



by Kate Ellis

10 Jun 06:00am

# Should successful athletes have to pay back the AIS?

FILED UNDER: EDUCATION, OLYMPICS, SPORT, TAXES

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Over the past 18 months I have regularly been presented with two opposing yet pretty extreme views on the issue of sports funding.

On one hand you have the sport die hards who set the sky as the limit; you know the argument - give sport whatever it takes to win gold, gold, gold or whatever dollars is needed to beat the Poms at everything and anything!



Dream team: but with their lucrative sponsorships, should we have a HECS-style system for elite athletes?

Then there is, quite literally, the other side of the coin. Why should we use taxpayers money to fund those athletes that are already exceptionally well paid to fly around the world to play games when the money could be better spent on...please insert policy priority of choice.

While I want to be clear here that I reckon that sport is more than a game and is a most worthy recipient of significant government funding, I do think a national debate on how we fund sport is completely valid.

In the afterglow of Beijing, there were several newspaper articles with calls from sports seeking more funding to ensure the future success of Australia.

I recognise that that there are many financial barriers in elite sport, and that our sporting success can be enhanced by Government investments in our athletes.

But at the same time – the same newspapers often carry stories of some high profile sports stars setting up home in well known tax havens.

I get how Australians who read these articles would be confused by the mixed messages often portrayed in the media – sport at large doing it tough – some successful athletes receiving significant financial benefits.

I am the first to say that I know that sports people across the country make huge sacrifices, along with their families, in order to achieve for Australia at the highest level in sport.

And I also know that the majority of our elite athletes do it tough to compete in sport and that they do it for a country they love.

For those who do achieve great success - I believe that they deserve the rewards that come with it, including the financial ones, and I think that the majority of Australians – even those who think sport is just a game – would

agree with that.

However, I also understand how many Australians, who take pride in their athletes, may also have an expectation that those who have benefitted from taxpayer funded resources and support and as a result, become very financially successful, should also give back to sport.

Most already give back in many ways that are not quantifiable – providing bucket loads of inspiration as role models for our kids, as coaches, in charity, the list goes on.

But in a world where Governments have to get the balance right between supporting sport and getting bang for taxpayers buck – should our most successful, professional sports people also be making some level of financial contribution to sport?

Australians from a range of professions, from teachers to specialists in nuclear medicine benefit from government support to get the skills they need to establish their careers on the premise they contribute back at a later date.

Some might be aware that the Government recently established the biggest review of Australian sport in decades and one of terms of reference is how sport can diversify its funding.

As a Government we are serious about working to keep Australian sport at the forefront of international success – and that's why we will continue to be a contributor to sport going forward. To build on this, perhaps it's time for a debate on the role our super successful athletes can play.