

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Modewarre – 9 March 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr B. P. Hardman

Dr D. V. Napthine

Mr C. Ingram

Mr P. L. Walsh

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray

Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

Witness

Ms D. Trickey, Chief Executive Officer, Colac and District Football Netball League (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome. Do you mind giving us your address for the purpose of the transcript?

Ms TRICKEY — My postal address is PO Box 332, Colac.

The CHAIR — Are you attending today in your role as chief executive officer of the Colac and District Football Netball League?

Ms TRICKEY — Yes.

The CHAIR — Any comments you make will be granted immunity from judicial review, but if you make any comments outside the committee's hearing you are not protected by parliamentary privilege. All evidence you give us is taken down. Could you give us a statement for 5 or so minutes, then we will ask you some questions.

Ms TRICKEY — Colac and District Football Netball League is probably regarded within the area as a strong league. It consists of 11 clubs; two of those clubs came into the league in 2003. Winchelsea Football Club left the league two or three years ago to go to the Geelong and District Football League, for its own reasons. Two clubs came into the league following the demise of the Heytesbury-Mount Noorat Football League, which disbanded — I suppose that would be the word for it — at the start of 2003. In their first year those two clubs probably have been on a big learning curve, ours being a bigger and stronger league than where they have come from. It probably would be fair to say that they struggled against the competition, so they have had to have a good look at themselves, their set-up and their player basis to become more competitive, which I believe they will this season.

Of the existing clubs within the league, we probably have a couple that could be considered to be at risk. Forrest Football Club has probably been the stand-out obvious one, and that would be because of the population. There is just not the population at Forrest; there is not the young population there to field a football side. They rely very heavily on the Geelong and District Football League and the Geelong Football League to encourage players to come out and play at the Forrest Football Club. How long that can continue, because of obvious expense, is debatable.

Despite there being salary caps for major and district leagues, they are, for want of a better term, impossible to police. I believe the two reasons are that the governing structure of the VCFL will not or has not appointed at its level a salary cap advisory committee, a person or someone to support the salary cap officers we have within our leagues, who are hamstrung and limited in relation to salary caps because there is just not the structure there for them to take any real action.

I think you can send all the stat decs to players and clubs that you like, and what they send back in is on a stat dec. I think it is probably to the detriment of a lot of clubs, the amount of money that is paid out to players, and it is probably will known, not just in this area but across the state, that there has been many a club that has come from the depths of doom, won a premiership and folded the next year. I think when you have little communities fighting to keep a football team on the ground, annually it is costing them more and more money to do so. They are doing it because they want to keep their little community. They have lost their schools; they have lost their post offices; they have lost their little corner shops. The only thing holding the community together is their football and netball on a Saturday during the winter and perhaps their tennis or cricket in the summer. Football is seen — for those of us who are involved, I suppose — as the ultimate of those sports. Cricketers will have a different view, but certainly you get a much bigger crowd at the football on a Saturday in winter than you do at the cricket on a Saturday in summer, be it for whatever reason.

Lack of population in small communities: it is farm sizes; it is kids going off for education; and just a general mobility. Because we are a lot more mobile society than we were 20 or 30 years ago, young people have more opportunities to experience other sports and activities that were not available to them when they could not get into a car or bus or whatever and go off to these other avenues of social release, I suppose.

One of the reasons that I was initially asked to come I think is that the league is structured under a board of management system, as compared to the former club delegates system. We had one position vacant since the start of last year and then another position vacated at the start of this season that we as a board were having difficulty filling. Generally it has been a matter of going around and speaking to people, gauging interest. Jim Brown will say to Fred Hollows or Mick Smith or whoever, 'So-and-so would be good for that position', so you go and see so-and-so and it is either yes or no'. We had struck a brick wall and after a fair bit of discussion within the board

structure I decided to put a rather hard-hitting — for our area — article in the paper, exposing some truths about what would happen if those positions were not filled. From that we managed to fill those positions. While it was for our area hard-hitting, it could have been harder — we did keep it reasonably fair. We managed to fill those positions; our goal was achieved.

Why are the volunteers not coming forward? I think it is a combination of several factors. It is time. Again it is this mobile society that we live in. People have a lot more avenues to explore different and new activities. The responsibilities that are placed on people now, even in a voluntary capacity, often will involve some sort of training. The litigation factors: it does not matter where you turn now, litigation is a huge factor. People just do not want to put their hand up and be the risk management officer who goes around and checks grounds and facilities for obvious flaws, because they do not want to sign that bit of paper that says everything is clear and then somebody falls because of a 6-inch hole that was missed in a check. They do not want to be the one who signed that paper off; they do not want those responsibilities. The paperwork and red tape involved in sport is just getting thicker and thicker. People are not interested in doing it. They feel they have enough in their working life without something that they enjoy, a hobby, then becomes something that has to be sort of really worked through. So the volunteers are not coming through as readily as perhaps in the past.

Insurance, of course, is a factor for clubs. It is just on the up and up. Even fellows getting injured and not being able to work for several weeks — their pay is affected et cetera. A lot of these are young married blokes with kids. I know of several people who work for themselves — who have gone out on their own, particularly in trade — and they have given up playing football because they cannot afford to be injured; they cannot afford that time off work. So with insurance and wages — there are options for clubs and players to up the basic insurance, but they are not always in a position to be able to do so.

