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Unspoiling our champions

IN the funeral oration in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Marc Antony declared to his "friends, Romans, country-men", that he had "come to bury Caesar, not to praise him". The Prime Minister echoed this in his tribute to Hafiz by reminding his fellow citizens not to lavish gifts upon him, lest they bury him in the scrapheap of would-be or has-been champions.

Gone are the days when people played for the love of the sport and the country, when all they got was a congratulatory telegram from the Prime Minister. By all means reward them for success but, as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out, not excessively.

By winning the All-England and the Commonwealth titles, Hafiz has shown that he is no jaguh kampung. But only if he's still winning major trophies five years from now can he be considered a true champion. Let's hope he fulfils his potential because too many Malaysian shuttlers who seemed destined for greatness at his age have not made it. One of the reasons is that Malaysian sportsmen get too much money, too soon, for too little achieved. Living the lifestyles of the rich and famous, they become complacent in their comfort zones of mediocre results and big bounty.

Whether Hafiz makes it will depend on how he handles the money and the fame. While he seems to have his feet firmly on the ground, it is important for the Badminton Association of Malaysia to help him remain focused. They need to emulate the management practices of Sir Alex Ferguson, who gave Ryan Giggs and David Beckham the support to bloom into the footballers they have become despite all the hype and the wealth.

Information Minister Tan Sri Mohd Khalil Yaakob said that, "When we want our sportsmen to win, don't send our media. The poor following must have pushed him to perform." Is this policy now? It's a poor excuse in any case for the absence of live coverage of the All-England singles final. The minister knows it, and the country's No 1 badminton fan Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah agrees.

How come even the commercially savvy private TV stations missed it? Malaysians would have liked to watch Hafiz defeat his opponent on the court and to see how their champion coped with the hopes of a nation egging him on to victory.