

Alchemy of the Olympics: money into gold

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Australian Olympic basketballer Kristi Harrower shows her silver medal to young students at St Paul's, West Sunshine this week.

Picture: *Joe Armao*

For a lucky few successful Olympians, now's their chance to collect. But do they owe a HECS-style debt to society? Larry Schwartz investigates.

Australia's first diving Olympic gold medallist in 80 years, Chantelle Newbery, and dual bronze medal-winning husband, Robert, returned from Athens this week buoyed by achievements but with few illusions.

"Sponsorship would be great and it would make life a lot easier," said Chantelle, 27, the Melbourne-born 10 metre platform champion, as she was reunited with Jet, her two-year-old son, this week.

The Newberys are among more than half of nearly 500 athletes in Australia's most successful Olympic team to receive, or have received, an estimated average \$23,000 a year scholarships from the Australian Institute of Sport, according to an article by two academics in *The Age* this week.

Citing high-profile AIS alumni Lleyton Hewitt, Mark Viduka and Shane Warne, Bruce Chapman and Andrew Leigh, of Australia National University's research school of social sciences, said

high-earners should repay a proportion of AIS education costs as professionals did through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme.

Dr Leigh estimates that a quarter of Australia's athletes end up among the top 25 per cent of income earners. He and Professor Chapman suggest a threshold annual income of \$60,000 for repayment.

Dr Leigh concedes that elite sporting achievements encourage a culture of sporting achievement, particularly amongst children. "Those kind of public benefits are the reason we should be putting public money into sport," he says. "But there's also a private benefit that comes to sport that somebody like Lleyton Hewitt is on a seven-figure salary. So it's not unreasonable that we should ask him to put some of that back into the pot."

The proposal echoes concerns in a 2002 paper by a Canberra-based think tank, the Australia Institute, which also suggested a HECS-style scheme for high-earning athletes.

Deputy director Richard Denniss says there was little resistance to the proposal in talkback radio interviews he did at the time. The only complaints had been that its threshold was too generous - at least \$80,000 a year.

Peter Logue, senior media adviser to the Australian Sports Commission, which funds the AIS, says "maybe a handful" of scholarship recipients go on to earn a significant amount. But many athletes repay taxpayers by coaching clinics, visiting schools and other community activities.

The Newberys say their scholarships probably total the \$23,000 cited and help cover rent for their house in Brisbane. Chantelle has received an AIS scholarship for nine years. She also receives a Centrelink parenting payment. Diving does not yield big dollars - "it is not a lucrative sport by any stretch of the imagination".

Robert, 25, has received an AIS scholarship for eight years.

As a part-time student he has been ineligible for Austudy while completing a degree. The couple also rely on their families for support.

At the other end of the spectrum are medallists like swimming triple-gold medallist Jodie Henry, who celebrity agents have said could earn up to \$250,000 from sponsors.

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