

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Ballarat – 27 April 2004

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Mr R. Ward, chief executive officer, Ballarat Football League (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome everyone. I have a statement to make before we begin proceedings. Under the powers conferred on this Committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, hearing evidence today into country football. Thank you very much for your attendance, Mr Ward. Please provide your full name and address as well as the organisation you are representing for the transcript.

Mr WARD — I am chief executive officer of the Ballarat Football League. My address is 1341 Mair Street, Ballarat.

The CHAIR — Please give us your submission, and then we will go from there.

Mr WARD — Thank you for inviting me here today to give our submission. I assume everyone has a copy of the submission. I have included a couple of the slides within the submission just to explain who the Ballarat Football League is. The league consists of 15 clubs, and I will not read them out — they are listed in the submission. The league consists of 11 clubs at senior level, which makes up 33 sides and approximately 3000 club members, and in 2003 we had over 120 000 spectators at our fixtures. Within our junior football structure we have nine clubs, five age groups and 45 sides, with approximately 2000 club members, and in 2003 we exceeded 105 000 spectators. Within the umbrella of the football league we have the Ballarat Football League Netball Association, comprising 11 clubs, 3 age groups, and 33 sides; and they had approximately 10 000 spectators at fixtures last year. So we are a fairly large organisation, with a total number of spectators in the overall league of nearly 240 000 at our fixtures for 2003.

To give you the demographics for our clubs, the average senior club has approximately 200 to 300 members and is comprised of 30 volunteers. They range from coaches, committee members, trainers, lady committee canteen members; the average turnover is about \$220 000; and the volunteers range from the age of 16 to 75. Our junior age club has approximately 150 to 200 members, 30 volunteers again, and the average turnover range is about \$100 000. Their volunteers are aged 10 to 75. The total economic value, looking at the turnover of each of our clubs, is about \$3.3 million. If you look at the total economic value, which would include indirect spending — and I guess it is impossible to put an accurate figure on that — we estimate the economic value of the Ballarat Football League clubs to be \$4.5 million to \$5 million. That includes personal expenditure of club members on items such as sporting gear, fuel to get to training and games, medical equipment and costs, physiotherapy and so on. It is a fairly large business. Our average senior clubs raise funds through bar takings, largely — that makes up 24 per cent; then there is canteen and catering, 16 per cent; sponsorship, 16 per cent; fundraising, 16 per cent; and then smaller categories such as major events and functions, 9 per cent; membership and registration, 6 per cent; our takings, 6 per cent; and donations and miscellaneous, 4 per cent and 3 per cent respectively. Our junior clubs are obviously alcohol-free venues. They raise funds from canteen takings, 35 per cent; fundraising, 23 per cent; membership and registration, 17 per cent; sponsorship, 17 per cent; and then there is the general miscellaneous category. The information for those categories were provided by a survey from the Victorian Country Football League in 2003. The BLF does assist clubs in key areas if it can. Predominantly we manage league operations by scheduling football and netball fixtures, and via our operations manual and administration of the by-laws. Under administration we also take care of league financials, issue footy programs, organise major events such as finals and junior camps, lightning premierships, forward planning, governance, and implementation of VCFL and Ballarat Football League programs.

We assist in training and education through training and accreditation programs for coaching, football administration, tribunals and VCFL programs such as Bouncing racism out of sport, Risk management, and Information technology, and government programs such as Smoke Free, and Responsible consuming of alcohol. We manage support programs, again concerning administration, the tribunal, record-keeping, player registration and clearances, planning, problem management and club development grants. We enter into commercial arrangements and opportunities such as sponsorship. We have implemented a licensee program, providing rebates back to our clubs, and we have pursued grants and funding, AFL transfer fees and marketing partnerships. We assist clubs to develop rules, regulations, policies and dispute resolution via the *VCFL Handbook*, the *AFL Rules of the Game*, and the BFL constitution. Our work in development of the game is via junior development programs, Player pathway, and other general areas such as government liaison at the local and state levels. We are also

involved in VCFL liaison, Ballarat Football Umpires Association liaison and community partnerships. The key areas where the BFL cannot provide assistance, unfortunately, are in areas such as ground rentals and maintenance, water availability and water costs, power costs, insurance, new facilities and facility upgrades, the impact of government regulations, population shifts, and the impact of GST on the economy.

Rather than going through each of the criteria under the inquiry, I will highlight key areas in which the government could assist country football. It was pleasing to hear yesterday's announcement about water availability and costs, but as of Monday, 26 April, only one Ballarat Football League ground within the City of Ballarat boundaries was open for competition. Eleven grounds were closed due to risk management concerns caused by the lack of water. Attached to the back of this submission is a letter from the City of Ballarat confirming the closure of all of those grounds. The BFL extends to four local government municipalities. The City of Ballarat itself has experienced stage 3 water restrictions, the Moorabool and Melton shires have experienced stage 4 restrictions, while the City of Hume, which covers Sunbury, has experienced stage 2 restrictions. We do need increased availability of water at affordable prices — for example, a program to fund implementation of bores at venues or alternative water supplies such as grey water should be a high priority.

