

Tax evasion gets Messi

Last month footballer Lionel Messi, alongside his father, was handed a 21 month prison sentence for offences relating to tax fraud. Although it is unlikely Messi will serve any of his sentence due to the nuances of Spanish Law, the case does raise questions regarding high profile individuals and the management of their tax affairs.

The sentencing followed Messi and his father being found guilty of defrauding the Spanish Tax Office of nearly €4,200,000 over a two year period. The offences arose after a web of shell companies were utilised by the footballer to receive income from his image rights, something the court determined was undertaken to deliberately evade taxes. This accusation was difficult to deny when the companies in question were based in a variety of tax havens, such as Belize, Uruguay and Switzerland, where the identity of the owner is kept secret - the irony of the income resulting from image rights is surely lost on few.

Whilst aware that certain documents had been signed in order to protect his image rights, Messi claimed to have no idea he was defrauding the Spanish state or partaking in any wrong doing. Shortly after the sentencing FC Barcelona, Messi's current club, launched a campaign of support, encouraging Barcelona football fans to use the hashtag #WeAreAllLeoMessi. Clearly, we are not.

Is it right that simply because Messi claims to have had no knowledge of his financial affairs that he should be expunged from any wrongdoing? The outpouring of support for Messi simply because he is a gifted footballer somehow suggests that such high profile individuals are above the law. Instead such conduct should be condemned by a public outpour of discontent as this is more likely to influence public figures whether celebrities or otherwise to uphold the law, set an example and pay their fair share of tax like the rest of us.