

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Horsham – 11 March 2004

#### Members

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Mr B. P. Hardman  
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Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray  
Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

#### Witnesses

Mr B. Hartigan, Chairman (sworn), and;  
Mr M. Williams, Secretary-Treasurer (sworn), Horsham Football and Netball Club.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome to the inquiry, Bruce and Mark. Would you please give your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, its name and your position within the organisation.

**Mr HARTIGAN** — My name is Bruce Hartigan. My address is 33 Rose Street, Horsham. I am chairman of the Horsham Football and Netball Club.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Mark Williams. My postal address is PO Box 677, Horsham 3402. I am a public office bearer of the Horsham Football and Netball Club, in the position of combined Secretary-Treasurer.

**The CHAIR** — Your evidence will be taken down today and you will have a chance to peruse it afterwards to make sure that there are no mistakes in fact or grammar and you can alter that, but not change any matters of substance. If you give us your presentation for 5 minutes or so, we will ask some questions afterwards.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — We have enough copies of our presentation for committee members, but probably not enough for all and sundry.

**Mr HARTIGAN** — Our presentation deals with the local level and the club itself in a city of this size. We have been involved in football for probably 120 years. The Horsham Football and Netball Club has five grades of football and five grades of netball, involving probably 150 footballers and 75 netballers. We have a board of management which runs our club. We have accreditation in good sports management; we were a pilot club for that in forming the criteria for other clubs to establish no smoking and positive and caring attitudes to alcohol issues, health and safety, food, and those sorts of areas, with probably 20 or so members of our club doing responsible serving of alcohol courses, so that our bar is managed to those degrees or we implement the areas that need to be looked at. We felt that probably back over 10 years in about the mid-1990s our club was struggling. We had come from a proud background as probably one of the most successful clubs given that we had won probably 16 senior football premierships and about the same in netball and through the grades probably as many as well.

About the mid-1990s we were struggling because, I suppose, the environment we were in had changed dramatically, given that footballer numbers in the town had diminished to a great degree and a couple of district or minor league clubs had asked to be promoted into the Wimmera league and that had been granted and that made it a pretty hard playing field for us to continue in the form that we were in. So we have changed the whole structure of the club. After a 10-year period we have probably re-established ourselves as a successful club again.

Mark and I have gone through the terms of reference. Mark will take the first term of reference and I will take the second and so on — we have shared them around a little bit. We will probably go over some areas that you have already touched on, but we will try as much as we possibly can to keep it to how it affects us as a club.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — As Bruce alluded to, we are trying to keep to the terms of reference and make sure that what we are pitching is relevant to the specific powers that you have been given. We do have blanket other issues at the end.

In relation to your first term of reference, the main issue relates to the availability of participants and the viability of clubs. In relation to player availability, the fact is that people leave the region for school or employment and that just diminishes your potential player base. We are still relatively fortunate in Horsham in that we are one of the what they call soak cities and therefore we probably still draw in a nucleus of people from the surrounding region. Certainly we understand and sympathise, I suppose, with our competing clubs that they do not get the benefit. If anything, the three clubs that are in town now work against some of those smaller clubs because our player base that would, for the sake of playing in the Wimmera league, have travelled to perhaps Murtoa, Dimboola or Minyip — which is more accessible from town — they have the three clubs to choose from in town. So that works against those towns to a certain extent as well. Whilst having three clubs in the town helps, it also competes against those clubs.

The other issue also, I suppose, is that talented young people are streamed into those development programs at an earlier age. Whilst we encourage them and we have had quite a few of our kids streamed into that program and we are certainly proud of their achievements and would like to think that it is partly because of the environment we have created for them, the reality is that once they enter that system they are generally lost to the area forever.

The third area is that they are also less prepared to commit beyond the junior years. Once they do get beyond their junior years we generally find that there are a lot of other things going on around them that makes them less

prepared to commit. That is accessibility to other activities, Melbourne is much more accessible these days, the beach is a bit more accessible — all those sorts of things work against a club that really needs a player, once he has decided to play football, to make that commitment for the full six months of the year. Compounded with that is the fact that their peers leave the region as well. More and more of their peers are away, so they will follow them on weekend exploits if they are still living here.

