

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Ballarat – 27 April 2004

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Witnesses

Mr W. Storey-Smith, secretary-manager (sworn); and
Mr R. Haintz, president (sworn), Central Highlands Football League.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your attendance. Please give us your full names, addresses and the organisation you are representing.

Mr STOREY-SMITH — My name is William Storey-Smith, and I live at 97 Blackmores Road, Sulky. I am the secretary-manager of the Central Highlands Football League.

Mr HAINTZ — My name is Reg Haintz, and I live at 349 Ormond Rd, Springbank. I am the president of the Central Highlands Football League.

The CHAIR — Please present your submission briefly and then we will have some questions for you.

Mr STOREY-SMITH — We would like to thank the committee for the opportunity of giving the thoughts of the Central Highlands Football League to the committee. We have presented a small paper. We did not think it was appropriate to go through a lot of the stuff that had already been covered by the VCFL, as it would have been taken as given. I have supplied a mission statement for the Central Highlands Football League. It is to foster, promote, develop and administer the game for Australian Rules football and netball for the Central Highlands region.

Who is the Central Highlands football and netball league? It was formed in 1978 as a result of the amalgamation of two neighbouring leagues, and it currently comprises 13 clubs from the rural communities of Ballan, Beaufort, Bungaree, Buninyong, Clunes, Creswick, Dunnstown, Gordon, Hepburn, Learmonth, Newlyn, Springbank and Waubra. We are fully aware of the problems in country football and what is required as far as amalgamations and closures of clubs are concerned because it has directly affected us. The Central Highlands Football League is regarded as one of the most successful district leagues within the Victorian Country Football League, comprising almost 1300 football players and 800 netball players. The league's grand final is seen as the premier sporting event in Ballarat, with approximately 10 000 spectators witnessing the action at last year's grand final, in wet, wintry conditions. The league is administered by a seven-person executive under the direction of 26 club delegates, supported by a general manager, a secretary on a part-time basis, via an office in the general manager's home. The league does not have its own ground or home base. Each of the clubs support a strong Auskick program, which attracts another 800 young children under the age of 12 years to the sport, and I have offered a bit of a structure of the Central Highlands league there in the submission.

The Victorian Country Football League encapsulated the sentiments of the Central Highlands Football League in its submission to the parliamentary inquiry in August 2003, and it is not our intention to go over the same ground today; but it is important to bring to the committee's attention the specific interests of our clubs and the problems they face in today's competitive environment. In terms of participation, playing the game of football and netball — and that includes officiating and umpiring — provides a substantial sense of worth within our community. In most clubs entire families are involved at some level within the clubs — whether that be as a player, official, committee member or volunteer. This involvement is the fabric that unites the rural communities through the football-netball clubs, as there are little other opportunities within these communities. A particular example is our club of Springbank this year. It was the football premiers in 2000 and 2001; netball premiers in 2002, and runner-up in 2003. Over the last two seasons the football side has been in a serious decline, and finished second last in both 2002 and 2003 whilst the netball team has maintained its position as one of the strongest teams in the league. This club held a crisis meeting in early March due to the lack of commitment both on and off the playing arena. This meeting attracted several hundred people in a community that comprises mainly farmers, with a town population of probably no more than 500 to 600 people. This meeting unanimously voted to support the club. The plight of the Springbank club is little different to that of any other rural football club.

In terms of the administration of volunteers, the role of the local football club in administration has grown to an alarming level in the past five years, with the growth of litigation within the sporting arena placing an unnecessary unanimous burden, which is turning away many willing volunteers to sport in general, let alone the code of AFL. This growth has seen an increase in the amount of paperwork, along with a growth in technology that many volunteers are incapable of keeping up with. Estimates within our league suggest that each club secretary commit some 20 to 30 hours per week, and to find a volunteer with the time and expertise to commit to particularly rural communities is near on impossible. As submitted by the VCFL, the key area of importance to regional, rural and remote communities is the direct social benefits in the form of regular social interactions at games, regular social events at the club or conducted by the club, a general environment of hospitality, and the gathering of neighbouring communities in the social environment that the game of football provides. Indirect benefits as well are the

development of lifelong friendships through playing and working in a team and club environment, and the social interaction on a regular basis, allowing individuals within the community to interact with others with similar or like interests.

In terms of the demise of the football club, while our league is not currently faced with a decline in numbers due to other sports, there is nevertheless a decline. This highlights the fact that rural communities are diminishing due to a number of factors. School closures have a dramatic effect on recruiting of young players in small rural communities. Children travelling to school in central locations are discontinuing their involvement in sport due to the lack of suitable transport and distance required to travel to and from school.

