

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Modewarre – 9 March 2004

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Witnesses

Mr S. Carbines, Chairman (affirmed); and
Mr W. Fulton, General Manager (sworn), Geelong Football Umpires League.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Shane and Bill. Bill, if you could give us your address and let us know whether you are representing yourself or the association.

Mr FULTON — I am here just to support Shane in this presentation. The presentation will be made by Shane and I am here just to back him up and answer any questions that are relative to my role as the general manager of the umpires league.

The CHAIR — So you are representing the league?

Mr FULTON — Yes.

The CHAIR — If you could just give us the address of the league.

Mr FULTON — It is PO Box 1607, Geelong 3220.

The CHAIR — Shane, you are representing the league today?

Mr CARBINES — Yes, the same address.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down today and recorded and the transcript will be sent to you, obviously, in due course for any corrections that you might need to make. If you would like to begin, Shane.

Mr CARBINES — I am Shane Carbines, chairman of the Geelong Football Umpires League, known as the GFUL. Bill Fulton is our general manager. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to appear today. The main reason for us appearing and the main thrust of our submission is linked to the recruitment and retention of umpires, which is a huge problem in country football.

Our submission, which you have a copy of, is 16 pages, with 5 pages of written submission, which I have signed and want formally introduced into evidence. The next pages are appendices: seven pages are a ruling from the Australian Taxation Office; three pages are an audit that we did last year on umpiring facilities at local grounds; and the last page, appendix 3, is a set of motions we put to a forum on game behaviour that we had last year. I will refer to them as we go along.

The GFUL was set up in 1935 as an independent, incorporated body to supply field, boundary and goal umpires to the Geelong Football League, the Bellarine Football League, the Geelong Junior Football League — together known as Football Geelong now — and the Geelong and District Football League. It is run by a board of management of seven people, who include a part-time paid general manager. We appoint a director of umpiring and a number of coaches to train and develop the field, goal and boundary umpires. Training is held at the Geelong Cricket Ground, which is part of Kardinia Park, where we have our own club rooms which were built and financed by members a number of years ago. The GFUL has about 200 running umpires at any one time — give or take — but we are unable to provide umpires for all the needs of the football leagues here. There is a lot of football played and certainly in recent years we have not supplied field umpires to any reserves competition.

The GFUL incurs significant costs in order to deliver trained and developed umpires to local football leagues — for example, we would spend at least \$25 000 per annum on coaching, at least another \$25 000 on general administration and between \$16 000 and \$20 000 on Workcover. There are other costs as well. Our income comes from the match fee that umpires are paid. There is an agreed match fee structure, which has been negotiated between the VCFL and the Victorian Country Football Umpires Association (VCFUA), which is our umbrella body, if you like.

An umpire officiates at a particular game. A local football league pays the match fee to us, the GFUL, and we pass it on to the umpire; however, the GFUL has to take out or levy up to 29 per cent of this particular fee to meet its financial commitments — for example, if the umpire's match fee was \$40 we might be able to pay them \$30 if we take out 25 per cent. If the match fee was \$100 we might be able to pay them \$75. We do have some other income. In recent years we have been granted \$4000 from the west coast regional board of the VCFL — that is, \$4000 over each year for the last few years — and we have some sponsorship, but it is pretty minimal.

I would like to emphasise at this particular point that the local football leagues contribute nothing directly to the training and development of their umpires. They pay the match fee to the GFUL, but nothing more. It is the umpires themselves who are levied up to 29 per cent of their match fees and who keep our organisation going. The

fact that such a significant levy has to be deducted from umpires' match fees must have a detrimental effect on the recruitment and retention of umpires, which is a major worry for country football.

The GFUL has seven main concerns, and I would like to outline briefly. The first is the recruitment and retention of umpires, and it underscores all the other concerns. As I have said, umpires get paid for their duties, and one of the main reasons for the match fee is to attract and hopefully retain umpires. But the levy of up to 29 per cent waters down the positive effect of the agreed match fee on recruitment and retention. The irony of all this is that the more the GFUL spends on training and development, the more it has to levy and the less the umpires can be paid. Umpires could actually be paid more if they were untrained and undeveloped, because the cost to the GFUL would be less. As I have said, local football leagues give nothing directly to the training and development of their umpires. The umpires pay for this out of their own pockets, which affects their match payments and which affects the recruitment and retention of umpires.

