

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Horsham – 11 March 2004

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Ms D. Trotter, Executive Officer, Wimmera Regional Sports Assembly (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Di. I know you have been here and have listened to our preliminaries beforehand about parliamentary privilege: what you say in here is covered by parliamentary privilege and what you say outside is not. Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. If you make a statement for 5 minutes or so we will ask some questions afterwards.

Ms TROTTER — Football in country areas has a proud tradition and a long history. It has provided country Victorians an opportunity to come together for competition and participation, created healthy rivalry on the field, engendered a team spirit and perpetuated the ‘looking after your mates’ ethic that has been part of Australian culture probably since the Anzac days. The more senior, the elderly, the middle-aged and current players and supporters and juniors of the game all have a story to tell about the fabulous grand finals of the 1950s, the high marking and long kicking of the 1960s, the great inter-league games of the 1970s, the toughness of certain players, the skills of others, and the post-game and post-season celebrations. All of these contribute to the social culture of rural communities and the community’s ability to connect people within their town and also between towns.

Football also provides the actual opportunity for people to meet and to share these memories and to focus on a positive in their lives, where there may be many negatives. We have already heard about drought and the rural economy and water and all those sorts of things. Most clubs host social functions before and after the game. Sometimes that is the only social connection or activity for the local population to engage in.

For country football to survive in an area where the population is ageing and decreasing, where young people are leaving the region to seek tertiary education and job opportunities, where competition from other sports and other recreational options is having an impact on participation numbers, football must look internally to seek solutions if it is to survive in this current and future climate.

Football — the very game itself is simply by its nature part of the problem. Traditionalists of the sport agree that the game must have 18 players on the field and that seniors, reserves and under-age teams must all participate on the day. With towns in the Wimmera having diminishing populations clubs cannot continue to supply the numbers required, forcing them to amalgamate with neighbouring clubs or disband. As a result some clubs either persist with fielding players who are older or promote youngsters who were not yet ready to contest with fully grown men. This often leads to a mismatch, usually in reserves, and it does little to promote the spectacle of the game itself.

Towns that lose their football clubs also suffer from an identity crisis. Local youth have no local role models — no locals to actually follow in their participation. Playing for a neighbouring town may be an option, but the increased travel may mean there are other easier, more accessible sporting alternatives.

Football games are played on weekends and with family structures these days that time is often used as the only time that families are together. Either a family attends the game — generally for the day — or it is split up or simply does not go. Football requires players to train twice a week and play on the weekends and this very entrenched time commitment is also turning many young people away from the sport, as they simply do not have the time to give to this type of structure. With other sport and physical activities options being available during the week for an hour or so, indoors, and some being able to be engaged in whenever the participant has the time and therefore fit very well into their lifestyle, football is a harder option, requiring more than some people can commit to.

Football is being overexposed. At the very elite level every match is programmed live, on television, the radio and with pre-match and post-match reports splashed all through the pages of the paper — not just the sporting pages either — and members of the public are becoming onlookers and not participants. Another result of this overexposure is the game’s image: it is seen to be a game where rough and tough play, often testing the limits of the rules is mandatory and where perhaps taking out a player via specific tactics and causing injury is acceptable. Particularly women, the mums of potential players, see the game as a threat to their offspring and do all they can to steer them away from taking up the game.

Injury — and serious injury at that — is now seen to be part and parcel of the game. Every week football injuries to profiled players are highlighted, even taking the back page headline of our national papers. The impact on local community football is being felt. First, parents are loath to have the children exposed to such risks. The cost of medical treatment may also be of concern, particularly in this area, where no doctors bulk-bill, specialist treatment for specific injury is not available locally — —

Mr McQUILTEN — Shame on the federal government!

Ms TROTTER — Some clubs have a policy of actually allowing players to play only if they have proof of a fully paid-up ambulance membership. This last point is because hospitals, which are the only medical treatment option open on a weekend, are quite a distance from where games are being played. We actually have a format in some of our leagues also where they actually provide a free membership to the local ambulance driver if he will bring the ambulance to the game. Of course this also ties up a lot of hospital and medical resources, with football being one of the top three sports where the players present with injuries to local casualty departments. Many employers are wary of employing footballers, due to the premise that the sport has a high injury risk and that may impact on the ability of the person they employ to perform their paid work.

Overexposure of elite players' lives, their financial arrangements and their movement between clubs, chasing better contracts, has also had an impact on the local level, with local clubs competing for an ever-diminishing pool of players. Clubs offer financial inducements — legally under the salary cap, of course — for players to play with their club or to travel back from job or school for weekend games. The reverse also occurs, with players seeking or expecting reimbursement to play football.