Closures and relocation of significant rural businesses to support local communities cause families to relocate to gain employment. The need for young people to gain higher education of technical understanding to gain employment in a faster growing environment basically means that those people are no longer available for their local community. Financial costs have dramatically increased. This has been exacerbated by the development of local councils' policy of user pays as opposed to the service provided to the community through council rates and government grants. Many country regions were self-sufficient, financially viable and supportive of the local football community. However, amalgamations of councils where larger towns absorb small rural councils has seen a demise in the development and maintenance of rural facilities and/or an increase in maintenance costs that have been borne directly by the rural football-netball community. An example is maintenance of the Daylesford football ground in the Hepburn shire as opposed to the inability of the shire to supply a machine just to spike the ground to allow for better irrigation that would assist in the drought conditions at Clunes. Council amalgamations allow for an out of sight, out of mind set to develop with regard to remote communities. We have several clubs that are on fringes of councils where they are not able to get direct assistance from local councils. They seem to be out of sight and out of mind. We are faced with the problem of council policy of user-pays, lack of assistance from council to address current drought situations, and lack of understanding of what should be long-term solutions to areas of need as opposed to quick-fix solutions that have limited effect. The statement government announced last night is welcomed by the Central Highlands Football League. However, we felt that the notion of actually supplying water or carting water into the grounds is only a quick-fix solution. It should look at far more long-term solutions, and many of our clubs have already done that in sinking bores to assist in the playing of the game.

The lack of volunteers, as had been previously stated, is a major concern. It is a large contributing factor to the demise of rural football. It is often necessarily attributed to the downturn in population caused by people shifting. Central to this lack of members is the burgeoning responsibility of workloads due to the increased regulations that have swept the sporting industry over the past five years — the implementation of GST and associated responsibilities of paperwork, food handling accreditation, the responsibilities of serving alcohol, risk management, the ramifications of the Privacy Act and the need for police checks for officials for under-age teams, increasing communication and the need to provide information to the public, accreditation programs for coaches and trainers, and the fear of litigation against all those involved in sport.

The underlying fact is that most people involved in the management of sport just want to provide a playing arena for their children and family to have fun with a minimum of fuss and paperwork. The Central Highlands Football League would like to see the following recommendations pursued. A greater shire council involvement in the supplying of adequate sporting facilities to be used by the community at peppercorn rents or at no cost. The providing of government grants to cover the total cost of providing alternative water methods to playing surfaces. A recommendation to the governing body of football in Victoria to seriously look at the administration requirements in rural communities. The removal of the need to seek clearance for clubs and players where contracts do not exist to transfer to other clubs to pursue their enjoyment of sport. The protection of volunteers, coaches, trainers and administrators from litigation where it is obvious that some form of risk is associated with sporting endeavours. The removal of WorkCover costs of umpires — currently the cost to the Central Highlands Football League is \$1300 per annum for WorkCover for its volunteer umpires. Recognition that payments made to players in rural football below a certain financial level be tax free under the rules of the pursuance of a hobby. Also a direction of some gaming and tobacco taxes to the grassroots level of football to be used in the development of facilities for the local community. These grants should be directed to football and netball clubs as opposed to the grants via secondary parties that have other agendas — for example, councils.

The CHAIR — Some good news for you, Bill. Last night's water announcement was in two parts; the first part is for addressing the short-term needs of clubs, which is \$500 000. There is then \$500 000 to look at long-term solutions as well.

Mr McQUILTEN — Including bores.

Mr STOREY-SMITH — When you look at that realistically, it does not go very far.

Dr NAPTHINE — It will not go a long way, no.

Mr STOREY-SMITH — There are 880 clubs in Victoria and there is \$500 000. You divide it up and see how much each club will get — about \$250 a throw! That is not even going to buy grass seed. I have to admit that we are very fortunate. Within our 13 clubs we only have one ground that is not playable, and three or four others that have suffered a few problems. But our clubs are very industrious and try to find ways and means of begging, borrowing and stealing water to get their grounds up and running for the season.

Dr NAPTHINE — That is being recorded!

Mr STOREY-SMITH — I realise that.

Dr NAPTHINE — It is in the Hansard transcript. It is on the public record!

The CHAIR — The point is that more things will be needed in the future.

Dr NAPTHINE — The geography of your league suggests that the communities closer to Melbourne — like Ballan — may be getting a significant increase in population compared to some other parts of your league. Are you finding there is an imbalance growing in your league and that you perhaps needs to rethink some of the structures?

Mr STOREY-SMITH — Are you meaning in the availability of people, or — —

Dr NAPTHINE — The availability of people. For example, I would suggest that Ballan is probably growing a fair bit faster than Learmonth or Waubra.

Mr STOREY-SMITH — Very much so.

Dr NAPTHINE — Over time is Ballan going to get too big for your league?

Mr HAINTZ — Not really. Probably they would be one of the worst supported football clubs. We find that those types of towns are not supporting their football club as much as areas such as Waubra, Springbank and Dunnstown that do not have a township there. Those smaller townships including Creswick, Clunes, Ballan and Beaufort to a lesser extent are not getting the support on a population basis.

