



The Talent

## The Most Influential Athletes

Tom Van Riper, 04.21.10, 7:00 PM ET

Cyclist extraordinaire Lance Armstrong has seven Tour de France titles to his credit. He's been named Associated Press male athlete of the year four times, a record matched only by Tiger Woods (Armstrong remains the only one to win four consecutively).

Along the way, he dated Cheryl Crow, ran the New York City Marathon and flirted with a run for Texas governor. And he did it all while battling cancer, the cause that brought him back to competitive racing in 2009 after a four-year retirement. Declaring cancer awareness as his chief motivation, Armstrong finished third in last year's Tour de France at age 37. He plans to make another run this year.

### Slide Show: The Most Influential Athletes

It all adds up to grant Armstrong the status as the most influential athlete in America, according to surveys by Encino, Calif.-based E-Poll Market Research, the research firm that measures over 5,000 celebrities on 46 attributes including influence, awareness and likability. More than half of all Americans know who Armstrong is, according to E-Poll data, more than Peyton Manning or LeBron James. Nearly a third consider him to be "influential," while 46% profess to "like him a lot."

Talent is just a part of why the public would consider an athlete as "influential." The rest is drawn from endorsements and media attention, along with off-the-field image (cancer awareness work only helps, of course). In short, has the player raised interest in the sport he plays?

"It means that people feel he's making an impact," says Gerry Philpott, E-Poll's chief executive.

Both James and Manning, poster boys for the NBA and NFL, respectively, join Armstrong in the top ten. What people like: the right mix of confidence and humility, along with the perception of James and Manning as team-oriented players who place winning above individual stats.

The same is largely true of Boston Celtics star Kevin Garnett, whose public profile doesn't quite match James or Kobe Bryant but who's seen as an intense competitor who will go all out to win, including putting up maximum effort on the defensive end of the court. Garnett's trade to Boston from low-profile Minnesota before the 2007-08 season did wonders for his "go to battle" reputation as he led the Celtics to a title during a nationally televised playoff run. And his willingness to play through injuries this season has earned him good press coverage, even as it's reduced his effectiveness on the floor.

Notably missing from the list: Tiger Woods, whose scores placed him at or close to the top less than a year ago, according to Philpott. No one can doubt Woods' enormous influence on golf over the years. But the retreat of several of his sponsors in the wake of his personal problems has people naturally assuming that his influence is waning, at least for now.

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"People hear about Accenture, AT&T and others pulling out, and they figure he's just not as influential any more," Philpott says.

Not surprisingly, eight of the ten most influential athletes hail from individual sports (cycling, speed skating, snowboarding) or from the NBA, which markets individual stars over team brands. Major League Baseball, where fans tend to be more tribal (i.e., following teams more than players), isn't represented, though Cardinals slugger Albert Pujols just misses, says E-Poll. And what if 2010 brings LeBron an NBA championship and Armstrong another Tour de France title? Let the recalculating begin.