In terms of the provision of grants for capital works — many change rooms require urgent upgrade of facilities, and I should clarify that by saying that in Ballarat we are fortunate to have two of the most historic and prestigious grounds in country football, in the city oval and the eastern oval, but unfortunately with such historic facilities maintenance has often been neglected there. We need separate change room and shower facilities for netball players. There is not one single Ballarat football league venue that has such a facility. Unfortunately all our netballers either get changed in their cars or in the toilets, they compete and then after the game they go back and sit in their cars to get changed or go back into the toilets to change again without having a shower. We need separate change and shower rooms for umpires, including female umpires. Traditionally when change rooms were built many years ago, well in excess of 90 per cent of umpires were male. Today we are fortunate that we have a high number of female umpires, but unfortunately it is a case of only one change room.

We do not have netball courts at all venues, which is a blight upon the league — for example the city oval, which is one of our showpiece grounds, does not have a netball court. We need new social rooms that reflect social standards, and funding for adequate training lights, and again the city oval is the perfect example — we have two showpiece grounds in Ballarat and only one of them has just got satisfactory or suitable training lights. The city oval does not. I have taken a few photos, included in our submission, of a few venues. One shows the disrepair of one change room, and the other one shows the public toilets at one of our reserves.

In my mind — and I have provided an example to substantiate this — there is something wrong with the current capital works funding program. To highlight this the City of Ballarat is the second largest regional city in Victoria, with an approximate population of 85 000 people. Within the boundaries we have 8 senior and 11 junior football clubs, countless cricket clubs, basketball, tennis, bowls, croquet clubs and so on, yet under the current legislation the City of Ballarat is only able to submit three applications to Sport and Recreation Victoria for minor facilities funding. I highlight the Borough of Queenscliffe, with an approximate population of 4000. I have nothing against the Borough of Queenscliffe — I grew up there — but within its boundary it has one football club, one cricket club, one tennis club and one bowls club, yet it is also able to submit three sport and recreation facility grants. The facility funding program, whilst it is fantastic, needs to be proportional on population and take into account the number of clubs with input, on a needs basis. Some clubs are fortunate enough to have good administrators who keep in touch with funding programs and write fantastic submissions; other clubs who may have a greater need may not have such a skilled resource to submit them. Maybe the VCFL should have input into who needs these grants the most.

We have a distinct lack of volunteers. I should clarify that by saying that it is not just a problem at football level; it is a problem with community groups around the nation. Why are we losing volunteers? There is a lack of time in today's world. Fear is the biggest killer. Today people are expected to be experts on risk management, insurance, liquor licensing, food handling, taxation and GST. There is a requirement to complete and a cost for completing accreditation programs. If you speak to any volunteer — and fortunately there are still some of them out there — their attitude is that they just want to help; they do not want to be drowned in bureaucracy and red tape nor to be held liable if something goes wrong when they have just given their best effort.

I have made a suggestion here — and it may be an ill-informed suggestion, but I think we need to think outside the square. Can we offer incentives to encourage volunteers back — for example, a volunteer accreditation card where

hours performed per annum could be logged? So if a volunteer at a football club did 130 hours per season and that was verified by an authorised signatory, could he or she be provided with a tax incentive or concession for these hours? I note that PAYE is a federal government matter, but I think the federal government could and should be lobbied by state governments not to think of the cost of the lost revenue by doing this. I ask the question: what will be the real cost if we continue to lose volunteers, not just in football but from all community groups?

The other issue is the rising costs in power and ground rental. I surveyed our clubs. The average Ballarat Football League club — and again I clarify this by saying they are spread across four local government municipalities — spends between \$6500 and \$10 500 a year. If you break it up it is up to \$400 a week that needs to be raised during a season to meet ground rental charges and to pay power costs — electricity and gas. The pressure on volunteers to raise the money for the rising costs is becoming excessive and the costs are not sustainable. That is possibly another reason why we are losing volunteers. We need to look at capping or reducing the cost to volunteer organisations in these areas before it is too late.

The final area I wish to highlight is the school curriculum. Obviously I am very passionate about football; we all recognise it is a national game. It is one invented by Australians for Australians. Yet it is disappearing in our schools for a variety of reasons, including the matter of male teachers — and probably risk management and insurance concerns are some of the biggest killers. Between 1999 and 2003 the number of Victorian secondary school teams reduced by 100. Football needs to be embraced in our schools instead of taking it off the curriculum. It is as Australian as studying our flag and Federation. Can we somehow offer incentives to entice male PE teachers and primary teachers into the country? Less than 35 per cent of PE teachers at the moment are male. While agreeing on curriculum diversity, it should embrace our own culture and include Australian Rules football.

