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What do Jeff Gordon, Martina Navratilova, Bob Knight and Mariano Rivera have in common? The soul of a champion.

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It takes more than talent to reach top of sport

By Erik Brady
USA TODAY

Woody Allen used to tell a joke about school. “I cheated on my metaphysics exam,” he’d say. “I looked into the soul of the boy sitting next to me.”

Tiger Woods came to watch Roger Federer play tennis the other day, soul mates magnetically attracted by mutual eminence (and by IMG, their mutual agent). Woods and Federer cheated on a metaphysics exam of their own device, sharing champagne and insights after Federer won the U.S. Open men’s title, a rare chance for each to see inside the soul of the champ sitting next to him.

Soul of a champion is an abstract concept, difficult to define and yet easy to illustrate. Whatever it actually means, it *looks* like Woods and Federer. They met for the first time that day and talked about what only they can know: How it feels to be the most dominant individual male sports stars of the millennial era.

“That’s something I have never felt before — a guy who knows how it feels to be invincible at times,” Federer said.

Only a few people on the planet know what it is to be the best of the best. Federer and Woods are two of the more well-known champions.

During the next 10 weeks, USA TODAY and OLN, the cable network that changes its name to Versus on Monday, will go behind the scenes with 11 other active champions — some famous, some not — to explore what drives elite competitors in the *Soul of a Champion* series.

Andrew Bernstein, a philosophy professor at Marist College, believes he knows why sports stars are so immensely popular in modern culture: Humans have a deep yearning for the heroic — and for momentary glimpses of human perfection.

“We recognize, at least at some gut level, that a great champion isn’t just supremely gifted,” Bernstein says. “The sheer will to excel is what we find so admirable.”

Great athletes all share colossal physical skill. The greatest possess something more — characteristics so transcendent and translucent they elude classification.

What is it that separates great champions from the near-great? There’s no simple answer. Not even the greats themselves can quite put their alchemy into words.

“My goodness, I don’t know,” says Wayne Gretzky, known as “The Great One.”

"If I did, I'd bottle it up and sell it."

For lack of a more tangible term, we'll style it as soul.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, souls are immortal. In the secular tradition of sports, Hall of Fame athletes are.

Joe Dumars was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame this month. He has championship rings as a player and as a general manager of the Detroit Pistons. "I think soul of a champion means what's inside of you," he says. "How much you are willing to do, how much you are willing to sacrifice. ... I think that determines and defines the soul of a champion."

Pat Williams thinks mental toughness tips the balance. The vice president of the NBA's Orlando Magic is also an author and motivational speaker. "You've got to have great talent to be a champion, but ... everything triggers off this muscle right here," Williams says, pointing to his noggin.

The head is important, but so is the heart: Soccer great Mia Hamm says courage is what sets stars such as Woods and Michael Jordan apart. "It takes great skill for Tiger to hit a 2-iron 260 yards over water," she says. "But it also takes the courage to go for that shot. He doesn't think about failure. That's what's so impressive."

Patrick Cohn is a sports psychologist and president of Peak Performance Sports, an Orlando-based company that specializes in "creating a championship mind-set" in teams and individual athletes.

Cohn suggests four mental and emotional characteristics common to champion athletes:

•**Competitiveness:** "This is someone who loves the heat of battle," Cohn says. "They're motivated by testing their skills against the next person. Obviously, they love to win and hate to lose. You need that. People might think, 'Well, isn't everyone competitive?' The answer is 'no.' The really competitive person digs deeper than the next guy."

Example: Jordan had a stomach virus before Game 5 of the 1997 NBA Finals at the Utah Jazz, and Chicago Bulls trainers told him he was too sick to play. Jordan, visibly weak, played anyway — and scored 38 points, including the clincher, as the Bulls won 90-88.

•**Confidence:** "Self-confidence is probably the No. 1 mental skill that championship athletes possess," Cohn says.

"Simply put, it is their belief in their ability to perform. They see themselves as winners. They think, act and behave in very confident ways, sometimes to the point it can turn people off."

Examples: Joe Namath told the world his 18-point underdog New York Jets would win Super Bowl III. They did.

Cassius Clay declared, "I am the greatest," in the early 1960s.

