

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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Witnesses

Mr K. W. McLean, Chief Commissioner (sworn); and
Mr B. F. McTaggart, Football Manager (sworn), Wimmera Football League.

The CHAIR — Welcome. Please you give your full names and addresses, and state whether you are appearing as individuals or representing an organisation.

Mr McTAGGART — I am Barry Francis McTaggart, 103 Robinson Street, Horsham. I am representing the Wimmera Football League. I am the league's football manager.

Mr McLEAN — I am Kenneth Wayne McLean, 59 Lloyd Street, Dimboola. I am the chief commissioner of the Wimmera Football League.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. Could you please make a statement for 5-or-so minutes, then we will ask some questions.

Mr McLEAN — First of all I would like to say that Brendan's presentation was fantastic. I knew he would come up with something like that, so I will make mine pretty brief. We have been lucky in this area to have somebody like Brendan in the Victorian Country Football League over the years, as can be seen by his presentation. The Wimmera Football League has a long and proud record with the VCFL, and it is pleased that this inquiry is taking place. We hope something positive is created by the inquiry and the decisions made are put into place, both for the betterment of the game itself and the community which supports it.

A short time prior to 15 August last year a member from this league attended a forum at the MCG, which was called by the VCFL to discuss its submission to your inquiry. This submission was put forward at AFL House on 15 August 2003, and our league has a copy of that submission. It is this league's view that the submission is an extensive, accurate and well-presented document, which covers each of your terms of reference. Points stated in the document reflect the current situation in this area. Our league has nine clubs with three teams being based in the major centre of Horsham. There are two other teams at Ararat and Stawell, which have relatively large population bases, and the are rest Nhill, Warracknabeal, Dimboola and Minyip-Murtoa, which have small populations. The Horsham, Ararat and Stawell areas also field clubs in the Horsham and District Football League and the Mininera and District Football League. Each team fields seniors, reserves, thirds and fourths competitions, and most sides play mini games for children 11 years and under. Each of the clubs is also aligned with a netball club, which all have A grade, B grade, under-17 and under-15 competitions. The combined problems of population drift, ageing population, youth going to large population areas for school and work, better under-18 footballers being recruited by the Ballarat Rebels, and more people working on Saturdays and being unable to play sport are all taking their toll on player numbers. Players are playing until they are older to bolster team numbers, and as a consequence they are not following on into administrative roles where volunteers are becoming older and becoming less positive in their outlook.

We have a good umpiring association in the Wimmera Football Umpires Association in the area, but it is also suffering from lack of numbers. They are finding it harder to recruit younger members. In the last year several of them were running two games of a Saturday.

In this area football is still the dominant sport, both player and supporter-wise. Coupled with netball it encompasses most of the population of the Wimmera. The Wimmera has the highest participation rate for the age group 5 to 18 in the state, with a rate of 62 per cent. It follows that most families in the area attend football, and that football is a major part of the community. Football and netball are where everybody in this area meets, where they get to intermingle with others from nearby towns, and what they do for enjoyment and relaxation. In this area football and netball are not just games; they are part of life.

Most clubs in the Wimmera Football League are viable, but they do have concerns. The drought, which appears to be continuing, has caused problems, with some clubs being unable to water ovals pre-season. As the ovals are not able to be watered during summer periods they die off, thus causing problems when training begins, especially with the possibility of injuries. It also means extra work has to be put in to bring the grounds up to standard as the rejuvenated grass becomes tough and dangerous to play on. The cost of watering these grounds is too expensive for the clubs, and something needs to be put in place so these grounds can be watered at a reduced rate. Most of these grounds are the centrepieces of their towns and are used by various other sporting bodies in the community as a whole for recreation. Funds need to be available to train volunteers in both administrative and training roles. The administration of football and the roles of trainers have changed significantly over the last decade, and there is a need for them to become more competent at what they do so that they can realise the legal, moral and social obligations required of them.

Risk management and the use of computers are two examples where things are passing some volunteers by. You may say, 'Get rid of the volunteers and get someone in who knows what he is doing'. I say, 'Best of luck trying to get someone. You may as well train them'. 'Due care' seems to be a buzz phrase at the moment, but most volunteers would not even know what the phrase means. If we are to protect those members of our society who are doing the most to ensure the betterment of their communities, we should be prepared to give them the tools and the schools to do so. It would also be advantageous to offer these skills to younger members of our communities to encourage them to moved into these areas. This would assist younger members of the community to be more aware and more likely to take up these positions at an earlier age. These skills brush off into the community and to the families and friends of those trained, and it is beneficial to the community as a whole.

The sporting environment is the best place for communities to interact. People of differing backgrounds meet, intermingle, laugh, joke, debate and have a good time together. In the Wimmera the biggest meeting place is a football ground on a Saturday afternoon. Where else can so many people with so many different backgrounds meet and have fun in a relaxed atmosphere?

To keep this great game flourishing we need to address the need to recruit and keep umpires. Career paths need to be available to those who make the effort to put on the whites and blow the whistle. They struggle to get numbers because of abuse and failure to receive recognition, and in some cases the sheer amount of travel required to attend training and matches. While they do receive remuneration for their services, the incentive to join their ranks initially is not high. Funding for uniform and training may be a way of creating the incentive, and once there the mateship and brotherhood involved should be enough to keep them there.

Most Wimmera Football League clubs have good facilities in relation to clubrooms; however, there are few facilities for netballers and female umpires. The netball courts play second fiddle to the football ground, and whilst several clubs have recently upgraded their courts, some are in need of renewal. We believe grants for capital works should be available for clubs to improve their facilities, even if clubs could be given interest-free grants to attain these improvements. It would better than the current system where clubs get a grant through their city councils or shires. At least they would feel they are masters of their own domain. Whatever the problems are with football, they can all be overcome with the generosity of local communities, and hopefully with your input.