In conclusion, I have put together a couple of slides on why football is important and why, in my mind, this inquiry is important. Country football is more than a game; it is the biggest service club in many towns and communities. The football club provides a source of local pride, meaning and relevance to hundreds of thousands of Victorians. The footy club is a meeting place and provides a venue for fun and entertainment. It teaches family and community values. From a personal point of view, with two young children I know I can go down to the club and there are 80 volunteers down there who will act as babysitters for me, as I do for their children. It is a comforting thought. It provides a continuity of tradition, history and a sense of belonging. It teaches specific skills and in turn self-esteem and worth among individuals. It promotes participation which in turn promotes health and fitness and it provides an economic boost through direct and indirect spending. If this opportunity to assist country football is lost and the government does not help football and in time country football dies, the social benefits that football now brings will become social problems and health and wellbeing will become a lack of health and wellbeing. Commercial benefits will become commercial problems and community benefits will become community problems. I thank you for allowing me to present this submission.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Rod. Thank you for the amount of time and work that you have put into this submission. It was particularly good to get the fundraising breakdown for clubs because I had not actually seen a good breakdown like that before and was wondering what proportion and where the funds might have come from. So that is an average, which is great.

Mr McQUILTEN — That is a good argument for the SRV grants as well. How do you get on with the AFL? Does it help country football enough?

Mr WARD — I think five years ago the answer was probably definitely no. I think the AFL has recognised that and initiatives such as the community camps program are great. The grassroots footy weekend is a great initiative. I think there has been too much focus on so-called developing states at the expense of the traditional heartland. I know that one-third of the players on the AFL list still come from country Victoria and I think it is a shame that country Victoria, and even Tasmania, have been neglected over the past five years at the expense of the so-called developing states.

Dr NAPHTHINE — How does your league get on with the Rebels and the North Ballarat VFL?

Mr WARD — Not very well.

Dr NAPHTHINE — We cannot put your grimace into the Hansard record, although I have just recorded it!

Mr WARD — I do not think there is a lot of love from the grassroots clubs towards the VFL and the TAC. I think there is a widely held view that they take a lot away and give little back. They take the best 17 and 18-year-olds who go into the TAC and they spend two or three years developing them. If they do not make it, the kids do not tend to come back to the grassroots clubs. I think the biggest bone of contention in this region is that we are the only country region that has a stand-alone VFL side, which is great and should be encouraged, but I do not think there is much support at all for the VFL reserves side. So in effect, rather than taking the best 25 players out of the region to play at VFL level, we are taking the best 50 and there is little support for the VFL reserves. I think North Ballarat needs to embrace the region. At the moment it is betwixt and between. It does not know whether it is a members club or whether it wants to represent the region. At the moment the region does not view it too kindly because it has a reserve side and it tends to take players away from clubs and not give a lot back.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do any of your clubs, or the league itself, have gaming machines, and are the clubs that have them the haves versus the have-nots? How does that work?

Mr WARD — There is a bit of that. The Ballarat Football League social club was established about five or six years ago and includes the Ballarat Leagues Club. It experienced four years of good turnover; last year was a disastrous one for the venue and rather than assisting the league, it did not help the league in any way. So the league is looking at its operations down there.

Dr NAPTHINE — Is that a combined thing for the Ballarat clubs or the Ballarat league?

Mr WARD — In the good years when it was trading well the Ballarat Leagues Club was underwriting club costs in terms of umpire payments, the provision of footballs and match day programs by about 25 per cent — so it was underwriting all clubs' operating costs in those areas by about 25 per cent. That did not happen last year and it placed a burden on clubs, so the league is looking at its operations. Two clubs in the league have gaming facilities via their social clubs. One only opened three months ago, and the other has been going for some time. That club has appeared in about six of the last seven grand finals, so there is a have versus have-not scenario.

Dr NAPTHINE — I notice that you run a tipping competition. It has been suggested to us in a previous submission that the tipster competition has been an absolute dog and that it would be a good thing if that competition was handed over to, say, the VCFL to run, and it could run it through local leagues and clubs, and local leagues and clubs could then run their local tipping competition through that umbrella with the profits being distributed back to the local clubs according to the number of people they got involved. So perhaps you have a more successful statewide tipping competition, but one which helps grassroots country footy. If they wanted to join, even Melbourne people could nominate a country club for a percentage of their take. Would you see that as a model that should be explored?

Mr WARD — Absolutely. I spent 12 months working for the VCFL prior to this job and I know how big the country football community is, and while we have 71 000 players I know that the community comprises hundreds of thousands of people. If you had half the people who are involved in the VCFL join up to a tipping competition, it would provide a great source of revenue for country football. It could be poured back into areas of need. I think it is a fantastic idea and it should be investigated further.

The CHAIR — One final question. You mentioned in your submission about the school curriculum and male teachers to try to give country footy a boost. Does the BFL have any programs where it gets out into schools and offers support and all that sort of stuff to schools where they do not have male teachers to do that work?

Mr WARD — Our league does not. The VCFL has a program where enticements are offered to clubs for running school clinics. It might be that they get five free Sherrins if they do two programs at designated schools. That is a worthwhile program and it could be embraced across the state. I do not know the answer to the male teacher issue. I know when I grew up in the country, every male teacher that taught in the school lived in the town and played football and cricket in the town. I will not mention the town that I came from, but now every teacher commutes from the nearest regional city. Again that has hurt the local football, tennis and cricket clubs and it is hurting school football which in turn is hurting the VCFL. Unfortunately it is a problem that I do not know the answer to.

The CHAIR — Thanks for coming to this session. You will get a copy of the transcript and you will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.