I question sometimes if some players are in it for the sport or the money. I do not know that all players of country football now are there for the love of the sport, the club or the jumper, but the love of the money that might be attached to it. That then comes back to the club issue again, of how much they are spending — going bust after a premiership, or whatever. There are quite a lot of issues. To me, the salary cap is the big one. That is probably about all I have to say.

The CHAIR — You spent a lot of time on player payments and the salary cap and you talked about the need for perhaps more enforcement and the active monitoring of the situation. How do you feel local clubs would feel? Do you think there would be general support for a system like that, to make sure there was fairness? Do you think everyone is offering more and more so that they can get the players — not really wanting to do it, but knowing that they have to do it so that they can actually be competitive?

Ms TRICKEY — So they can remain competitive, and that is how they see it.

The CHAIR — Do you think they would support a stronger regime?

Ms TRICKEY — I think most would, because I think most clubs want to survive, and if that means having that enforced more tightly they will say, 'Yes, go for it'. Anybody who is involved in football will know there is more than one way to get around salary caps.

Mr INGRAM — Would you make that comment on the assumption that the scrutiny was evenly handed, by someone independent of the league or clubs, maybe?

Ms TRICKEY — Even at league level, every league has its salary cap officer. I think the pressures on that person are phenomenal. They go to the football on Saturday and hear, 'Oh, so-and-so is getting paid so much', or 'How much are they doing this for?'. But there is nothing to prove — you cannot prove it. They are under enormous pressure. If those sorts of allegations are made, there is nowhere then for that salary cap officer to go to another body for support to help him through that situation.

Mr WALSH — With the number of players and the amount of money it is costing clubs in minor leagues are we actually making a rod for our own backs by fielding two senior teams?

Ms TRICKEY — As in the seniors and the reserves?

Mr WALSH — Yes.

Ms TRICKEY — I do not think you can get away with not having reserves. Generally they are the backbone of your club, the workers of the club and, I believe, the ones who hold it together.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — And the drinkers!

Ms TRICKEY — And the drinkers! The backbone of the club! But they are the ones who get out there, man the bars, go to the working bees and be in amongst everything, whereas you do not always see your senior players.

Mr WALSH — If a country club is importing 10 or 15 players to field two teams, are we not also making a rod for our own backs in that we need the money from the seconds, from the drinking they do, to pay the seniors?

Ms TRICKEY — I do not believe clubs would be able to function without reserves teams. Even if it means having to reduce the on-field players to, say, 16 and a couple on the bench, instead of your 22 — your 18 and 4. If you make that 16 and 2 on the bench it is much easier to get 18 reserve players. Then you are not having to stretch to your 40 and 45-year-olds to make up the numbers in your reserves competitions, or dragging your kids up from the under-18s, under-17s, under-16s or whatever you have got.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Good idea! You mentioned about the VCFL, which I think touches on what Craig had mentioned in terms of it having someone responsible at VCFL level. That brings back the point made by Michael from Football Geelong. He said that the AFL has spent about \$15 million, the majority of which is allocated to the elite, whether it is the VFL, the under-18 competition or the development squads of 16s or 15s. What areas can the AFL and/or the VCFL do better in for grassroots football?

Ms TRICKEY — Just acknowledge the fact that we are there to start with.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — How? By programs? What about capital funding? Do you need capital funding from the AFL or the VCFL?

Ms TRICKEY — I do not think any league would say no to more money and more programs involved to help.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am just probing. I noticed your response. From that response are you suggesting that the perception is that the AFL is not contributing enough directly to grassroots football?

Ms TRICKEY — It depends how you want to put the term 'directly'.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What does it contribute to grassroots football? Can you tell me as a CEO?

Ms TRICKEY — Not particularly. Players go through the leagues, and I am sure that coming down through Football Victoria and through the VCFL there are programs and training opportunities et cetera that are available.

Mr INGRAM — You mentioned at length about the football player payments and the impact on clubs. Do you see an increase in football mercenaries, if you like, who change from club to club? Do you see that through a transfer through the leagues or through the clubs, and can you pick up — —

Obviously there are players who are only playing for the payments, or that is the major priority. Can you see that they pick it up through leagues through transfers, between clubs or between leagues. Can you see that or not?

Ms TRICKEY — Because we are not far from Geelong we are extremely accessible. Players are extremely accessible to the district league, so they are not required to do huge travelling if they are going to come out from Geelong to play in our league. For a lot of the clubs it is a matter of survival; they have to get these players out to be able to field their teams.

Dr NAPHTHINE — We are a parliamentary committee, and we report to Parliament and then the government will respond. If you could be government for a couple of days, what do you think government could or should do to help at the absolute grassroots level of country footy, your type of league? Is there anything government could or should do to help your clubs or your league?

Ms TRICKEY — I do not know.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you want things like improved lighting for your grounds, improved training facilities or improved training for your trainers?

Ms TRICKEY — I think all country clubs have the same problems with change rooms, umpires' change rooms and now with more women involved with umpiring. A lot of places only have only a box now for umpires' changing rooms. The grants are out there. Perhaps if the grants were made easier to get. I do not know. Most of our clubs are active in seeking grants for improvements and so forth.

Dr NAPTHINE — What if the amount of grants was doubled?

Ms TRICKEY — Wouldn't it be great!

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Go easy!

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Denise. We will have a copy of the transcript forwarded to you. You may correct any obvious errors in fact or grammar and that sort of thing, but the matters of substance obviously have to remain the same. You will get it in the mail in about two weeks. Thank you very much for your time today.

Witness withdrew.