Dr NAPTHINE — My second question is that when you look at Ballarat and you look at places like Smythesdale and Scarsdale which are actually growing in population, whose responsibility is to target some of those potential new markets to encourage junior football and perhaps some new teams to pick up some areas that traditionally do not have a football team but are now subject to significant population growth due to the spread of Ballarat?

Mr STOREY-SMITH — I think you will find that the towns that you mentioned do have teams and they play in the Lexton Plains Football League, which is part of the Ballarat region. Four leagues are involved, Ballarat Football League, ours, Maryborough-Castlemaine — —

Mr McQUILTEN — There is Skipton and Linton; there are a whole range of them.

Dr NAPTHINE — I realise that. If you look at Scarsdale — —

Mr STOREY-SMITH — There is a team there. One of our clubs participated in a junior league in that area — which is the Goulburn Plains junior football league. That folded this year to make way for the Lexton Plains league to incorporate juniors. We have a problem in Buninyong where the growth is enormous. They have a

lot of young kids wanting to play football and they are unable to facilitate the number of teams required to adequately allow for those kids. So that is a problem. Many of our other communities are the exact reverse and struggle to find kids all the time. As Reg said earlier, some of our clubs fail to be supported by local communities.

Dr NAPTHINE — I was asking who you see is responsible at looking at the change in demographics and the way things have changed. If you look at the situation in Geelong, there is a Geelong football consortium that includes the district leagues, the Geelong league and other leagues all under the one roof. So they argue they get efficiencies and they argue therefore they have a bigger picture look at what is good for football in the whole region rather than just focusing on what is good for one league or another league, and perhaps allowing things to slip through the gaps. Has there ever been a proposal to look at a Ballarat — —

Mr STOREY-SMITH — The VCFL submitted a paper at its annual AGM last year looking at the possibilities of having a centralised administration for an area such as Ballarat — and other regions as well. It used the Geelong model as a precursor to that. I think the jury is still out on the situation in Geelong; I do not think it is necessarily that successful. Some of the leagues involved in that area have voiced their disapproval of what has happened down there, so it is not necessarily the best model. You are probably right; there needs to be a situation where football needs to be looked at as an actual structure. I believe we have a not necessarily unhealthy situation but a situation where the neighbouring Lexton Plains league has to travel through towns which participate in our league to travel another half to three-quarters of an hour to get to their games. So it is something that could perhaps be looked at. But then you have to look at the strength of those other teams and everything else, and look at the strength of the leagues around the place. The Central Highlands Football League is a very strong league.

Dr NAPTHINE — Finally, the issue of TAC Cup comes up regularly and it has been touched on briefly this morning. There have been suggestions in some of our other hearings that the TAC Cup should finish in mid or end July at the completion of interstate championships and have a limited finals series, and then the young fellas involved in the TAC Cup can come back to their local district teams and leagues for the last six weeks of the season and participate in the finals, so local consumers get the benefit of seeing their best young kids playing in their local teams and having that link which would perhaps get more people through the gate, particularly leading into the finals. What is your view on that sort of scenario?

Mr STOREY-SMITH — I think that is twofold. Yes, it is great to get those kids and everything else back into the league. But what do you do with the players who have played 16 league games leading up to that time and suddenly find themselves sitting on the bench going into a grand final because of a kid that comes back who is playing in another league? It is very much twofold. That sort of scenario can have a devastating effect on any sport because those sorts of kids become very disgruntled, and you lose them very quickly to the game of football. It is a situation we have, to a lesser degree, in our umpiring fraternity here in Ballarat. We have similar umpires, week in and week out, adjudicate on our games in the Central Highlands Football League, but when it comes to the finals they do not get a guernsey. It is very difficult and it means that those umpires become disgruntled; they are not getting the opportunities that other umpires are getting from the major Ballarat Football League, so it is a little unjustified, and that can create what you are suggesting — a similar situation within the clubs.

The CHAIR — Has the community got behind Springbank Football Club and supported it since that meeting?

Mr STOREY-SMITH — Very much so. We were talking about it this morning. They had 28 players to select from for their reserves side on Saturday. They have increased their numbers at junior football level; in netball they trounced the opposition on Saturday, so they are still maintaining their level on the netball court; and they are getting a good level of support from spectators at the game as well. They have only played one game this season — they had a bye in the first round — but Springbank certainly has bounced back. We took a proactive situation there. Brett Anderson was at the meeting as well as the area manager for the Victorian Country Football League. It was also supported by a couple of our clubs to look at supporting Springbank to ensure that there was no demise of the club, and we would do everything within our power to assist it. Probably one of the things that needs to be said about the Central Highlands Football League is that we are a little unique in today's society in the structure of a football league. We do not have a structure like the AFL, with a board of management that rules the game of football; we have 26 delegates at a meeting — two from each club — and they run our football club. We only administer it. Seven people just administer the league, and, provided it is a majority vote from them, we will do what they say. So it is a little unique and different to the other leagues and it is one of our major successes.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time today. You will get a copy of the transcript in due course.

Witnesses withdrew.