In this area netball and hockey have been intrinsic parts of the football competition. If and when the football club closes its doors, so too go the opportunities for these netball and hockey players. I have been involved in supporting the development of strategic and business plans for some netball clubs. The one limitation they have recognised is their very dependence on the health of the football club, both on and off the field.

The off-field operations also seem to be losing administrators faster than the on-field participants. This again is a direct result of our ageing and decreasing population plus the myriad of duties expected of them: risk management, financial obligations, insurance, food handling, incorporation, volunteer protection et cetera. And all of this in an era when the very scarce volunteer is time poor. Player payment, the high cost of public and legal liability insurance are also additional burdens that have been placed on the fundraising potential and resources of many clubs, further adding to the burnout of our volunteers.

There are also the ground maintenance costs, with many councils expecting full cost recovery from clubs. Again this impacts on the volunteer administrators raising funds to pay for this, or writing submissions for grants to support upgrades. The state of grounds at present is also of concern to everyone and is a major ongoing headache, not just for football but for all sports that use grass surfaces. In a snapshot survey conducted by the Wimmera Regional Sports Assembly, all clubs were asked a number of key questions about the current state of their grounds and what was needed to bring them up to standard. Of the replies we have received to date, indications are that of grounds that are maintained by local government, one local government has halved the number of grounds it supports and so is therefore making clubs share. Lack of water maintenance has also caused aeration problems when water has become available. The high cost of water in this area has led to limiting the watering of grounds and there is a lack of delivery systems — how do we get water onto grounds from perhaps some grey water systems?

Finally, while highlighting issues I know is really important, obviously solutions would be better. The following are some of the mechanisms — and I like the word 'mechanisms' because it is about how we get things done — and they may be worth considering. Improving the public image of football; highlighting more about the country clubs — their special interest stories, their successes and experiences, so that young people have someone within their local community they identify with, not at just the upper echelon; getting a better deal with the AFL — and we certainly heard about that from Rob Gersh. I am not a local Wimmera person — I have not been here long enough; I come from the Latrobe Valley, and we were in the Footscray zone. It was great to see our players go into that system. Those of my era that I went to school with were players like Bernie Quinlan and Geoff Jennings, and guys like that certainly encouraged local people because there was that direct link with the local club.

Also, vice versa we had those people come back to our community and talk to people within the community. We felt that we were perhaps part of that broader family of football. The game only caters to half the participant population — that is, males. It was interesting to speak to Hugh Delahunty before. I said, 'Where are the women on the panel?'. While there are some steps being implemented to address this, more probably could be done in rural areas. It was just a comment.

Where are our women coaches and presidents? We have them as secretaries and trainers of our league clubs, but we do not seem to have them in other positions.

Mr McQUILTEN — My cousin is one of those presidents down in Warrnambool.

Ms TROTTER — Thank you very much for that, but I am being specific about the Wimmera. The game is learned in community settings and schools. Adding a role for sport and including football in tertiary and teaching qualifications would certainly assist youngsters to get into the game. I know it is okay to target teachers who are already there, but if we are looking for long-term solutions, getting into the tertiary system would certainly seem to be an alternative. We need to modify the rules, particularly at primary level, to enable more participants to engage more actively in the game. I do know that that happens in some areas, but in others it does not. We need to look at reducing the number of players per team to alleviate pressure on club numbers. Clubs could appoint part-time administrators to handle issues for clubs, or perhaps groups of clubs could have a full-time administrator. Government could introduce funding schemes that could support water delivery systems, like bore sinking, piping and automatic sprinklers.

One of the issues clubs highlighted with our organisation was the fact that they do have access to water. They have been able to pay for it, but they do not have the volunteers to go and physically move sprinklers around their recreational grounds at the times they are designated to do so. Having a water board member who has a portfolio that looks after the interests of recreational water users, I am sure most water authorities — —

We had a campaign a number of years ago about this type of issue here in our region. Water authorities have a community service obligation, which is very difficult to define. It is very much a grey area. Either we find out what that specifically means, and maybe make that a part of their obligation to community organisations or even have a subsidised rate that could be given to sport and recreational groups or committees of management of those ovals. Perhaps the operational system of requirements for administrators could be simplified. I have heard all about that from Brendan.