The second concern is Workcover. In the next 12 months we expect to pay between \$16 000 and \$20 000 to Workcover. This comes from the levy imposed on umpires' match fees. It comes out of their match fees and it affects them. Workcover is an acknowledged area of concern to do with umpiring, but nothing has been done. There is an insurance scheme for players, who are not actually in Workcover, but we cannot get the umpires included in that scheme. Workcover is a huge burden on umpiring. Perhaps the AFL could support grassroots umpiring by paying the Workcover payments, if they have to be paid, or perhaps the government actually could do something in terms of the law so that we do not have to be in Workcover.

There are two other matters which I would like to point out with regard to Workcover. The GFUL's feeling is that the actual employers are the local football leagues themselves. They actually pay the match fees for the actual work done — that is, the game to be umpired. If Workcover must be paid, the football league should pay it. The GFUL administers, coaches and coordinates the umpires, but is not really the employer. I draw your attention to page 3 of appendix 1, which is to do with the recent Australian Taxation Office ruling. It is to do with Workcover and whatever. The ruling is that GFUL umpires — because we put in the submission and went for this — do not have to declare their income on income tax returns, and group certificates do not have to be issued. This is a huge win in lots of ways for us. In appendix 1 of our submission I have highlighted a number of things, which you might like to read at another time, but I would like to draw your attention — —

As you can see, the page numbers are noted on page 3 of the submission.

Mr INGRAM — When was that ruling?

Mr CARBINES — It was gazetted recently, and it applies for the current financial year. Page 3 of the ruling in appendix 1 states:

20. Match fees ... paid to members of the GFUL ... are not assessable income.

Page 5, paragraph 34, states:

... the GFUL members are not considered 'employees'...

Page 5, paragraph 35, states:

35. The match fees of GFUL members are considered to be 'receipts incidental to a pastime' ...

and —

as such, the match fees are not assessable LOIPS because the umpires are not considered to be employees, nor are they rendering services.

But we have to pay Workcover.

On page 5 again, paragraph 37 states:

... there is no employer/employee relationship —

that is, between the GFUL and its members with regard to travel allowances paid and so forth.

Page 6, paragraph 42, states:

... match payments made to an umpire who is engaged in a hobby or pastime are not assessable income. The payments are not a payment for work and services ...

Yet we are burdened with this Workcover, but at least the Australian Taxation Office has come to our aid a bit. Hopefully if the committee can take some of the quotes on board, we might be able to get the Workcover as it applies to umpires changed to take away this burden and perhaps use the money differently. The point that we are trying to make here is that we should not have to pay Workcover, and perhaps the government would be able to clear this matter up quickly for us.

Mr McQUILTEN — Have you contacted Workcover.

Mr CARBINES — We are in the process. I have to be careful what I say here, but we are pursuing this as the GFUL, and that is why we are here today. I do not know what other people have done who are supposed to be in umbrella bodies in the past.

No. 3 is the training facilities. The GFUL has its own clubrooms in Kardinia Park, which we built and financed ourselves. We do not actually pay a fee to the council to use the facilities. We use the Geelong Cricket Ground to train on, for which we do pay a fee, but the clubrooms are becoming a financial burden as they fall into disrepair and need upkeep. We want to recruit female umpires, but we cannot afford to upgrade our rooms, and we have no support to do this.

The Geelong Football Club, which is next door to where our rooms are in Kardinia Park, in recent years has indicated that it would like to incorporate the umpires into any upgrade of what is now known as Skilled Stadium. The main reason is so they can demolish our rooms and open up the area where they have Cats Pokies and all that sort of thing. This looked like a bit of a goer until last year, when the City of Greater Geelong, which is the project manager for the upgrade of Skilled Stadium, said that the umpires, the GFUL, would not be part of the upgrade. This was a very disappointing decision for the Geelong umpires and lacked a lot of lateral thinking, because there are new change rooms et cetera being built in the upgrade. With a bit of lateral thinking they could have allocated these new rooms to us as clubrooms and change facilities for training during the week. They would still be available for AFL, VFL or whatever on the weekend when we do not need them.