There is, however, one thing that can only be fixed up by government — that is, getting football back into schools. We can argue till the cows come in — which they do not often up here — about kids playing contact sports at school, peer pressure, mum not wanting Johnny injured, what the insurance cover is and a myriad of other problems — but football must be available to our youth at school. It amazes members of this league that boys can run, hop, ride bikes, play soccer, climb ropes, high jump, long jump, throw javelins and discus, play basketball and do various other things at school, but they cannot get football on the curriculum. From what is known about bike education and the way they ride around the streets, it would be preferable that they all played football — after all, there are less people killed playing football than riding bikes.

How much can a runner, a bike rider, a soccer player, a gymnast, a high jumper, a long jumper, a javelin or discus thrower or a basketballer make in this state? Unless he is one of the few champions, it is not much. You would agree that AFL footballers make a pretty good living. There are a lot of country footballers who are making a good living out of the game. What about encouraging our youth at school to play football and make a living out of the game? No way! We discourage it. Is it because we do not have the courage to work out the problems, or is it the academics who believe we worship our sportsmen more than them?

Whatever the problem is, our code of football is unique, it is of national importance and it deserves to be preserved. We are not a league that has sat by and waited for things to happen; we have aggressively sought new teams to join our competition and embraced change. Change is nothing new to us, and we anticipate that this will be an ongoing trend. We hope our current clubs can flourish and continue in their own right. Over the last 25 years we have lost Jeparit and Rupanyup to minor league competitions, but we have gained Horsham United and Horsham Saints to our ranks. We have also had an amalgamation, with Minyip and Murtoa clubs joining ranks. I would urge you to take the VCFL submission into account when you make your findings.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. That was really comprehensive and gave us an idea of this area.

Mr WALSH — You have outlined very well what goes on with football here. If you were Premier for a day, what would you do that could improve country football in Victoria?

Mr McLEAN — We really need to get football back into the schools. That is the major thing that I see. I think we need to get it on the curriculum and give them courses to do at school, be they administration or towards playing. Whatever it be, it needs to be brought back into the schools. That would be the major thing.

Mr WALSH — Anything else?

Mr McLEAN — It is obvious that we have a problem with water and funding with some areas for ovals, especially when, as I said, they are supposed to be the centrepieces of a lot of the towns around here. Unfortunately at this stage a lot of them certainly are not centrepieces; they are just pieces of dry rock. Because of the cost of watering at this stage and the inability to get water in some places, these centrepieces are just being let go to rack and ruin and that needs to be addressed.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — My question is similar to what I asked Brendan about the AFL. From your league's perspective — and I know that your under 18s are ripped out and taken away to Ballarat, aren't they?

Mr McLEAN — That is correct.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — And they are very focused on elite levels of development. Pinching Peter's idea, if you were an AFL commissioner for a day, what would you do, if anything, to improve grassroots football? I am talking about your league and perhaps even more so the district leagues around you.

Mr McLEAN — I think Brendan touched on coaching accreditation. I think that is a big thing with junior football that can possibly be done. We need to get the right people involved in junior sport so that everybody is being taught the right things and they are doing the right things. There are a few junior coaches around and hangers-on who seem to be with them who go overboard and do not treat the young ones the way they should.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about a resource issue?

Mr McLEAN — This league has not got the resources to be able to run the courses that are required for the coaches to do. That is where we would need some sort of funding, to be able to get these people to be able to do the courses.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Are you happy with the AFL's contribution to grassroots football?

Mr McLEAN — The AFL contribution up here is negligible. You hardly see them. I mean, years ago they would come up and visit nearly every club in the area. Now they might come to Horsham once a year — I am not sure exactly how many times they come to Horsham, but it is rare to see them go to Nhill or Dimboola or Warracknabeal. So they are not getting around as much as they could. The young blokes certainly enjoy having them around. It gives them a boost and probably gives them something to look at.

Mr WALSH — Do you think when we had zoning and particular clubs had an area, the country leagues and country football clubs were actually better serviced by the AFL than they are now?

Mr McLEAN — There is no doubt that they were better serviced, by a long way.

Mr INGRAM — In your presentation you mentioned that the Wimmera has the highest participation rate for 15-to-18-year-olds in the state. It is fairly clear that for my area, East Gippsland, that is probably fairly accurate as well. It is the next age group, the 18-to-25-year-olds, where a large portion leave for job opportunities, apprenticeships and things like that.

Mr McLEAN — That is correct.

Mr INGRAM — Is that something that is a real challenge here — you develop the footballers and the metro regions are benefiting from the skills you put into those young people?

Mr McLEAN — It is a real problem here. Even when they come out of under 17s there seems to be a problem with retaining those players and getting them to go into senior ranks even. There is a huge number of kids travelling down to Melbourne for work, school, university, whatever. A lot of kids around here go to Ballarat to university, so we lose them once they leave school. How we get over those problems is very hard to define. We also have a problem with our ageing population. While a lot of areas are probably keeping the same or a similar

population, that population is becoming older and older, so the number of younger people who are in those centres is becoming less and less. So we have less to draw from for our sides and that is creating problems for us.

Mr INGRAM — Very simply, if you could retain more of those young people with employment and education in this region, you would end up with obviously a greater number of young people available to pick from?

Mr McLEAN — That is correct.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — As the Chair is temporarily absent, I would like to thank you for your presentation. Within the next couple of weeks you will receive a copy of the transcript. You are allowed to amend obvious errors in fact or grammar, but you cannot correct any matter of substance. Thank you very much for your presentation.

Witnesses withdrew.