

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Warrnambool – 10 March 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield
Mr B. P. Hardman
Mr C. Ingram
Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell
Dr D. V. Naphthine
Mr P. L. Walsh

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray
Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

Witnesses

Mr W. F. Nunn, President (sworn); and
Mr P. T. O'Keefe, Chairman (sworn), South West District Football Netball League.

The CHAIR — Welcome. I know you were present earlier as well, so I will not go through the preface. Would you give us your full address and tell us who you are representing today?

Mr NUNN — Wayne Francis Nunn, RMB 7220, Tyrendarra. I am the current president of the South West District Football Netball League.

The CHAIR — And you are representing the organisation today?

Mr NUNN — Yes.

Mr O'KEEFE — I am Phillip Thomas O'Keefe. I reside at 'Farena', Douglas Road, Coleraine. I am the chairman of the board of the South West District Football Netball League.

The CHAIR — If you would like to give us a presentation for 5 minutes or so, we will ask some questions afterwards.

Mr O'KEEFE — Country football faces many challenges to survive. At the grassroots level, two of the greatest challenges are: firstly, the lack of players; and secondly, the financial burden placed on clubs. Over the past 40 years the league has had three name changes as a result of adding and subtracting clubs within the league. The name changes were necessary to reflect the larger area from which the clubs came. The original league name was Portland Districts League, which later became the Portland–Port Fairy Football League. The present league name of South West reflects that we now have teams as far north as Cavendish. South West was originally comprised of 16 teams. Now there are eight, which are Westerns Branxholme/Wallacedale, Cavendish, Tyrendarra, Dartmoor, Coleraine, Heathmere and Sandford. Some of the clubs that folded were Merino/Digby, Winnap, Pigeon Ponds, Bessiebelle and Yambuk. Other teams, like Balmoral and McArthur, amalgamated into other leagues for survival. Branxholme and Wallacedale amalgamated within the South West league.

Some factors contributing to the decreasing numbers of football players include: lack of work opportunities in the country, school leavers moving out of small country towns to further their education, a downturn in farm profits; and the introduction of blue gums which reduces employment opportunities on the land. The greater choice of the different sports — for example, soccer, baseball, hockey, basketball et cetera — take numbers away from Australian Rules Football. Parents today are encouraging their children to take part in non-contact sports.

Financial difficulties that clubs face today include: players expect to be paid; the general running costs; and the added costs of insurance. It is becoming harder to find anyone to assist around the club on a voluntary basis. For example, the upkeep of the grounds and amenities was always carried out at working bees. Now clubs often have to pay a tradesperson to carry out the work. New Worksafe regulations have placed restrictions on work that volunteers can do around the club.

Fundraising is becoming more difficult as country towns become smaller. Small businesses are burdened with requests for sponsorship from many other clubs, not just the football club. Fundraising opportunities are becoming limited due to the high cost and/or availability of insurance.

For country football to survive, the difficulties that have been presented throughout this inquiry need to be addressed at all levels, from club level to Spring Street. Earlier, sitting in the gallery and listening, one of the points that was touched on was amalgamation. At the end of the day amalgamation is probably the last resort. The VCFL is amalgamating. The south-west region, which consisted of the South West Football League, the Mininera Football League and the Western Border Football League, has now amalgamated with the Hampden region to form the south west border region. That has gone from where the south-west region was three leagues and I think it is now up to nine leagues, incorporating major, minor and district leagues.

Where the VCFL had 14 area managers, they have reduced that number to 9 and are saving some \$100 000. I was also a member of the south-west board. The south-west were quite happy with the three leagues, which were working quite well together. We do not believe that amalgamation is to the benefit of football, especially as it is on a volunteer basis. We now have to travel from Cavendish to Warrnambool for meetings, whereas before it was centralised; we only had to go to Hamilton. This puts an extra burden on volunteers.

Previously Dr Denis Napthine also touched on water on grounds. Our first round is on 17 April. We have two clubs in the northern end of our league that are having problems now with grounds cracking due to lack of water. There is

no water available to water their grounds, and to buy water becomes a financial burden. Having grounds in that condition poses a great safety risk under the risk management.

The AFL has also been touched on. The AFL coming into schools at the junior level is great. However, being on that board and listening to Jock Whiting, who was the junior development officer for south-west and now the south-west border region, every year he fights with the AFL to have named players come to those schools. The AFL is sending unnamed players — I think they might be no. 60 in their senior list. That is no benefit to juniors. They want to see the named players of today.

Another thing that was touched on was the salary cap. The VCFL are actually talking about abolishing the salary cap in the near future. Thank you

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Is that a good idea?

Mr O'KEEFE — I do not think it is. I think there needs to be a ceiling. There are issues, which we have stated previously: how do you police it?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you support having a salary cap officer at VCFL level, so that they have resources to assist leagues like yours to enforce it?

Mr O'KEEFE — Yes, but there is more than one way to skin a cat. I think corporates are getting involved in probably some of the major leagues. I believe they might be paying the players direct and the clubs are not involved whatsoever. It is totally under the table — totally hidden.

Mr NUNN — I actually do the salary cap in the south west league. Our league has not got the finances for clubs to really blow it out, anyhow. There are no AFL coaches down there, or anything. The under-the-carpet thing you were talking about, that happens all the time. If a company wants to give a bloke a bit of petrol money to come along and play, that happens all the time. There is nothing, as a salary cap officer, that I can do about it. You know a lot of that goes on, but if you can get someone to do it — we are there for survival and no-one is blowing the competition out of the water with money, anyhow. If they were, then maybe you would have to start stamping on it, but at the minute most of our clubs are trying to survive. They blow all the money.