The fourth concern is game day facilities. In appendix 2 of our submission we have outlined a study we did last year on the facilities at different grounds. You will see that we have listed the ones that lack adequate facilities.

What we need is a huge sore point for us. We look for a toilet, a shower and a bit of adequate space. Six out of the 12 GFL grounds did not have that, 6 out of the 10 Bellarine grounds did not have it, and 10 out of 12 Geelong and district grounds did not. I would like to emphasise that at a certain crossover time there could be as many as 12 umpires using space often no bigger than an average bathroom. The health and safety of umpires on game day is very reliant on self-contained facilities, the lack of which is a factor why many of the umpires we recruit give it away.

The local council, the City of Greater Geelong, is the fifth concern. As I said, our clubrooms are on council land, and they did paint the outside of them once. We pay a fee for the use of the Geelong Cricket Ground. They are the project manager for the upgrade of Skilled Stadium, but they did not give us any support for relocation into this upgrade.

I would like to use an example of how difficult it can be as an umpiring group with regard to the lighting, which we are in dispute with the council about at the moment. When the cricket ground was redeveloped there were four light poles put around the cricket oval. We use these lights for our training. The lights go back a long way; they were there when it was an old rugby oval, but they were put back. Recently one of the light poles was condemned as unsafe, and the council got in touch with us and said that we would have to pay the nearly \$10 000 to fix that pole. We informed the council that we could not pay that money, so they came back to us and said, 'We'll make an offer. We will fix this light pole for the \$10 000 if you sign an undertaking to take full responsibility for the other three light poles'. We got in touch with them again and said, 'We can't sign this undertaking. How can we sign it? It might commit us to \$30 000 over the next period of time'. We asked the local football leagues if they would help us with this, but they said that they would not sign it either. If we do not sign, what the council intends to do is take away the condemned pole, which will leave us with three poles. The leagues want us to train, but what happens when the three poles are taken away? We do not feel that we can sign a sheet that says that we are fully responsible for those three poles.

Some good news: the sixth point is government grants, which we had not applied for in recent years because we thought that we were going to be part of the relocation of Skilled Stadium. We got the flick from that last year by the council, so Bill spent some time applying for a few grants and we actually have been approved for a state government 2004 country action grant scheme grant of \$5000 to be put towards the training and development of umpires, which we are extremely grateful for. We do not know about bigger grants, because we did not meet the council's approval or support to get this one. I must say that the council is not a stakeholder, really, in football, so I do not want to blame it too much. On the bigger grants for female facilities and so forth, we are not sure whether the council would support anything we put in, which the council has to support to get government grants and so forth. Recently we spent \$1000 of umpires' money to get some concept plans drawn up for our rooms, to do with females and so forth.

The last point, no. 7, is game behaviour. The game behaviour forum was finally held last year. Game behaviour on and off the field has a big negative effect on the recruitment and retention of umpires. So what we wanted to do was get the leagues together to discuss our concerns about this. It was extremely difficult to get the leagues together. However, thankfully the VCFL manager of the west coast region, Bill Brebner, got the leagues together in about June last year and we were able to have our discussions, and we put our eight motions, mainly to do with video evidence at tribunals, umpires and coaches reporting behind-the-scenes, behind-the-action incidents and so forth. Of the motions, which you can read later, motions nos 1, 2, 3,4, 5 and 8 were passed in principle — that is, on video evidence and so forth. We wrote up guidelines on how these things could be implemented and sent them to the leagues. The Geelong and District Football League gave some approval to these guidelines at the end of 2003, but Football Geelong said no. It will be an ongoing battle to have these game behaviour policies implemented by the football leagues.

