

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Kerang – 23 March 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield	Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman	Dr D. V. Napthine
Mr C. Ingram	Mr P. L. Walsh
Mr J. M. McQuilten	

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

Staff

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

Witnesses

Mr H. Rosewarne, Administration Manager (sworn); and
Mr S. Ficarra, Chairman (sworn), Central Murray Football League.

The CHAIR — Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, under the provisions of the Constitution Act is granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

This is an all-party parliamentary committee, including members from the Liberal and National parties and an Independent member.

I welcome Mr Rosewarne and Mr Ficarra. Gentlemen, for the purposes of the transcript would you please provide your full name and address, whether you are appearing before the committee in a private capacity or whether you represent an organisation, and if so, your position in that organisation.

Mr ROSEWARNE — My full name is Howard Lindsay Rosewarne. My address is 1 Sellick Street, Swan Hill; I am administration manager for the Central Murray Football League.

Mr FICARRA — My full name is Salvatore 'Tore' Ficarra. I live at 133 Church Road, Woorinen. I am chairman of the Central Murray Football League.

The CHAIR — I invite you to make some brief comments, and afterwards committee members will ask you a few questions.

Mr ROSEWARNE — The Central Murray Football League is a league of 12 clubs — 8 former mid-Murray clubs and 4 clubs from the former Northern and Echuca League. We came together in 1997 in our current configuration. Of the 12 clubs, 6 are clubs that have been through amalgamations, the most recent being the combination of Manangatang, from the old Mallee league, with Tooleybuc in the Central Murray Football League at the end of last year. They are in their first year as a new club. Of those, two maintain games at two grounds and the rest have consolidated onto one venue for their games.

Swan Hill is the centre of our league geographically, with Balranald being an hour to the north and Leitchville–Gunbower a little over an hour to the south.

We have seniors, reserves and a colts division — that is, 17½-year-olds. We have modified that to create a slightly larger pool of players for the junior competition within our league. Like a lot of country clubs we are finding that reserve grade and colt-age players are becoming difficult to find for a lot of the clubs.

I am sure the committee has seen the Victorian Country Football League's submission to the inquiry. We would like to endorse that, having participated in its completion. Our clubs have also had numerous opportunities to provide information for that submission.

We would like to emphasise particular areas where we think, or we would hope, the inquiry might recommend to the government that changes be made. One area in particular is the ease of access to capital works grants. The reason for that is that where a number of our clubs have amalgamated the distance to training has increased and a lot of clubs that perhaps would have started training at 5.00 p.m. or 5:30 p.m. are now starting training after dark to allow players who travel out from Swan Hill to other towns to attend training. Many of them are in a situation where they would like to improve the quality of their lighting, which is an expensive thing to do, but one that will be necessary for their long-term viability. So grants for those sorts of things are needed.

Netball players have often been the poor relation in football/netball clubs and a lot of clubs have now realised that the future of their clubs will depend on attracting netballers as well, so many of them are in a situation where they would like to develop their netball facilities to include shower and changing rooms or update the existing facilities in those areas. Many football clubs have rooms that are community centres, not just clubs; they are social rooms and clubrooms. A lot of them are looking to update those facilities so that they become multipurpose venues, and easier access to grants would help in those areas.

In order to attract junior players a lot of clubs go to the trouble of transporting players out from some of the bigger centres to the outlying clubs and then arrange to bring them back. Perhaps access to grants would enable them to

use minibuses or buses. Some clubs have tried doing this at their own expense previously but have abandoned the idea after a while due to the cost. Assistance in that area for some clubs would be most welcome.

Another area is the ability to maintain water costs at a reasonable level. While a lot of the clubs have reasonable access to water, where the cost of the water is not all that expensive, the power used to pump the water onto the grounds is quite expensive. I think the Victorian Country Football League's submission quoted that the average water cost was \$2200. I think most of our clubs would exceed that average amount. The VCFL has said that a strategy needs to be put in place to keep a check on those costs, and we support that view.