The CHAIR — Do you think you will lose a few players because of the salary cap not being adhered to in the other leagues? You have other leagues all around and on top of you. Are players leaving and not playing for your local towns and local communities because the salary cap is not being adhered to by all leagues?

Mr NUNN — That would happen now. Probably the Western Border would think the South West is shocking, but there is probably the odd one there. Perhaps a middle-of-the-range player will go out and be an assistant coach in the South West league for a bit of money, but we are not talking about huge money. This year Portland footy club probably thinks Tyrendarra, Westerns and Heathmere are the worst mobs going, but the amount of players who have left Portland this year to take on coaching roles and stuff in the South West is probably a bit too large.

Dr NAPHTHINE — We had Phil Currie before representing the Southern Grampians shire — and we know that he also has been a successful coach in your league — talking about the fact that when you get past the top 10 or 15 players in any club you get a lot of players who are participating at your level for recreational, social support, community-type reasons and that perhaps at the reserves level in minor leagues there ought to be greater flexibility in terms of having unrestricted benches so that if anyone wants a game they can get one. You can have more changes. He was suggesting that perhaps you only play three weeks out of four, and things like that, just to keep the interest alive. Has the league considered that, or has it looked at that as being a retrograde step?

Mr NUNN — In our league I would not be surprised if you could not find one player who misses out on a game. The numbers are not there for that. For instance, with Tyrendarra playing Sandford, Sandford might ring up on the Thursday night and say, 'We have only got 12 players'. The VCFL allows Tyrendarra to supplement its team. We might give them five players. That happens all the time. If one team has a lot of players and the other team has not, they will switch around, so that does happen. I am a great believer in the unlimited bench, because usually when finals time comes around the best team will have be in and there will be three blokes who miss out. In senior football maybe that is the way it has to go, but with a reserves team you would think that the ones who are going to miss out are not going to make a lot of difference in the team anyhow.

Dr NAPTHINE — That is right, and then next year they might not turn up to play at all if they played most of the year and cannot play in the finals, or something like that. One of the things we have to try and do in country footy is keep people who want to play playing, and we have to be careful about having rules that stop that.

Mr NUNN — I am involved in junior football as well, and one thing I see is that the 16-year-olds do drop out once they have finished under 16s mainly because they can play basketball through the week. They can do all their sports at night throughout the week and do not need to complicate their weekends with a game of football. Whether or not grounds getting more lighting and playing the odd Friday night game will encourage those kids to play, I do not know, but they definitely drop out because they can play all their sport through the week. The other thing we notice is that Alcoa is all shift work. Saturday is just as much a working day as any other day at the moment. It is hard enough to get a job, and you do not want to jeopardise it by saying, 'I cannot work Saturday because I am playing football'.

Dr NAPTHINE — You have raised the issue of insurance. What are the particular problems with insurance, and have you got any ideas about solutions?

Mr NUNN — Solutions! It would be nice to be able to have them.

With insurance, you can go back to the work situation where a young kid might hurt his arm and misses a bit of work, but there might be a financial problem. But we cannot afford to be insuring a person against loss of wages. You can insure them for the medical part, but to insure a player for loss of wages is phenomenal. Our club could not even contemplate the idea of insuring every player. We give the players the option. We say, 'If you want to take it out, basically you are going to pay it yourself'. If you get hurt and the boss says, 'I am not having this'. The kid is going to say, 'Unless you can give me insurance I am not going to play'. You cannot do that.

Mr O'KEEFE — Can I pick up on that too? Both the federal and state governments are looking at litigation. There has been some talk of putting a cap on payouts of litigation. That is one of the biggest issues we have, which gets back to fundraising and things like that. It is so hard to find insurance; underwriters just will not touch you. If the government was to put a cap on litigation payouts, that would probably make insurance companies rest a bit easier, and insurance would be easier to find. The bachelor and spinster balls are defunct because they cannot find insurance. Activities for young people in the country are just not there. They go back to the football club for the social aspect of it. Football is probably one of the few social aspects left for the young ones. It is the biggest one around. Yes, governments need to look at litigation.

Mr MITCHELL — How do you go with retention of players and umpires.

Mr O'KEEFE — The South West sort of set up its own umpires association two or three years ago.

Mr NUNN — We found that we did not have umpires. The umpiring association said it could not; it was doing Western Border, Mininera and us. The association decided that one league would not have umpires, and ours was the unfortunate one that did not have umpires. We spent 12 months umpiring ourselves; the clubs umpired their own games. After that we had quite a few ex-umpires and ex-footballers who said, 'We would not mind setting up an umpiring association just to do South West games', so we are one of the few leagues that pays a coach to coach the umpires, the league itself. They formed their own group, and it is going along very strongly at the minute.

Mr O'KEEFE — In relation to the juniors — you asked about the juniors — the SDFL does not have an under-18 age, so with anyone under 16 who has any potential in football whatsoever Western Border is pretty quick to jump on them, because they have the under 18s. So South West loses a lot of young players to Western Border and its under 18s. It is very hard to keep the young ones within the South West, hence a lot of our clubs are hard pushed to find a seconds team. People will not travel to away games either. You find it is a lot easier to field a home team than it is an away game. Having that unlimited bench could be an answer. It might encourage people to turn up because they know they are going to get a run.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving us your time today to come and make this presentation. It has been really good. You will get a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight, and you will be able to correct any errors of fact or grammar but not matters of substance. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.