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## Gina Rinehart: Australia's biggest Olympic fan



Gina Rinehart has ploughed money into major events and been closely connected with competitors. Instagram

by [John Stensholt](#)

John Bertrand calls her the "matriarch" of the Australian Olympic team.

Mining billionaire Gina Rinehart has quietly become the biggest individual financial supporter of Australia's Olympic efforts as the team heads to Rio de Janeiro for next week's Games.

Rinehart has emerged as a sponsor of four Olympic sports, putting in an estimated \$5 million annually – more than any other individual and more than most corporate backers.

Having long had an interest in swimming, a sport that her children competed in at state level in Western Australia, Rinehart had been a sponsor of the WA and

Queensland state teams before stepping up to become a big sponsor of Swimming Australia in 2012.



A year later Rinehart became a patron and backer of Volleyball Australia, and in the past 18 months has also begun sponsoring Rowing Australia and Synchro Australia, the governing body of synchronised swimming.

## Financial hole

[Australia's richest woman](#) will also be a notable presence in the stands in Rio when competition begins next weekend, criss-crossing the city to cheer on Australian swimmers alongside Bertrand, the president of Swimming Australia, and synchronised swimmers at the Aquatics Centre in Rio's south, beach volleyballers on iconic Copacabana Beach and the rowing team on Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas in between.

Bertrand – president of Swimming Australia – says Rinehart's sponsorship of his organisation helped dig it out of a financial hole after previous sponsor Energy Australia dropped the organisation after a scandal-plagued London Olympics, while Volleyball Australia president Craig Carracher says several female volleyballers would not have made Rio without Rinehart's support.



Gina Rinehart with the 2016 Australian Rowing Team. "The culture of the team and ethics around it is important to Gina," says Rowing Australia president and Wesfarmers executive Rob Scott. **Supplied**

"Gina has been a game-changer for us," says Bertrand. "Sure, Hancock Prospecting gets its name poolside. But for Gina this is about giving back to Australia. She sees these swimmers as future leaders, and there's a message about resilience of overcoming setbacks that resonates with her, and they can see common ground given what she has done in business."

"She gets sport and wants to help Australian sport," says Australian Sports Commission chairman John Wylie. "She's a very proud Australian and she's been doing this in a very quiet and unassuming way. She's also done it at a time when she's had substantial challenges with the Roy Hill project and the iron ore sector has been under a huge amount of pressure."

Several of Australia's top Olympic hopes got to see Roy Hill with their own eyes in April, when Rinehart flew a group in a private jet to the giant project in Western Australia's Pilbara.

Among those on the tour were swimmers Cate Campbell, to whom Rinehart sent a personal note of congratulations in July when she broke the world record for the 100 metres freestyle, and Mack Horton, who praised Rinehart on live national television after competing in the Australian Olympic qualifiers weeks after the trip.





Nikki Laird (left), Gina Rinehart (middle), and Mariafe Artacho del Solar after winning a beach volleyball event at Scarborough Beach in Perth. **Owen Hammond**

## Special dinner

There were also rowers, synchronised swimmers and volleyballers along for the ride, which included a special dinner under the stars at Uluru and then another plane ride for a gathering at the Opera House in Sydney.

The athletes were also presented with a copy of Gina's 2015 book, Northern Australia and then some, and swapped stories about leadership and overcoming obstacles and goal-setting.

"The only thing that Gina wants is to give the athletes a platform so they can be the best they can be," says volleyball's Carracher. "She realises that they might find themselves in a position of real leadership in 20 years' time, so she really wants to support them."

In June, Rinehart jumped on a plane during the weekend of her daughter Ginia's wedding on Hamilton Island to fly to Cairns to celebrate the second women's team to qualify for the beach volleyball in Rio. Rinehart landed, spent an hour and a half with the team, and then flew out again.

During a recent trip to Europe Rinehart spent time with the Australian Rowing team at its training camp at Varese, near Milan. "The culture of the team and ethics around is also important to Gina and not just being associated with who has the best chance of winning gold medals," says Rowing Australia president and Wesfarmers executive Rob Scott.

## **Major factor**

The synchronised swimming team has a design featuring Sturt's Desert Pea on their uniforms, the same flower found on the logo of Rinehart's Georgina Hope Foundation. "It is nice to know there's a sponsor and a person like Mrs Rinehart cheering us on," said team member Bianca Hammett in a video thanking the billionaire for her support on Rinehart's official website.

Rinehart's Olympic financial support has been a combination of sponsorship by her Hancock Prospecting mining business, including having naming rights for events such as the swimming team's Olympic trials in Adelaide in April, and direct payments to athletes via the Georgina Hope Foundation. The latter was a major factor in Rinehart being awarded an Order of Merit from the Australian Olympic Committee in 2014.

At least 120 swimmers are said to directly receive up to \$40,000 per year from the foundation, depending on their world ranking, and Rinehart also funds young swimmers and university scholarships.

"The question is, why does she do this?" says Bertrand. "Well, I think she loves the concept of Australians taking on the world. She gets a great sense of satisfaction seeing these people go out and do their best."