On club viability, it is more expensive to run a club. We will go through those costs at a later stage. Also it is more difficult to attract volunteers. We are finding that more and more there are roles that we have to pick up. We are engaging service clubs to come back and sometimes those service club members are also football club members. We are generally finding that we are having to pay more for those types of roles and for umpires as well. In this league the umpires have just gone through a round of negotiations with the league, with a substantial increase of costs to clubs. That is term of reference 1.

**Mr HARTIGAN** — Moving on to term of reference (b), we endeavour as a club, or we have over the last number of years, to instil a bond or pride in our young kids. We have established that in our club. We took over a junior league to the detriment, I suppose, of the local league. We had a local junior league of about 8 to 10 sides. It split in half and basically disintegrated. We took on one of the clubs that was using our ground as a junior development area. We have embraced them — not taken them over — and they play under our structure with our coaches, with our finance, the whole thing. We have taken them on and reaped the benefits of it, for sure. A number of kids have come out of there who now play in our senior football side, so we have been the beneficiaries, but with that comes the extra costs.

We have had to establish reasons for parents to bring their children to our club. We have had to establish a Thursday-night-type of environment so that the kids are fed and not late home for tea with mum saying, 'Where are they, Dad?' Dad also has a pleasant environment to stand around and have a bit of a chat with a few blokes. We have established a bus service, which we pay for, so that the kids can be ferried to games as far away as Ararat or Stawell, and then brought home. They are looked after, chaperoned and then dropped off at the ground here so that their parents can pick them up again. It does not actually establish them as volunteers or active participants in our club, but it gives them an outlet and lets the kid play footy.

In this environment a lot of kids and parents work weekends, and it is hard for them to leave the dollar alone if they can be working at McDonalds or KFC for six or eight bucks an hour, or whatever. It is a case of play footy or make some money, or mum is making money and does not want to give up the time or effort to transport the kid. So we identified that as an area, and that is obviously a financial burden on the club, but we have reaped the benefit of it as well. In other areas we have tried to look at in getting more ways for more people to be involved in our facility down there. We identified cricket as another area where we could. They use the ground already. We have a club using our social rooms. There are embryonic ties at the moment, and hopefully we can get them more involved. Obviously with that will come costings as far as nets, extra netball courts and things like that go, but they would have to be established. We would like to think that we could grow and survive, but we need the funding and all the rest of it to let that happen.

One of our key issues, which we are working through with the council at the moment, is lighting at our ground. Our lighting is poor, and with that comes a risk as far as insurance goes as well, and that is not cheap. We are talking \$180 000 to establish lighting which is good enough to play both football and cricket. I suppose what I am trying to get at is that we are trying to improve facilities, but with that comes a cost. To what degree does that take away from the little improvements we have made if we have to go way over the top and have big expenditure like that?

We also work with the committee of management in those areas. It is not just the footy club itself; other clubs use the facilities. There are other people who probably would help us gain those grants and the likes to get the facility up to a great standard so that it is utilised as much as it possibly can be, although it could not possibly be used much more than it is now — that is, 5, 6 or 7 days a week. There are a couple of cricket games on at a weekend. I suppose what I am driving at is that we need to help and nurture the kids in our club, and with that comes a financial responsibility. Basically we are looking at making no money over a 12-month period. We turn over \$200 000 a year, and at the end of it we are left with nothing. You could probably say that it is absorbed with player payments and the likes, but it is very expensive to run a club. I will hand over to Mark for term of reference (c).

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Probably I will expand to other points, but I will start with term of reference (c) about demographic shifts. In most of the submissions you have received you probably have seen those DOI-type

publications which highlight the closure of football clubs around the area in terms of the correlation between demographic shifts and the closing of football clubs. We will not elaborate on those that much, but if you go back 20 years you would have had 20 per cent from Horsham leave and 80 per cent of the population staying around. Now it is probably the reverse. We do not have any definitive statistics, but that is our understanding of the sorts of numbers.

Once upon a time it was probably a bit more attractive if a player was going down to Ballarat to study — or even to Melbourne — that if they could work their roster or school schedule they would get their Mondays and Fridays worked out so that they could come home and play at the weekend, but that just does not seem to happen any more. They are not necessarily doing that. Once they are gone, they are down in Melbourne, and they are there. Invariably they do not play football as well, so it is generally harder to attract those players back as well. As well as sport there is entertainment. We are probably a bit fortunate that we do not have many competing sporting interests — probably basketball is one that goes head to head a little bit more in the winter season.