To conclude, I would just like to say that we have about 200 umpires, we are one of the biggest umpire associations in Victoria, but there is a lot of footy in Geelong and the Geelong area, and we cannot provide umpires to all of it. We recruit fairly well, but retention is extremely difficult. I would like to emphasise, in conclusion, that when a person walks through the door to be recruited as an umpire he or she has to pay for his or her own training and development, training venue, Workcover, upkeep of clubrooms et cetera. The umpires pay for all these costs out of their own match fee. The match fee is the major factor in recruiting and retaining umpires, yet it is continually eaten up by the numerous costs we incur to provide umpires for the local football leagues, who do very little support us. Thank you for listening.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Shane, that was comprehensive and has given us a really good idea of some of the issues regarding umpires. From my experience Workcover is taking a lot on the taxable income you are actually paying people. That is going to be an interesting situation for you in the future with what Workcover rules on that. You were saying that recruitment and retention of umpires is very, very important to you. If I was interested in being an umpire, I would certainly be looking at my own income insurance and things like that, if something did occur. We have heard already that footballers have stopped playing because of those issues. If there was inadequate cover for income insurance for an umpire, it might solve one problem as far as player payments are concerned, but could that cause another problem in retaining and recruiting umpires into the future?

Mr CARBINES — The claims we have on our Workcover are normally for physio. It is very rare, if at all — and I have been involved down here for 10 years now — that people would claim wages, if that is what you mean, from their normal, run-of-the-mill jobs.

The CHAIR — That would happen, for a start, I would imagine. There must be some kind of claim.

Mr CARBINES — Normally an injury suffered by an umpire would not prevent them from attending work. It would be more a sprained ankle or a hamstring or something. The normal claims on Workcover from us are to cover medical bills, not so much for being taken away from your daily job. The point I was trying to make is that it is a tremendous burden that we have to pay out of our own finances; clubs do not have to pay it.

Mr FULTON — We had over 50 Workcover claims last season, and only one of those involved income. It was only a minor income situation, a week's wages or something.

Mr CARBINES — Given the tax ruling, we hope we have some grounds to perhaps pursue this.

The CHAIR — I am aware of an umpire Workcover case which has fairly high ongoing costs, and I just need to know who is going to take that up, if Workcover does not.

Mr CARBINES — If, for example, someone was hit and was hurt — would it be something like that?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr CARBINES — There certainly needs to be something to cover, whether it is public liability, or whatever. I do not know how that works, but there certainly needs to be something to cover those incidents that do occur from time to time. I do not have any doubt about that. If it was half the cost, Workcover, it would be a significant saving that we could put elsewhere.

Mr WALSH — Shane, have you actually done your umpires a disservice by getting an exemption from income tax? Because they now will not be able to claim any of their expenses, whereas if they had been earning \$90 and paying tax, their expenses could very easily have been \$200.

Mr CARBINES — Say a senior umpire, who might be an older person, might earn \$2000 a year umpiring. The costs incurred should not be that much, so the income should always outweigh the expenditure. You are saying that the expenses are more than the income?

Mr WALSH — Potentially they could be.

Mr CARBINES — I am not denying it, but normally you would earn more. I mean, there is only so much you can spend it on. There is gear, which would be deductible, and some travel from work to training. But you should earn more. It does not affect a lot of young kids who do it and who are still at school. I understand what you are saying, but you should earn more than you pay out.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — The AFL and the VCFL spend a lot of money on players, in particular the development of elite players. What do they actually provide to umpire associations, if anything?

Mr CARBINES — Nothing. In Geelong we have Brett Allen and Shaun Ryan running around in AFL football at the moment. We get nothing paid down to us from the AFL.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Not a cent for that?

Mr CARBINES — No, not for that. When a player comes through South Barwon and makes league footy, there are payments that come through. It does not happen for umpires, so we have two in the elite umpiring group at the moment. There is significant money paid. AFL umpires are paid well; I am sure VFL umpires are. But at the grassroots level they would argue that significant money — if you want to use that word — is directed. What they do is spend money on a regional coach, or something, to go around and help other coaches or a bit of administration. They will add it all up at the end of the day and say, 'We have spent X amount of dollars on umpiring', because they have got a coaching consultant or a bit of a administration for the VCFUA, but in Geelong we do not see any benefit of that. We do not see anything.

Mr FULTON — They have a recruitment and development officer who resides in Bendigo and covers the whole state.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Would you see it better that the AFL or the VCFL should allocate funds directly to umpires' associations, either in terms of defraying Workcover costs or other costs that may be applicable development costs and/or capital costs for owned facilities or facilities at individual grounds?