Another point is the availability of umpires. The VCFL has run a number of its own campaigns, but these have been short term, I think because of the expense of those sorts of campaigns. It has urged all leagues to work with their local umpire associations in doing what they can to increase the availability of umpires, but this has not met with a huge amount success at the moment. With government support, be it financial or other forms of support, if we could do more to perhaps work at attracting umpires at a younger age; I think schools are a place where perhaps this could start. The VCFL also mentions Workcover costs. Most of our umpires do it as enthusiasts, and it is something that is a hobby interest for them, yet the Workcover costs borne by the umpires at the moment is something that often comes out of their pay. We advertise that a field, boundary or goal umpire is paid a certain amount, but in effect when you take out the fees that the umpire associations charge to cover some of these costs, the umpires are earning less than the full amount. We would like assistance with that if possible.

Another point the VCFL raised was greater access to the Community Support Fund for sporting bodies. They argued a fairly good case that sporting bodies have missed out on access to this fund in the past. One of the recommendations in the VCFL report was the creation of hubs in areas to assist with support of volunteers to allow these clubs to have increased education and training of volunteers. All football clubs depend on their volunteer work base for administration and for the majority of the work that gets done around the club. We believe the creation of these hubs would allow increased training and education, especially to cope with the increased level of regulation that football clubs operate under these days, with such things as the responsible serving of alcohol, food-handling courses and public liability insurance. All of these are necessary and hopefully will have the long-term result of dropping the cost of public liability insurance, another cost that has risen dramatically for clubs in recent years. The creation of these sorts of hubs throughout Victoria might make it easier to attract volunteers to clubs. That is another area in which clubs are feeling the pinch a little bit. It is never easy to get volunteers. One of the things that is making it less easy for clubs to attract volunteers at the moment is the increased fear of regulations and people not wanting to be liable if anything should go wrong. I finish by emphasising those points from the VCFL submission.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — A number of other submissions have mentioned the AFL, both positively and negatively. What is your view on the AFL? I know you have certainly targeted the state government, but I did not hear a mention of any other group in your submission. The AFL is glaringly obvious, I would have thought, as is perhaps how councils can assist. I am interested in your view on the AFL. One view is that it targets your elite kids and elite programs but does nothing in terms of resourcing grassroots footy, and I do not think anybody would argue that grassroots football is not around this area. I can see you smiling, so I would appreciate your candour in respect to the AFL.

Mr FICARRA — If you are an AFL footballer your club will not allow you to travel any further than 2½ hours in a car.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — At a time? Can you have a rest after 2½ hours and go on?

Mr FICARRA — If it is any further than 2½ hours you must pay money to get an aeroplane for them. If we wanted a footballer to come up here to conduct training or to speak, we have been told that the AFL will not allow its footballers to sit in a car for any longer than 2½ hours. We are on the borderline; we are 3 or 3½ hours from Melbourne.

Mr McQUILTEN — What reason did the AFL give you?

Mr FICARRA — Footballers cramp up. There is no reason. If you want an AFL footballer to come up as a guest speaker, they know how to charge. Slowly it is killing country areas because the money is too much. As far as I am concerned the AFL does nothing for country football up here, and I am not only talking about here. I am

talking about the Wimmera, Western Border and Mildura. If the AFL gave all the juniors — I am not talking about the senior clubs — one football, it would be a big help. One football costs between \$90 and \$100 dollars, so it would be a great help to the juniors.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you see the AFL having a role with umpires?