There is a small soccer competition going now, but it is not something that competes. We are still standing alone as a winter sport as far as choice goes, but it does not stop the fact that we are competing with the likes of computer games and the digital age, and the fact that a child is equally happy sitting behind a computer desk and playing interactively with a computer as opposed to actually getting out and actively participating in a sport. That is probably about as much as we want to say on term of reference (c).

**Mr HARTIGAN** — There is also the impact that other clubs in the area have on us, like major league clubs. For example, our junior development is affected by the North Ballarat Rebels, who identify our kids and take them away. We embrace that wholeheartedly. If our kids are good enough to go to that level and play in that footy, that is great, but it makes a big hole. At the moment we have half a dozen kids who have been identified from our club. They will go away and hopefully they will make it, but by gee it leaves a hole at home.

Obviously we have minor league clubs at little towns who identify the positivity that a netball and football club has in their environment. If they do not have one you can see that the town will suffer dramatically. They probably identify a more mature footballer and offer them ludicrous amounts of money. Some take it, but a lot do not. We are proud of a lot of our players for not taking the dollar and making it the be-all and end-all. We are proud of that fact. We are talking of amounts like \$20 000 and \$30 000 being offered to country footballers. It is not a huge amount of money in some areas, but by gee it takes a big hole out of our — —

**Mr McQUILTEN** — The salary cap is \$50 000.

**Mr HARTIGAN** — Our salary cap is \$55 000 with our coach and our highest-paid player not in it, so whichever way you want to rejig that, you can do whatever you like. Minor league is \$30 000, and some of these clubs I am talking about are minor-league clubs. I do not want to elaborate or dob anyone in, but the offers are there, and you cannot blame these small towns in some way, because they realise that if they have not got a footy or netball club then the social fabric is gone and the kids will not stay. They will leave and go to the major cities for work, employment and to live — to make a life there and never come back.

Our major league wants our kids to go on to AFL, and we have had a fair few from our club who have done that. We are very proud of them. We have our minor league around the area that tries to take our players and places a dollar on their heads, so that also puts pressure on the almighty dollar at our club.

With opportunity as far as employment goes, we see that some of the major works in this city are given to outside building firms. Once upon a time they used to come into town and employ a lot of the kids, but obviously they do not need them as much with the technology. They tend to bring their own workers now, so kids identify that there is not a lot of work around — that is, not a lot of apprenticeships in the trade and all the rest of it — so they have to stay at school and then they pursue tertiary education. That is another area that we are fighting as well. I will leave Mark to go to term of reference (e).

**Mr WILLIAMS** — Term of reference (e) looks at some of the costs. I have an indicative outline of costs that we probably represent as core costs we need to incur before we even put a netball or football team on the ground. It is \$23 000; we are \$23 000 behind before we even start. There is a range of insurances, and the VCFL has done a pretty good job with its insurance program. But it is not just those insurances, it is the insurances

associated with the council as well which relate to recreation reserves and associated buildings, and the council has its own infrastructure on those reserves as well. There are those costs.

The next is ground rental, which is \$5500; and in our case that actually includes the water charge as well. Netball surface resurfacing is an area that moves all the time. We have had to change the surface every five years and that is about \$10 000 a throw, so it is \$2000 each time and is something that you need to provide for. Rates and charges, \$1000; water costs, independent of what goes onto the reserves, so what is consumed in the clubhouse and the clubrooms themselves — there are still water costs associated there — \$600; umpires and officials, which we elaborated on before; and then there are just some general compliance issues that cost \$2000. In the next item I cover those compliance issues. That is probably an area that makes it even more difficult for clubs, unless you can attract a professional person who is sufficiently interested in the club to help out with some of these activities. The compliance issues you have to deal with are associations incorporation, tax and its various aspects, Workcover, superannuation guarantee, and liquor licensing. We operate three separate sorts of licences. With that there is also a requirement that you put your people through the responsible serving of alcohol course and there is a cost associated with that. We have about 30 members whom we have sponsored through a RSA course. Food registration, similarly — we need certification in that area.

