

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Modewarre – 9 March 2004

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Mr J. Stoward, Publisher (sworn).

The CHAIR — Could you please give your full name and address for the purpose of the transcript?

Mr STOWARD — I am John Stoward, and my address is 11A Pearl Street, Torquay.

The CHAIR — Are you attending as an individual today?

Mr STOWARD — Yes.

The CHAIR — Any evidence you give us will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. Can you make some preliminary comments and we will have some questions for you afterwards?

Mr STOWARD — I do not feel I am qualified to comment on the strength and long-term viability of our great Australian game, but I would like to draw attention to one aspect — that is, the recording of competition and club histories. Football history is being lost. Between 1899 and 1999 at least 100 football clubs have folded. Think about it — 100 clubs — and that is in the Geelong region, not in Victoria. The figure is probably closer to 150. I have come across references to at least a dozen football competitions that have also folded in the Geelong region in that period.

There is no point going onto the Internet to try and find details of these missing clubs and competitions; they are not there. The files of the *Geelong Advertiser* go back over 150 years, and while its records are very good they do not record in most instances the demise of clubs or competitions. With a number of clubs and competitions going into recess at the start of World War I and World War II, many of them sank without trace, never to re-emerge. During my research in Tasmania I found very similar figures and circumstances over that period. The number of times that records have been lost in clubroom fires and house fires of secretaries or presidents is incredible, but it is water under the bridge. Nowadays, with the computer and so much access to computers by so many people, the issue of recording history is just so different. I compiled my first football history book 30 years ago. If you compare then and today, it is a doddle now.

The point of my concern is having someone, preferably the AFL, coordinating the various club histories into a safe database. It is the nature of most football tragics like myself to be obsessed with the history of one club and often to have been aligned with that club for generations. In a typical 10 or 12-team competition in Victoria I suspect that you will find two or three teams only that have compiled but not necessarily published their club history. On a competition level, it is even worse.

Yesterday a football identity with an encyclopaedic knowledge of football of his club died. Another one died today and another is going to die tomorrow. What does it matter? What does that have to do with the viability of clubs today? In my opinion it does matter. John Smith may not be drafted by Geelong in 2005 but he may one day have played 300 games for Modewarre. He will sell raffle tickets, mark the boundary line, wave the flags in the kids junior match. After playing possibly for 20 years, probably ending up with a bung knee for the rest of his life, he is the bloke who keeps the game going.. He will have set a club record for Modewarre, but who knows? We lost all our records in a fire in 1978.

Something needs to be done urgently about recording our priceless football heritage and with the computer it is so easy. I do not believe we have been well served by the Victorian Country Football League in coordinating records of clubs and competitions. I believe a comprehensive record of the competitions' and clubs' premierships, best and fairest winners, leading goal kickers, life members, main office bearers, captains, coaches, most number of games played, record club scores — preferably in seniors, reserves and juniors — going back as far as possible should be gathered across the state.

Hearing some of the issues here today — and you again will hear a lot more around the state — it might seem that the history aspect is pretty minor when, as the Colac and District Football Netball league highlighted, clubs are facing a dire struggle to survive. It is the culture of Australian rules football that, sure, we have the elite — the very, very few that get right to the very top — but, as I said earlier, in many of our smaller communities it is the football club that is keeping the community going. To keep a club going, things like club records, premierships, best and fairest winners, and life members should be recorded. You do not get life members in any sport easily. They are people who have probably worked 10, 15 or perhaps 20 years in a club and are acknowledged there. Young guys coming into a sport might say, 'Oh, the old fart over in the corner there, he is a life member. Big deal'. But without that old chap the club would not be there for these young kids to play with.

As I said earlier about the fictional John Smith playing for Modewarre, if he does play 300 games, the guy is entitled to some recognition. If records are not kept, what is it compared against? I found in compiling football records in Tasmania that fair dinkum, football is really serious in Tassie. It is a joke here in Victoria by comparison. It is a matter of life and death over there. The culture of Australian rules football has not been watered down as it has been here in Victoria; soccer has not got a toehold; basketball is not strong. It is still an absolute religion in Tasmania. Good or bad, that is the way it is there — much stronger than it is certainly in metropolitan Victoria, perhaps more similar to what it might be in country Victoria. When I compiled the comprehensive history of Tasmanian football it meant an awful lot to clubs that did have rich histories that there was some yardstick to measure them by.

There are certainly people out there who are obsessed, as I am, with club records and history. Like the fellow who died yesterday and the one who will die tomorrow, their history is being lost. It does not involve injection of massive funds to do something about this — just be a bit smarter; the records are there. Hopefully someone, perhaps within the AFL, will give a talk with hand on heart about the heritage of the game. If they threw some effort into them compiling this, it would enrich the culture of Australian rules football in this state.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, John.

Mr INGRAM — How do we compile the records of the leagues that have already folded?

Mr STOWARD — Newspaper records, generally. You are able to do an awful lot. On the wall there you can see a photo of the Elliott Football Association. Modewarre won Elliott Football Association premierships prior to the last war and just after it. Most of the younger people today have never heard of the Elliott Football Association, in which this club was very strong. There are records — I have discovered comprehensive records — of the Elliott Football Association in the *Geelong Advertiser* files. It just takes time, not money.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You have said you have compiled a number of histories in a different state. Can you identify some common themes about the clubs and leagues that have folded in the past and are there are some recurring themes you can see around this region or in the broader state, if you like?

Mr STOWARD — Contrary to a comment made a bit earlier about reserves football and junior football, anyone who has been involved in football knows how important it is to have juniors. It is the lifeblood, with them coming through. That is a motherhood statement, of course it is. But there have been instances, particularly in the Otways and certainly I am sure in the more remote parts of Victoria — is it not better to have a team, if you have a hard core of 14 or 15 locals? I saw it happen a number of times in Tasmania in my decade there. They had enough to have one team out of very small hamlets. They could not field reserves and juniors; they folded. Even if the juniors played, there was nowhere then to come back to to play for the area they grew up in. So I doubt the wisdom of clubs laying it down so strictly that: you have to meet all these criteria or you are not in. I think they have to be a little bit pragmatic about it. That is something where I think there should be a bit more flexibility. I certainly agree that junior football is the absolute lifeblood of it continuing. That is one issue, I guess, Michael — a little bit more flexibility in towns and clubs that are really struggling.

The other issue, I guess, is that prior to going to Tasmania I was involved in a football competition in the Sunbury district for a fair while. I saw a lot of similarities in the small towns there struggling to keep their football team going, with the emergence of the stronger Meltons and Sunburys — very similar to Tasmania. Sometimes clubs, be it here in Victoria or in Tassie, are unable to pick up because there are three teams or whatever going. A classic case was Heskett Football Club at Hanging Rock, an area that probably no longer has even a school but is just a region. They were knocking off the likes of the Sunburys and Meltons for premierships — albeit with a few Melbourne-based players — and the team retained an identity. They were eventually just swamped and they have probably gone into recess. I believe it is a case of it being so important for these smaller towns to try and keep their football teams alive.

Mr McQUILTEN — Flexibility! My father was the manager of the Gaffneys Creek football team. They could only play 14 a side because the ground was not large enough to play 18 a side. That is just a bit of history about having to be flexible in country football.

The CHAIR — John, thank you very much for coming. You will get a copy of the transcript.

Witness withdrew.