Mr CARBINES — I think someone should. In the submission I have mentioned the local leagues a lot, but someone should be providing support for the local umpiring groups.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you think the AFL should bear a fair share of that?

Mr CARBINES — One of the reasons is, 'We cannot give the Geelong umpires money because there are 26 umpiring groups throughout Victoria and we would have to provide the same to all of them'. That is a pathetic argument.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Maybe they should.

Mr CARBINES — They vary in size though, Michael. They can argue that there are 26 of them and, yes, they should all get it in a relative sense, but they tend to use the argument of saying, ‘What we give to you we have to give to everyone’, which misses the point a little bit. If they gave it in proportion to your size, of course it would be good, yes.

Mr INGRAM — On your game behaviour forum and the recommendations that came out of it, do you have the red and yellow card sent out to — —

Mr CARBINES — Yes, in all country football; we do. We were directing that to behind the scenes things and things that are on video — —

When there is a big blue there are only so many reports an umpire or umpires can make. You cannot take note of everything that is happening; there is only so much you can do, plus things happen behind you. But they are caught on video; there is a bit of video done in the area here, and they are often there. There is an investigation process, but leagues, the clubs or someone else has to pursue that. We were trying to bring it in so that the umpires could cite someone on a Sunday — that is, within 24 hours of a game. That certainly merited discussion, and it certainly merits serious discussion to get it implemented. That is just our view on that.

Mr McQUILTEN — Shane, how many women are in the 200 that you now have?

Mr FULTON — I joined the GFUL last year, and when I started in January we had 20 females on our register. Now we have probably six.

Mr McQUILTEN — Six?

Mr CARBINES — If I could come in here, we had the same with racism in terms of what happens to umpires. Females get a certain kind of sexist abuse. If you were Asian, for example, you would get a certain racist abuse, and there is always going to be that, which would deter parents, for example, from having their daughters run the boundary or that sort of thing. However, one of the other deterrents is the lack of facilities that we can provide for females.

The CHAIR — Did you do an exit survey with those female umpires who did not return this year?

Mr FULTON — Sort of. I did not do an extensive survey, no, because I only found out that half a dozen of mine are coming back this year already. But of those who did leave, it was nothing to do with the physical training or the demands of being an umpire; it was more to do with, as Shane has already expressed, the levels of abuse they were being subjected to on the ground. Some of it was quite severe. In fact I had letters from three clubs last year apologising for the behaviour of people as a result of that type of abuse. It was only because the particular female in question raised it with me.

And, of course, there are no changing facilities for females at any of the grounds. It is just too much hard work for females, and it is embarrassing for them. We are talking about young girls, not mature females, because the only recruits we tend to get are teenagers. We are talking about recruiting and retention. We want to recruit 40 or 50 umpires this year, but 95 per cent of those will be teenagers. Then you have the older umpires dropping off at the other end, and you have all this experience going out and not being replaced. That is the problem. If we can retain some of the more experienced umpires, they can hang around, teach the young kids, run with them and pass on their experience to them. That is a major problem.

Mr WALSH — In your submission, apart from the Workcover issues, which I think will resolve themselves with your tax ruling, I struggle to find anything for us to report on for the Victorian government to be involved in.

Mr CARBINES — When you asked the other people the question, ‘If you were in government for a day’, or whatever it was — —

Mr WALSH — I am asking the same question.

Mr CARBINES — Certainly Workcover would be the one that perhaps — —

Mr WALSH — That will be resolved now.

Mr CARBINES — If that comes out of this, it will be a real positive for us. As I said before, if we only had to pay half we would invest that money in recruitment, retention and trying to pay a bit more and that sort of thing. I do not know what else you can — —

We are thankful for the grant that we got, the country action grant. We do not expect the council — —

The council has a lot of priorities to meet. We applied to upgrade our rooms, and there is the issue of whether we will get in the right priority, but certainly Workcover is something that probably could be done quickly. We intend now to write to the Minister for Workcover and pursue it that way. We feel probably let down by our umbrella body, the Victorian Country Football Umpires Association, in lots of ways. A lot of what I have said today you will not hear from a lot of other umpiring groups, but it needs to be said.