Fundraising: there are specific rules that you have to comply with, in terms of what you are doing with those moneys that you are raising through raffles or alternative sources. VCFL rules and regulations are a whole set of rules and regulations in their own right and obviously you need to be cognisant of those. Then there are the by-laws of your sub-bodies, like the Wimmera league and so on. It is fairly daunting for your general volunteer to step into a club and all of a sudden be exposed to all these sorts of things. It does work against getting people involved. There is no doubt about that.

**Mr McQUILTEN** — Is that why you are doing it?

**Mr WILLIAMS** — I have been looking over my shoulder for a while.

**Mr HARTIGAN** — On the last term of reference, I think we have all prior to this touched on the fact of the administrator and what Mark has just suggested there, that volunteers are few and far between. The people who are willing to be there on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, they are just hard to come by. The people who do do it you probably get in the role for three or four years and then they are burnt out. They suggest they have had enough and it is time for somebody else to take it on and they just basically force the hand of the club to get someone to do it. There are not too many people who stick their hand up and say, 'I'll get in there and do my job'.

I have been involved with the footy club as a family probably from 1950 right through to now. I have had some time away as well. My boys are now playing with it, so I would like to see it remain, but what we have to do at the club level to guarantee that we are going to be here in 10 years time, well, it is just getting too hard, it really is. I do know — any sort of help we can get or give as a club, because we have identified it and we thought we had done pretty well over the past 10 years to get ourselves to a level and we would gladly share the information with people. But it is money basically. I know you can suggest that it is player payments and all the rest of it. We keep ours to a minimum, pay our coaches and that is about it. We have to fight tooth and nail to hold onto our players because of the money that is brandished around. We think we have done pretty well over the last few years and hopefully will remain for the next few. Thanks very much for your time. Mark has something to sum up with.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — I do not think we need to cover those issues. There are some names there that you would certainly be familiar with and some that you would not be familiar with because they are still more emerging. For example, Jordyn Burke, the most recent one, the main benefit we got from Jordyn is that we have actually got a computer now by virtue of his Australian Institute of Sport scholarship award. That is fantastic for us and fantastic for Jordyn, but we will not see Jordyn again.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much.

**Mr MITCHELL** — On the TAC Cup limiting the ability of communities to see young juniors play locally, have you guys got a suggestion? It has been brought up before, the opportunity. If the good kids go and play in the TAC Cup, if they can come back on the other weeks to play locally, there is an option there to attract more people, as they come and see these young stars play.

**Mr HARTIGAN** — That area is obviously something that I think the AFL could help us with, in the actual taking of a kid that stays at home — lives and works in the town — and is out of the system. He is a 19 or 21-year-old — or that age — and he is actually drafted. No-one that age is drafted from here. The kids know at 14 that if they do not get into that system then after that footy is going to be lost to them. I do not mean any denigration of the TAC Cup. I have kids who are doing it now. My brother's young bloke has just been drafted to Richmond and he was part of that environment, so it is beneficial. I do not have any problem with that as such. We would love to have these six kids on the list who would all be senior footballers this year to enhance the gate takings obviously. People would come and want to watch them. They have to go on and pursue it the way they do it. There have to be older kids who are late developers who could possibly go into these systems as well, but they just do not get it. The kids know that; they are not stupid. They identify that when they are 14 years old and they go into that system because otherwise they are not going to be picked.

**The CHAIR** — Has it been thought that there could be a shorter season, for example, for the TAC Cup that would allow the kids to come back and play for the local footy side throughout the finals or more through the end of the season, so it would be a bit of a boost?

**Mr HARTIGAN** — It would be a boost, but you identify that your kids are going to go at the start of the season and you try to recruit the calibre of player who will maintain your seniors to a standard — it will hurt your reserves — and to put six kids into that team at the end of the year and drop six of those blokes out it may not hurt you that year in your pursuit of excellence but it is going to hurt you the next year when those six blokes say, 'Stick it; I'm not staying with you because I have worked all year and I have lost out at the end. When the Holy Grail was there you stuck me back in the reserves'. You are knocking your head against a wall a bit there.

