

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Modewarre – 9 March 2004

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#### Witness

Mr N. Whitley, President, Geelong and District Football League (sworn).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome! Could you please state your full name and address?

**Mr WHITLEY** — I am Neville James Whitley; my address is 4 McDougall Street, Geelong West.

**The CHAIR** — Are you giving evidence as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

**Mr WHITLEY** — I am the president of the Geelong and District Football League.

**The CHAIR** — All evidence taken at today's hearings are, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review, but any comments made outside the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. Could you give us a preliminary statement for about 5 or 10 minutes, then we will ask you some questions.

**Mr WHITLEY** — I represent the Geelong and District Football League, and I am sure all members of the body have the VCFL documentation and submission that was put to the inquiry. This meeting is a follow-up to that. The GDFL is the oldest league in the area. There are only two clubs that participate in this region that have never played GDFL football, and they are Colac and Newcomb. Every other club has played under the GDFL banner in the past. Back in 1979 the GDFL applied for major league status as division 1 — we had two divisions at that stage — and the VCFL in its wisdom decided to split the league into two, and that is when the GFL was formed. The GDFL then went along with the country clubs and some of the city clubs as well, which was mostly made up of the second-division clubs.

Then I came on board as president — I am in my 19th year as president. Before that I was with the East Geelong Football Club, which is a member of our league. I felt that there was an injustice done by my club at that stage because it was the one that was relegated from the 12-team competition to a 10-team competition and fought like hell to stay in, but the VCFL said that was the way it had to go. In coming on board with the Geelong and District Football League, I put a group of people around me and we worked very hard to make sure that we were going to be around for a long time to come.

Hence we are fairly well set up financially. We own a gaming venue in the Geelong area, which is rented back to the three leagues plus the umpires plus all the clubs in the area. We receive a rental basis out of that. We run our own bingo centre, which we set up about 19 years ago. We get money out of it and that comes straight back to our clubs. That is how we are set up. As I said, just going back a little bit, we believe we are fairly well established. We look after our clubs. Any money that comes in goes back to pay for the umpires, the footballs — a lot of outside expenses that clubs do not have to raise, so we take a lot of pressure away from the volunteer people.

In the Geelong area itself I think we are very fortunate that we have fairly strong junior competitions. We are fortunate that we are in a large regional centre. People congregate in the bigger city areas and I do not think we have the same problem as other clubs and deeper into the country. I do not know what the government can do about it. I do not think the government should interfere in the structure of football — that is up to the VCFL, the leagues and the clubs themselves. That has been running for well over 100 years and has been fairly successful. I used to work in country areas and talk football. I can see the reasons why there are problems. They have probably been elaborated on today — and it is in the inquiry, anyway. There is the lack of police going into the country schools and post offices where footballers used to go and they were recruited from the city into country areas. That probably has been spoken on, but I just want to enforce, if it has not been, that that is where your problem lies. Also the farms and the machinery are bigger, so a lot of people are not needed to work on the farms.

We introduced netball and this is our third year coming into netball, which has been very well received by our clubs. In our first year we ran — it is different from football — A grade and B grade. We had C grade, which was under 17 and seniors; under 15s and under 13s. Nine of our clubs fulfilled all commitments. Last year we had all sides. We had A, B, C — which are seniors — under 17s, under 15s and under 13s. That has been very successful; it brings a lot more people around the clubs. I would say that we were probably one of the last clubs in country Victoria to bring in netball. Bellarine always had it and it was always a success for them. GFL then introduced it when Football Geelong came together and they have said it has been good for them as well. On our behalf it brings a lot more people around the club and a lot more atmosphere.

I think we have some problems in football in general which the government could probably look at and that is to look after the volunteer people. The volunteer people are very important to any sporting body or in any area — the Lions Club, Rotary and all that sort of stuff are all volunteers. But we are talking football and netball today. We had

to take the litigation and the pressures away from the volunteer people. I am on the board of the combined leagues club, which is the gaming venue, and we have directors insurance. I think the government and the VCFL in conjunction should look at that — that an insurance policy be set up to take away the litigation from volunteers because the pressure on volunteers is really top priority, I think, and we have to try and take that away because it is difficult to find people to run and do things. As I said, it covers insurance, litigation, risk management and the liability of what the volunteers have to put forward.

