of the 80s, and I remember our gym teacher. We're arguing about the Red Sox Yankees and we're in gym class. And he goes, do you guys have any idea what this Wayne Gretzky guy is doing? And we're like, what does this mean? Because it's like Dale Murphy having 80 home runs. It's like Jim Rice having this many RBI in a game or whatever. And so when you start putting it together that way, is it impressive as all this stuff is? I don't know that anyone has ever been a statistically dominant in a more modern era. You're right. I thought we might disagree. We did not confer before this, but you're right. And I think the reason we don't disagree is that I don't know how a rational person looks at these statistics and it comes to any other conclusion. What Wayne Gretzky did is simply insane. Seth Wickersham from ESPN, when I tweeted out my initial request

for all the greatest sports records in history, he shared this set with me, which I thought was really fun. When Gretzky set the all time single season points record in 1986, he broke the previous record by 41%. To do that today, let's say in football, a quarterback would have to beat the record of 54 by 41%. That's throwing 76 touchdown passes in a year. That's Josh Shiland throwing 76 touchdown passes to match what Gretzky did in one year. And then Gretzky's career excellence is really what propels him. You mentioned hitting home runs. A batter would have to hit more than 100 home runs to beat the current home run record by 41%. These things aren't going to happen, and they're not going to happen because there's Wayne Gretzky and then there's everybody else. I'm with you. I think you said it perfectly, Derek, that you go, I don't know how a reasonable person looks at all this stuff. And yeah, we can hear about goalie pad size and different, you know, the lack of a trap zone by the, by the devils, you know, and all this different stuff. But it wasn't like, you know, he was, he was riding a horse here while he was playing. I still think it's modern enough to not be dismissive even if the era has changed. I totally agree. I totally agree. I think it's Wayne. All right. You did it. You helped me work through the entire statistical, uh, corpus of American sports history, and it only took us, uh, 50 minutes. Round your solo. Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure having you in the pod. Thanks. Thank you for listening. Plain English is produced by Devon Manzi. If you like the show, please go to Apple Podcast or Spotify. Give us a five star rating. Leave a review. And don't forget to check out our TikTok at plain English underscore. That's at plain English underscore on TikTok.