Mr ROSEWARNE — That was a point. The biggest problem with umpiring at the moment is that there is a reluctance among secondary school-age students to take it on. Part of that is peer group pressure; it can be a bit disconcerting for them. A lot of the jocks with rather short attitudes have often made fun of umpires at schools or targeted the umpires, and I think we are seeing that at the moment. One of the ways the AFL could help would be to provide footballers who could speak at schools. We are running a campaign at the moment of supporting the officials — after all, we do not have a game without the officials. That would be a terrific way for the AFL to help country footy — that is, by having players available to come into schools and to talk to students about those sorts of things and about what it takes to be an AFL footballer. They could ask the students to stop and think what it takes to have a game of football and highlight the importance of umpires. If we could begin a program or the AFL could contribute to a program where we could turn that attitude around and have clubs and school-age students embracing umpires and perhaps increasing their status and recognition, that would be terrific.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Do any of your clubs have access to gaming machines? Are any of your clubs part owners?

Mr ROSEWARNE — No, they are not.

Mr INGRAM — How effective do you reckon the salary cap is here? Is it enforced? What impact does it have? Looking at the map, I can see a few amalgamations, but you also have some clubs that are reasonably close together. Is the swapping of players from one club to another driven by money that has to be dragged out of the local communities?

Mr FICARRA — It is big dollars up here, but we have 12 clubs which are very honest, or so they tell me. None of them goes over the salary cap.

Mr INGRAM — What is your salary cap in this league?

Mr ROSEWARNE — The same as it is in the whole state. The major league is \$50 000. The VCFL sent out an email this morning. It has increased the ceiling for major leagues to \$70 000. Leagues have the right to adjust that under the \$70 000 if they want to. The honest answer is that the salary cap is breached more often than not, but we would hate to see it removed because we believe it is a measuring stick that clubs can operate by, and it stops a free-for-all developing.

Changing from one club to another for money is not as easy as it once was with the introduction of VCFL contracts and those sorts of things, although it does happen. There are some appeals coming up in our league that will revolve around a player moving for money, particularly at a young age and where a club thinks it has done a lot to develop that player and would like to see him remain for one or two more years. In such a case another club may have dangled a lot more money at that player. It is an issue, but it is not a major problem.

Mr INGRAM — If the VCFL gave assistance to enforce salary caps, particularly in areas where there may be some players who are arguably being attracted to other clubs, do you not think that would be an issue?

Mr ROSEWARNE — Anything done to cut player payments would be welcome. Clubs are paying too much for country footballers — way too much! They are paid beyond their abilities. It is one of the things that would take pressure off clubs if they could do something about it. In our part of Victoria you would have to pay pretty high money to get a reasonable footballer up here. A lot of them would come, but there is the pressure of getting them jobs, that is another thing. Our club is finding it increasingly difficult to attract players. Unemployment up this way is not too bad, but it is not always easy to find a job for a coach that you might have in mind, particularly if he does not have skills or a trade — those sorts of things. It can be quite a task. Some clubs have managed to pick up a coach who another club was looking at because they had contacts for jobs.

Mr INGRAM — You have four amalgamated clubs?

Mr ROSEWARNE — Six.

Mr INGRAM — Have they been reasonably easy, or is there a fair bit of pain involved in those amalgamations?

Mr ROSEWARNE — They are never easy. The most recent one perhaps in lots of ways has been the one with the least amount of pain. There are people at the clubs who will tell you that once the amalgamation has taken place certain families and certain supporters have not been to a game of football since the amalgamation has taken place. Most of the more recent ones, where the clubs have been very close together, some of the clubs have been in the same time. For example, Cohuna had two clubs, Union and Cohuna. They merged prior to joining our league. They have been reasonably successful at keeping their supporters, their committee and their volunteers together. Some of the ones that took place a little while ago have been less successful at that.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am interested in your comments on the VCFL. I did not see in its submission a critique of its own operations, and every operation can improve. Do you have any comments regarding the positives and negatives in terms of the VCFL? Can you comment on its new structure, particularly the area managers that it has introduced, and whether that will improve the service to your area?