On our problems about numbers in this area — Michael may have touched on this; I am sure — our juniors have gone from strength to strength in numbers, from little leagues right through to under 16s, but we have a big drop off from after under 16s into under-18 football. We have had a look at different ideas — maybe even playing on a Wednesday night, night games, but then we have lack of lights to play competitive football. If the government could, again in conjunction with the VCFL, look at facilities — a lot of the facilities around football clubs are second rate. Again with litigation and health — we have to have showers. We have netballers who have to have showers now. We have women who are umpiring — and I am sure that Shane and Bill will talk about that later. We are supposed to have separate toilets and showers for them and the clubs just cannot find the finances to do that. So I think facilities need to be upgraded and I am sure that the government can look at that.

I am not sure, but some of the footballers seem to be paid a lot of money. I know that the tax is a federal thing and not a state thing. Again I am not stealing Bill's thunder, but I think the umpires have to be looked at with that, because the more money that umpires can get, the better the retention of umpires might be. We seem to have a problem with a shortage of umpires. I think in our area that is probably our biggest concern. As I said, I will not steal Bill's thunder. I will let them talk on that because we are very short of umpires.

On the water costs, going back a few years when we had a drought here for three or four years the council did the recycling of water. We opted not to use that because there were some policies out together and you had to have three or four people there; you were not allowed to train on it or let anybody or any animals on it. So we dragged in water from Werribee at that stage — tanked it in and kept the grounds alive, which was really a council responsibility, but we brought it in so we could keep our games going. We kept half a dozen grounds alive and I think the cost of that was about \$8000 to our league. We were not able to claim it back through the council. The council said, 'We offered to do the other one; you opted to go the other way', so they decided not to compensate us.

I have not got much more to say except I think our football in our league is fairly healthy, the volunteers are very important, and I think we have the numbers of players to participate at firsts and reserves. Under 18s are a problem. We have had a look at grading — I will touch on that again. We went to 18½. This year we have opted to go to five players who are under 19s to try and keep the numbers up and keep the kids in football. We are really going from an under-18 competition into an under-19 competition with only five players. Once they play a senior game they are not eligible to go back down, but they can be replaced with another player. Then when they play three reserve games they are not allowed to drop back down to that competition. They are allowed to replace them with another player. What we are looking at is trying to bring more younger players through at that level. We do not know whether it is bandaid treatment, but we are giving it a go, just to try and keep people playing the game.

**The CHAIR** — Just on that last statement, we heard something before that was probably contradictory, in that there were a lot of under-16 players coming through and there were not enough competitions for the under 18s to keep all those young players in the leagues in the Geelong area. Could you expand a bit on that?

**Mr WHITLEY** — I can see your point, because we have a foundation down here of a lot of kids playing football. When they get set to senior football we have 35 clubs, I think it is, in the area. I will use the example of a club, like the St Joseph's Football Club, which has probably three under 14s, three under 16s and one under 18s. So where do the kids go? They have to either form a competition, but our under 18s struggle. This year some of our clubs in the same areas have gone to those clubs and said, 'Give your kids down to us and we'll look after them for you'.

It takes the pressure of that club because we are picking up the costs of the umpires, the footballs and all the training facilities. So there is an avenue for those players to go, but it is a matter of whether they want to move from their club to another club. The facilities are there for them, or the option is there for them to move, but I think you will always find that if you have a strong junior competition there is going to be a drop off when it gets into the peak or the pinnacle. I do not know what your answer is to fix it, but the more kids we have playing the game the healthier it is. We do not need more clubs because there are enough clubs to accommodate all those players.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Someone else raised the tax-free status. My opinion is that there is no hope for it, and I do not support it because it then allows clubs — and there will be clubs in your league as there are in Football Geelong and Colac and District Football League — that exploit it to pay players at a higher figure in terms of saying, ‘Well, that is tax free. We have got more money to pay for recruits’.

**Mr WHITLEY** — It probably will not come from there. I am not talking so much about the players, but to take the pressure of the umpire’s side of things.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Okay. That is what I will ask; I had not heard of it. On that, in terms of salary caps, another presenter talked about the difficulty — and it was another CEO, like you, another representative of a league — —

They said to take the pressure of each of the league investigators there needs to be a position created and resourced at the VCFL level to ensure that we are serious about breaches in salary cap. What is your view of that?