Mr INGRAM — The other obvious thing that you have pointed out in here is the issue of facilities for female umpires. Would you say that is something for which assistance could be given quite easily?.

Mr CARBINES — That is what I am saying about the grant. We would do that at our own rooms, but we do not have the money to do it, and we are not confident that council would prioritise us ahead of all the other people who apply for grants.

Mr FULTON — If you asked me the same question — that is, what I would like governments to do if it was at all possible — then maybe it could be to make accessibility to the grants a lot easier for us. We have got a \$5000 grant, but it was hard work to get it. We had to go in a pool of hundreds of other people to compete for that money. With all due respect, \$5000 is not going to go very far, and it is only for this year. What happens next year? We need to get funds and finance more easily than we can at present, access to it anyway.

Mr CARBINES — The government is spending a lot of money on Skilled Stadium. As I said, there are new rooms being built there that we do not need on the weekend. We are out doing other things on the weekend, such as umpiring local football matches. If influence can be brought to bear that we could move within Skilled Stadium, which was always what Geelong footy club wanted us to do so that they could open up the area in front — —

Mr INGRAM — I was talking more about generally, across-the-state facilities for both-sex umpires and in rooms, and that is something that you have indicated here. If you go through those lists, that is something that is sought by all the clubs, facilities for umpires.

Mr CARBINES — Yes.

Mr FULTON — Obviously the emphasis has to be on females because of the age we are living in at the moment, but the priority should be to upgrade, and then when you upgrade you include facilities for females.

Mr INGRAM — That is what I was talking about.

Mr WALSH — You should not upgrade without including them, surely.

Mr FULTON — That is what I am saying, but the priority is to get the upgrade started.

Mr CARBINES — I think that has happened at Barwon Heads. Is there some consultation proceeding? We are hoping!

Mr FULTON — One of the things I would like to see is that when councils approve building plans or funding — I know Michael was involved at the Barwon Heads one — and so forth — —

I do not know whether part of that included upgraded facilities for the umpires or even for females. We do not know. What we are saying is that at that stage there should be some sort of condition that it be included, that any new additions or upgrade to any facilities at sporting venues, particularly football venues, should have to have included upgraded facilities that include facilities for female umpires.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — One last thing is with regard to on-field behaviour, which is indicative. Violence is one issue. It has probably slowed down in recent times since I was playing, and the other is crowd and player behaviour to umpires. In respect to appendix 3, I can see why clubs would be concerned with motion no. 6.

Mr CARBINES — Motion no. 6 was probably an ambit claim.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I think it is very much an ambit claim. That would be my personal opinion, but on the rest, I notice that there is only one league that you are having some success with, which is the GDFL. I am disappointed that with the other two leagues you are having problems with this. I do not know if you have an update on it.

Mr CARBINES — There are guidelines.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — In respect to this, I do not see any issue with this. If it is a responsible league, I cannot see any issue with supporting these motions. If the leagues are only going to be recalcitrant, have you taken it up with the Victorian Football Umpires Association, in terms of getting the VCFL to make some sort of ruling that the leagues abide by this as a principle right across the state?

Mr CARBINES — No, we have not done that yet.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Is there an update on this, in terms of where it has gone?

Mr CARBINES — We are just sort of battling it out at the moment. The video that we had to get to look at on a Sunday morning if we want to do behind the scenes — and we do not want to be pedantic on it; it would only be a big one that we would want to do like this — they want us to pay for the video, and there are all these sorts of things. I mean, no-one makes it easy. They want the umpires to pay for the video.

Mr FULTON — They are not looking at the big picture. They are looking at what it is going to cost — ‘It is going to cost me \$40, so it is not worth doing’. They are not looking at the benefits that can be derived from doing it — the stamping out of violence.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — So it has not fallen over yet?

Mr FULTON — No, it has not fallen over.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time today, and I hope something useful comes out of it for you as well.

Mr CARBINES — Thanks very much for listening to us; we appreciate it.

The CHAIR — You will get a copy of the transcript.

Committee adjourned.