Mr ROSEWARNE — I believe it will. It is already having an effect. We are fortunate that the area manager for the north-west will be based in Swan Hill, so we have reasonably easy access to Mr Alan Davies. The fact that VCFL was in Melbourne made it difficult in certain instances. I think the idea of having area managers working full time as VCFL officials is a step in the right direction; and that, in conjunction with some of the other things it has asked for in the submission, will be helpful in maintaining the viability of the clubs, particularly with the training, the work on the accrediting volunteers, providing clubs with the latest information on the sorts of issues they have to deal with and those sorts of things at the clubs.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — How effective is the VCFL as a lobbyist with the AFL in terms of some of the issues that are resonating right around the state?

Mr ROSEWARNE — Not very, I do not think.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — How do you think it can improve its lobbying?

Mr FICARRA — I think we have to be very careful with the VCFL, because I think the AFL pays 60 per cent or 65 per cent of the wages, so it is the meat in the sandwich.

Mr ROSEWARNE — It may be reluctant to buy the hand that feeds it. I think there are issues, but the bigger problem could be between the VCFL and Football Victoria.

Dr NAPHTHINE — I am interested in inter-league competition. I know various clubs and some individuals are supportive and others are less supportive of inter-league competitions. Some leagues have a very high level of participation and others leagues suddenly find their players getting injured so they cannot participate. Do you support inter-league competitions, or do you think the sponsorship that goes into that would be better channelled directly to local clubs and local football?

Mr ROSEWARNE — We have been big supporters of the inter-league competition. Unfortunately, we have been in the last three division 2 finals without winning one. But we have done that with the policy where we encourage the clubs to nominate their best players and we use only players who want to participate in the competition. We have had the policy in the past where we nominated a certain number of players or we enforced participation, but the current coach and his predecessor decided that participation would be on a volunteer basis, and under that arrangement we have made the last three finals. That looks like being the way we will continue.

Having made the grand final on the last three occasions we have managed to participate without incurring a cost back at the league. In fact, we have probably finished a little bit in the black. We will continue to support it, even though the new arrangement will cost us between \$3000 and \$5000 to participate, because we believe it is important to give the players the chance to compete at a more elite or higher level than they would just from home and away games.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you think the inter-league competition should be restricted to players aged, say, under 23 because your younger players are likely to cope with the extra games and are more likely to want to participate and it gives them perhaps a remote second or third chance of being looked at by the AFL?

Mr ROSEWARNE — Personally I would not. I think the Ovens, Murray and other leagues would agree with that. We have under-18s participating in the inter-league competition as well. A lot of our inter-league squad would be at around that age group, with a few older ones involved as well. I would hate to deny them the opportunity to play at that next level.

Mr WALSH — In regard to the salary cap, some of the recommendations you have made in your submission would involve a state contribution to the funds football clubs. How would we then ensure that that money that was saved was not just channelled into increased player payments, or whatever. If we give on the one hand we do not want to find it just going out the other door in the raising of the price of players.

Mr FICARRA — You would not know. That would be dangerous. If we give clubs \$10 000 and say, ‘You can’t spend this on players’, you would have to say, ‘Okay, you need new showers. Tell us what you need the money for’.

Mr WALSH — No, you would get a grant for showers or for a facility upgrade, or whatever. That would then probably save the clubs some money that they may have had to spend on their own.

Mr ROSEWARNE — I think the way to do it would be to monitor it carefully, to target the money for specific things, rather than giving clubs so much in general. And you would need to put in place an auditing system; they would need to show you what they have spent it on. They would be tempted, but I think most clubs are more responsible these days. They work out a budget for their players, and they know that to maintain their long-term viability — and this is becoming something that is more evident among clubs — they need to spend more money on facilities, they need to attract families and females, and those sorts of things, and so they need to spend the money on the resources that they were asking for in those grants. I think it could be done with a little bit of work.

Most clubs have people on board who monitor spending themselves and who would not like see all that money going to players as well. Clubs are keen to do well, but it is not a completely cynical exercise on their part of getting money just to spend on players, because in the long term that will not maintain the clubs. The facilities will be there forever; the players usually are not.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time, gentlemen. You will receive a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks. You will be able to correct any errors of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.