**Mr WHITLEY** — Our salary cap is fairly low: it is \$25 000, excluding the coach. It used to be \$30 000, including the coach. We applied for compensation and to change it, so we went from \$30 000 to \$25 000, excluding the coach. That means our clubs could go out and get a better coach with \$2000, \$3000 or \$4 000, which did not put him under the salary cap.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — It is just a concept though, not necessarily — —

**Mr WHITLEY** — I think the concept of the salary cap is good. In this area it has at times proved successful, not so much in our league but going back a while there was an incident at St Josephs. It did not allow for their extra 5 per cent in the finals one year, and the GFL took it off their salary cap the next year. It might have been only \$1000 or \$2000 — I do not know what it was now. And there was another incident where a player was getting his \$100 a game to play with a GFL club, and the club said, ‘We are not having contract players any more’. He got \$1000 to sign on. He went to an appeal and said, ‘I got \$1000 dollars to sign’. At the time the salary cap officer was Arch Tonkin, who is well known around here as a tribunal member. Michael would know him.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Yes.

**Mr WHITLEY** — And he said, ‘I do not remember that being on your salary cap’, so the club lost the player and got fined \$3000, so the salary cap does work if somebody wants to exploit it. The salary cap has a lot of merit. We have a club, Werribee Centrals, that plays in our league. They are limited to what they can go out and offer, because you have got Hoppers Crossing and other clubs playing in the western suburbs that have not got a salary cap. A salary cap is important. It may be breached, and it probably is breached, but it keeps them a little bit more conscious that it is there.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — So would you support the VCFL having an officer being resourced to support other investigative officers in leagues? It was put to this committee that that is what is required, because at the moment leagues have not got the resources to investigate clubs for it.

**Mr WHITLEY** — I know that our salary cap officers has dragged clubs in at times and asked questions. They have signed statutory declarations and told them what the responsibility is of signing a statutory declaration as a legal document. A couple of them have signed it, but whether they have cheated or not, we do not know. But he has put himself into jeopardy if he was ever found out. I think we are getting overgoverned somewhere along the line. We are getting too many paid people in football sometimes that it takes away from the fun of it.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — My last point, which is related to this, concerns the AFL and the VCFL. They claim they put millions of dollars into football outside the AFL itself, into other areas, but it has been put to this committee that a lot of it, or the majority of it, is put to the elite in terms of development. Are there areas that the AFL and the VCFL can assist real grassroots football?

**Mr WHITLEY** — The VCFL does look after grassroots football. The AFL gives its money to the VFL, which disperses it to country footy. But I do believe we are looking after the elite player and not the person who is a struggler and just enjoys his game of football. Hence, going back to when the Falcons-type football started, they were going to turn players over all the time, but now they have a competition that is vital to them, and they just sit and watch a computer. If they want a six-foot-six bloke who can run even time, they just look at the computer and

go and see him. They do not even see him play footy up the bush. It does not give the opportunity for the kid to walk in and have a game of football anymore, because he has to play either TAC Cup or VFL football before he can be drafted. Now that is easily done, because they will put him away for a while and just give him one game in VFL football. But I do believe there is too much money going to the elite competitions and not being put back into grassroots.

**Mr MITCHELL** — You talked about the integration of football and netball. Have there been any problems with those two joining together, apart from facilities? Are there any tensions between them?

**Mr WHITLEY** — The only problem we had was that there were not courts at the grounds when we first started, which is fair enough. But we were lucky enough that out of our 12 clubs, 9 of them did put in courts. They had car parks that they were able to upgrade and all the rest of it. So we are still looking for an upgrade of those. I know some of the GFL clubs are still looking for courts at their grounds. We have two or three that are still doing that, but we are working with council on that. No, I think the integration of football and netball was really good, except that sometimes the netballers want to take over and run the footy club.

**Mr McQUILTEN** — What did you expect?

**Mr MITCHELL** — Also, the drop off in the 16-to-18-year-olds, have you done any research to find out what is causing that?

**Mr WHITLEY** — We have done a lot of homework on it over a period of time. We have a west coast region. We are very fortunate in that we meet every second month, whereas in other area's regions they probably meet once or twice a year. It is very important that the leagues in the areas do meet because it brings you closer together. It also gives you an opportunity to have a joke and talk about how things are going. We used to be three separate leagues down in this area, and Football Geelong started with the Bellarine going in in conjunction with them. We stayed on our own; we did not see any benefits of us integrating with Football Geelong, because we then felt that we were going to be third rate. We are the district league in this area. We have two major leagues and a district league. Possibly there only should be one major league in any region and two district leagues — or three, whatever it might be. The others should be treated as district leagues. I do not think we have a lot of problems with it, but the netball has been very important and the integration was not any problem. But we need facilities.