Training for rural administrators could be provided. There is always an opportunity for football coaches to come together in every area, so why can we not give that same opportunity to administrators? I am talking about having a football operations unit for country footy to tap into, perhaps with a 1800 number, so that people do not have to be ringing from here to Melbourne, just simple sorts of things like that. Thanks very much for allowing me the opportunity to present. I hope I have not gone over too much territory that other people have.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Di. There are some very good points there. I share your water board sentiments in particular. That comes back to me from my local communities, and it is certainly not just in the Wimmera; it is a very broad spread.

Mr WALSH — If government, water boards or whatever do help football clubs financially, how do we then ensure that that is not channelled into extra player payments, which then bids up the price of payments, which makes it tougher for those clubs that do not get that sort of assistance?

Ms TROTTER — Thanks, Peter. That was always a nice question to ask. I said that one of my concerns was about paying players; if we did not pay players we would not have that concern, would we? But in the short term one of the things that Vicsport, which is the parent body of all our state sporting associations, proposed was to have this representative on the water boards that perhaps looked after that recreation area in terms of looking after people's interests. I guess I was not looking for subsidies to clubs to do; I was looking more in terms of infrastructure costs that would enable them to deliver things.

Mr WALSH — But they are one and the same in some ways if they do not have to find the money themselves. It is a subsidy by grant that they get the money to do the infrastructure, is it not?

Ms TROTTER — Sure.

Mr WALSH — Which potentially frees up their money to do other things such as player payments.

Ms TROTTER — It could be player payments, yes. I guess that in the short term, looking at the clubs around this area, I would suggest that I am looking more from my perspective at the impact on volunteers. I would see that it is a recreation committee of management that would receive the funding to provide that infrastructure

and not just the football club. Our recreation grounds are not solely run by one organisation; there is a committee-of-management system in place, so there would be representatives of netball, cricket, football and whoever else uses the grounds from that committee of management. Most of those have been set up by local government under section 86 of the Local Government Act. Perhaps that would be the most appropriate organisation.

The CHAIR — That is a good point. It is like that across the state to my knowledge..

Mr INGRAM — Just on a point of clarification, in your presentation you made the comment that with ground maintenance costs councils were expecting full cost recovery.

Ms TROTTER — Sure.

Mr INGRAM — We have had a number of councils put to us their breakdown of their expenditure. The evidence that has come across is that about 84 per cent are covered by councils. They recognise that they are not only football and netball grounds, they have a wider social benefit. Can you clarify whether this is something that some areas do differently?

Ms TROTTER — I guess what I was looking at in terms of that, Craig, was more around the fact that, yes, we do have local governments which recognise that they provide that 84 per cent of the cost or whatever. That would be for a premier oval in their town. For example, in Horsham we do not have one oval; we have three within the city bounds. So, yes, for their premier oval they might be providing that, but that same level of service does not equate back to all the rest of the grounds that are being maintained by local governments.

Mr INGRAM — So that is not necessarily consistent.

Ms TROTTER — There is not a consistent policy. It is certainly very much at the whim — I should not say at the whim — but, yes, local governments do have different policies about different things. My organisation covers five local government areas, and every single one of them has a different policy about how to deliver those services.

Mr INGRAM — There is another issue. You mentioned grey water and you also mentioned grants for delivering water systems.

Ms TROTTER — Yes.

Mr INGRAM — What availability would there be for take-up of grey water recycling and use on grounds? Obviously it is not consistent across the board — some probably have the potential for it. If government was to provide infrastructure grants for that type of thing, what sort of take-up would you think it would be, and what sort of opportunities would there be across your region?

Ms TROTTER — Already there have been two that I know of that have been funded under Sport and Recreation Victoria's minor facilities grants. One was at Warracknabeal and one has been to the north of Horsham here. So already two have been taken up under that sort of area. Obviously that funding also has diminished. There used to be opportunities for local government to present five options to Sport and Recreation Victoria annually. Now that has gone back to three, and only two of them now can be for the maximum of \$50 000. So there is less opportunity for those organisations perhaps to access that. I think one of reasons that some clubs have not gone down that path has been because of those barriers in terms of just not being able to look at it. I am not sure how many we would get, but I would suggest that there certainly would be opportunities for regional towns in this area, that there is an opportunity to utilise some of that water perhaps for the recreational grounds, if there was the infrastructure to deliver it.

The CHAIR — Do any of your local clubs use the bore water grants scheme as well?

Ms TROTTER — Yes, we do, but there was only very limited funding and it ran out very quickly. Certainly I think that there are more clubs and organisations seeing that model and wanting to use it, but who do not have the dollars to be able to access it.

Witness withdrew.