Years later, as Muhammad Ali, he added, "I said that even before I knew I was."

•**Composure:** "This one has a couple of connotations," Cohn says. "The first is: Can you keep it together under pressure at crunchtime? It's the last minute of the game, and you're trailing by three: It's how well you can stay under control emotionally and can perform when you need to.

"The other component is how well you deal with mistakes. Can you stay composed and forget about them? Or do you get upset and frustrated and thrown off your game? Athletes who are composed don't get rattled and compound one mistake into many."

Examples: Jesse Owens won five gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin with Adolf Hitler as witness.

Joe Montana (nickname: Joe Cool) drove the San Francisco 49ers 92 yards for the winning touchdown in the closing moments of Super Bowl XXIII.

•**Focus:** “The idea is to give focus and attention to what’s most important — and, when you do get distracted, to refocus quickly,” Cohn says. “This is the key component to success in sports such as gymnastics and diving, but it’s important in all sports.”

Example: Franco Harris made the Immaculate Reception in an NFL divisional playoff game in 1972, alertly scooping a deflected pass off his shoe tops and scoring a miracle TD with five seconds to play as the Pittsburgh Steelers beat the Oakland Raiders 13-7.

NFL Films called it the greatest play in history.

Williams interviewed 1,500 people for a book on Jordan and found unanimity that Jordan had an uncanny “ability to block out distractions, zero in on what’s important. It was like he was in a total vacuum — totally zoned in. I think that’s the hallmark, really, of a champion ... focus, focus, focus.”

Plato was a Greek sports geek, an avid wrestling fan known to have attended the ancient Olympics. He also believed the soul was eternal — and that human knowledge was just a remembering of what the soul knew before birth.

“The Greeks worshiped human excellence,” Marist’s Bernstein says. “The great athletes competed naked. The statues we have from the Greeks show human beings as strong and beautiful and healthy. Michelangelo revived that in the Renaissance. This sort of worship of the human body is almost religious.”

Bernstein isn’t. He is an atheist who believes in the sanctity of human achievement. When Bernstein speaks of “soul of a champion” — he once wrote an open letter to Jordan with that title — he doesn’t mean soul in a religious sense.

Patrick Kelly does. He is a Jesuit who will teach a course at Seattle University next semester called “The Soul of Sport: An Interdisciplinary Inquiry.”

Kelly says the notion of the human soul diminished in Western tradition after French philosopher Rene Descartes merged science with philosophy in the 1600s.

“That also changed how people thought about sports,” Kelly says. “The human body began to be viewed as a machine, a tool to produce faster times or to lift more weight. I think that is demeaning to the human person. When athletes start to think of themselves in that way, they get cut off from themselves.

“The steroids issue is related to this way of thinking. From a spiritual point of view, the temptation for the athlete is to think his or her value as a person is tied to winning.”

Taking steroids, from this point of view, is like selling your soul. The Protestant work ethic, by contrast, suggests hard work is soul-nourishing.

And no one works harder than great athletes who have indomitable wills to match their surpassing skills.

“It’s a spiritual thing,” Bernstein says. “It’s in someone’s moral character — some indefatigable quality that a person has that they’re not going to be denied.”

Woody Allen looked into the soul of the boy sitting next to him. Gretzky looks into the soul of the boy he used to be.

“I think the great athletes go back to their childhood,” he says. “They go back to their love of the game.”

Gretzky grew up as a skinny kid with blond bangs and big ears who skated endlessly on the rink his father built in the backyard in Brantford, Ontario — complete with lights strung on a wire from the neighbors’ garage for night games.

Years later, when he played under the bright lights of the NHL, the soul of his game remained anchored in boyhood.

“It never left me,” Gretzky says. “Even when I became a champion, I always had the same feeling I had in the backyard.”

Hamm loved playing soccer as a girl. She also loved winning. "When I was little, people always used to say, 'It doesn't matter if you win or lose.' Well, to me it did."

Hamm thinks the secret to stardom is as simple as great talent plus hard work.

"Some people think they can train two or three times a week instead of seven or eight. They think they can take a game off. The great ones don't.

"I don't put myself in a category with Michael and Tiger. Their skills are unbelievable. But I know how hard they work. They are always finding a way to get better — physically, technically and psychologically."

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