**Mr WALSH** — Early in your presentation I effectively heard you say that there was not a role for government interfering in country football, which I agree with. If you were government for a day, would you have anything that you think this committee should recommend that could be done to improve country footy?

**Mr WHITLEY** — Everyone has a copy of this submission. This has covered a fair amount. If I were Mr Bracks or the government for a day — —

I do not think it is an easy fix. It just needs conversation and talking about football and the game in general.

**Mr WALSH** — With respect, we have to write a report to make recommendations to government. It is not just about talking; we have to come up with something concrete, or say there is nothing concrete.

**Mr WHITLEY** — In this area you will find that there are not a lot of problems. When you get deeper into the state you will find that there are a lot more difficulties in football and netball. As I said in my opening statement, this area is fairly healthy in the game itself; it is pretty well administered and fairly financially sound, from our league's point of view anyway. But if you are going into the bush, I do not know how you will fix any problems there because it is a numbers game. By having just a senior side and nothing else, there is no foundation underneath. It a matter of building a foundation and keeping the numbers together. I think you are going to have a difficult job putting a paper together.

**Mr WALSH** — You spoke about having different rules of liability for volunteers, compared to the rest of businesses in the community. Is it equitable that if I got hurt at a club run by volunteers I would have no right against negligence, but if I went into a private enterprise I would have rights?

**Mr WHITLEY** — Yes. I just think that we are offering a facility to play the game of Aussie Rules footy. Litigation is getting stronger and stronger and stronger. I do not say you do not have the right to sue, but I think if

there was negligence — and we have a risk management program, that every club has to have, and which is more pressure on an individual — then I think you would have a right to sue the club, not so much the individual.

**Mr WALSH** — I do not disagree that we are becoming over-litigious. But is it right that we have two sets of rules?

**Mr WHITLEY** — Yes, I do not see anything wrong with it.

**Mr WALSH** — As a legislator, I would have some real problems with it.

**Mr WHITLEY** — Well, you might, but you asked me the question. I am not a legislator and I just think the easy way out would be to take the pressure off the volunteers.

**Mr INGRAM** — You mentioned some of the problems in more rural areas. One of the problems that appears in far East Gippsland is that once they leave school a large proportion of the younger people disappear either for employment or education opportunities — basically they migrate to the city. It appeared from the evidence — and that is why I would like your comment — that that is not quite so here because you have Geelong as a major population centre that a lot of people go to, so you are actually getting a bit of the flow back out of that large metro area. Is that a reasonable summary of the position; or do you still have in some towns a bigger problem than in others; or is it that because you are reasonably close you can attract those people back?

**Mr WHITLEY** — I am not saying we have not got any problems. We cover from Werribee to Winchelsea and then from Inverleigh and Bannockburn to the eastern side of town. We have not got any Bellarine players because they are in the Bellarine league. So we cover a fair area. One of our clubs that will probably fold up for juniors is Anakie — I think their school is probably fifty-fifty with boys and girls. I think there is a bit of a green belt there. People are hanging onto the farmland and are not allowed to develop it. If that was allowed to be developed it would grow and more people would move into that area. Winchelsea now is a growth area, Bannockburn is a growth area and Inverleigh is a growth area. So over this side of our town we are looking all right, because people are moving into those areas. But Anakie, as I said before, they have the national park at the back of it and they are not allowed to develop any more land in that area and that is limiting people moving into that area. If that was allowed then I think we would not have a problem with Anakie Football Club, because I think more people would be move into it.

Coming into the city, we have a lot of clubs represented in football in general, in the GFL and GDFL. Six of our clubs are more or less in the city area, coming from Corio, North Geelong, East Geelong, Thomson, Belmont Alliance and Bell Post Hill, so we have a nucleus of both. Anakie is probably our only club that looks like struggling into the future with juniors, because of that growth area.

**The CHAIR** — Neville, thank you very much for your time today. You will receive a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks time. Any errors of fact or grammar can be corrected, but not matters of substance. Your time is very much appreciated.

**Mr WHITLEY** — Thanks.

**Witness withdrew.**