**The CHAIR** — That is a good call. Thanks.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Would you prefer breaks during the year, perhaps? Say if they had three weeks on and then two weeks off, so that there was a chance that you could give a couple of these fellows a run back in the local side?

**Mr HARTIGAN** — We have made it known to these kids that if they could come back we can place them in a senior game. It gets increasingly harder if there are six of them. We had Adam Goodes, for example, play with us for two years — he played two games. When he was available, that was the only time. Because, of course, of his excellence, he went on to represent Victoria and Australia — or whatever he did — he has done the whole kit and caboodle. So his availability was, I think, two games for two years.

**Mr MITCHELL** — Was he a bit of a drawcard when he did come back?

**Mr HARTIGAN** — Yes, he was a little bit of a drawcard, but you did not know whether you had him or you did not. It was told to you on Thursday night at 10 o'clock, or whatever.

**Mr WALSH** — Bruce, most of the things we have talked about are not in the jurisdiction of the state government. Have you guys got a couple of key messages that you would like to give us on things that come under the state government jurisdiction, things that we could do that can help country football?

**Mr HARTIGAN** — I suppose the thing would be to keep kids in the town or city the size of this, to somehow adapt a tertiary education unit with the TAFE college here that would keep kids in town. I am not saying that your rocket scientist could pursue his tertiary education here, but certainly a primary education teacher or a physical education teacher or someone like that may be able to do that. It is not a lot of people — you might be talking about only a dozen or 15 — but that would obviously give an area this size something. The people from Dimboola, Minyip, Warracknabeal and so on may be able to travel, pursue tertiary education and then go back into their environments and play footy at a local level if they could still do their education, rather than have to go to Ballarat or Melbourne. We have had a number of kids who have been real good kids and won league best and fairest and things like that at junior level, have gone away to school and do not play footy any more. They go away and they do not look at a club down town; they just give it away. They pursue their education and then go into the work force. Perhaps we could get something along those lines to help keep those young blokes in town — and young netballers as well, because I do not want to talk only on the football side of things. We will lose two or three of our netball girls this year when they go away to uni.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — On the theme of the AFL, it bandied around a figure of approximately \$15 million that it has put into country or grassroots football. Do you see any benefits of that alleged investment at your level? If you were the AFL commissioner for a week, how would you change the funding streams for clubs like yours?

**Mr HARTIGAN** — We have had benefit out of it because of the likes of Adam Goodes.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Aside from that; you are atypical.

**Mr HARTIGAN** — And Jordyn Burke. We have got that funding, but as far as direct funding goes I am not too sure what — —

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Programs? Does the VCFL run programs for administrators?

**Mr WILLIAMS** — The VCFL runs some support programs. It is certainly getting more proactive in supporting clubs and leagues in an administrative sense — that is, we look for less support. We have made the point about match day administration and where it can be improved. The country football industry would be one of the few industries that is manually based in terms of the amount of paper it generates on a Saturday, but that could be done with a keystroke on a computer. There are certainly a few areas, and that would ease the administrative burden on a number of clubs. Those things could be made easier. But as far as the AFL is concerned, it might be money for running clinics and those sorts of things. Certainly we have facilitated clinics down at the city oval in the last couple of years, junior Auskick-type programs, but as a club we do not see any direct funding coming from the AFL.

**Mr HARTIGAN** — Maybe the AFL could adopt a traineeship-type thing with a kid in each identified as one of these quality kids who could do a three-year apprenticeship with someone — a mechanic or a builder. At least that is three years. I would not know how it would be fair to distribute that funding and money. To come up with something is a bit hard. I would like to identify and develop a kid in this city, someone like Jordyn Burke. He could have stayed here and pursued his tertiary education funded by the AFL. He could have spent two years here as a senior footballer and then have been taken to wherever — Essendon, for instance — and we could have ridden on his back. He could have drawn people through the gate as well and still have ended up at the same goal, but he is lost to our community because he has been identified by a college in Ballarat, offered a scholarship and away he has gone. You do not blame the kid — we are happy to see him go and wish him all the best — but if he was able to do that here, then we might not have as many hassles as we have.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks very much, Bruce and Mark. You will receive a copy of the transcript. You can correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

**Witnesses withdrew.**