

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Seymour – 14 April 2004

Members

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Witness

Mr D. Drane, general manager, umpiring, Victorian Country Football League and Victorian Country Football Umpires Association (sworn).

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Please state for the record your full name and address, if you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation, and what position in that organisation you hold.

Mr DRANE — My full name is David William Drane. My address is PO box 242, Morwell, Victoria 3840. I am attending as the general manager of umpiring for the Victorian Country Football League and Victorian Country Umpires Association. My role is a dual role.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — All the evidence taken will become public evidence in due course. I invite you to make some brief comments, and then the committee members will have the opportunity to ask you some questions.

Mr DRANE — Thank you. Members of the committee have a copy of my submission, and I will basically speak to the issues that are involved in that.

There are two things that are important to say. Firstly, the Victorian Country Football Umpires Association is the largest umpiring body in Australia, with over 2200 members, and we umpire 25 per cent of all football played in Australia, which is a fairly significant point in relation to our operations. The other thing it is important for the committee to be aware of is the process in relation to how umpires get paid, and that is that clubs pay a fee through their leagues to the local umpires association; that fee then has an amount deducted from it for all the administration, coaching and training purposes; and then the balance is paid to the umpire. The average amount of money that is deducted from the original fee across the state is around 20 per cent. It is important for you to have that background as to how the umpires get paid, because sometimes there is a lot of confusion about why the umpire does not get the amount of money the clubs pay, and it is because of that component that needs to be taken out for administration, coaching and training.

There are a number of major issues that impact on that 20 per cent deduction, and one of the biggest ones we face is in relation to WorkCover. In this state the state legislation says that employers have to have a WorkCover policy for their employees; and under the current legislation umpires are classified as employees, therefore the umpires associations have to have a WorkCover component. Whilst we are not saying we should not have coverage like that for umpires, we are saying that because the legislation at the moment says that that is the situation, it makes it really impossible for our associations. If we were able to have access to things like the VCFL's player insurance program, that would enable us to have an almost identical safety package in place for umpires but at a significantly reduced fee, which would then mean an umpire could access more money in his pocket, because there would be less money taken out of the original fee.

Some of our associations pay significant amounts of money in relation to WorkCover. This year we have one association paying \$25 000 and another paying \$20 000 in WorkCover insurance. To take \$25 000 out of umpires' fees just for one thing is a fairly significant amount. You will see from our submission that in 2003 the total WorkCover cost to our groups was \$117 000, which is a significant amount of money to come out of umpires' pays. At the moment the definition of a contestant in a sporting competition is a player. An umpire at the moment is not considered to be a contestant and therefore has to be considered as an employee. That is a difficult situation for us, and perhaps the committee could ask the government to look at the definition of a contestant under the act.

One of the other things we face confusion with is the difference between state and federal legislation. Under federal legislation in relation to taxation umpiring associations can obtain a class ruling, and a number of umpiring groups in Victoria have done that. That means that umpires can be considered as hobbyists and are therefore not subject to taxation and the things that go with it. That is fine, and we encourage our groups to be involved in that way, but that is a federal situation. Then when we come to the state legislation situation, umpires are considered to be employees, so in one part of the world we have them as hobbyists and in the other part we have them as employees. That creates confusion and concern amongst some of our members as to how they should deal with that and on which side of the fence they should jump. It is our job hopefully to put them on the right track and make sure they do everything right, but when we have those confusing issues it makes it difficult.

A major issue for us is the training and education of not only our umpires — our umpires have to go through an accreditation process — but also our volunteers. By far the majority of our umpiring administrators are volunteers. We have one part-time administrator who administers one umpiring group in the state, but the rest are pretty much volunteers who get an honorarium or nothing. As I am sure you have been told many times in the process of the inquiry, there is a necessity to train volunteers and meet their requirements. People are crying out for that sort of

assistance, but there is very little opportunity to access programs or access funding to run those programs for them. Again, if we do that and it costs money, that is money out of the umpires' pay, is it not?

In my submission I have submitted about four ideas in relation to where some funding can come from. It is on page 3. It would be good if we could have a look at a situation where some funding was made available to help us with our training of umpiring administrators and volunteers in a similar manner to the way I am sure leagues and clubs have asked you for assistance in relation to training their volunteers and administrators as well.

Another issue for us is in relation to the image of umpiring. I suppose since last Wednesday night the current publicity and things going round have not endeared the image of umpiring in general. There have been a couple of issues, as you would be aware. We believe, and people who get involved in umpiring believe, that the situation is similar to in a club. There are friendships and common goals; the things that you do in an umpiring group are similar to what you do in a footy club. A lot of people who come to us from footy clubs are amazed at the similarities that exist on the social side between an umpiring group and a football club. But umpiring needs — and it is not only our sport; it is every sport across the state — to have an image that it is an integral and worthy part of the game of whatever sport it is. It has to be there and should be encouraged. My belief is that we will never succeed in that situation until umpiring is as well known as, for example, the Coca-Cola logo or the Nike swish, where it is identified as being something that everybody knows and everybody understands. It needs to have its image improved, but that takes funding and resources. Currently there are no resources around to help us to provide that identity to lift the image of umpiring in this state and certainly in other sports as well, certainly in our sport and I am sure in other sports as well.

Another issue I would like to raise with you is the costs related to meeting statutory requirements. Whilst we need to meet those requirements in relation to food handling, responsible serving of alcohol and all of the things sporting groups are required to do, please make it as easy as possible for us to do them. We know we must do it and we are prepared to do it, but any assistance that the government can provide in relation to helping us — and I guess it is the same for football clubs — meet those requirements would be extremely valuable. As I said, there is no question of the fact that we need to accredit our umpires, to have our administrators going through those courses and to accredit our coaches, but the costs of doing that add enormously to the overall cost of running an umpiring association. As I said before, the money for that comes out of the umpires' pockets.

The last thing relates to insurance. I am sure football clubs have been telling you about the cost of insurance. It happens for us as well. Last year — and we buy a statewide policy for all of our groups, which obviously helps to cut down the costs — it cost \$26 500 to insure our clubs, public liability and professional indemnity. When you divide that between umpiring groups it is around \$826 per association. Next year we are looking at perhaps having access to the VCFL's public liability insurance, which would help us to reduce that cost, but it is still a significant amount of money that has to be found.

My ideal would be to see government have a public liability policy similar to what it has for non-profit community organisations. My background is in regional sports assemblies, and we were insured under a government public liability policy. If government could provide public liability professional indemnity insurance which may be contributed to by sporting groups — not only by football clubs, but other groups as well — that would certainly help and could make a significant contribution not only to football and umpiring but to other sporting activities across the state.

They are the six issues that are major issues as far as we are concerned. I have made some recommendations in my submission, which you may like to read at a later stage. The VCFUA's point of view is to have every football game umpired by a panel umpire and to reduce the number of club umpires we are forced to use at the moment, but the amount of costs and the number of issues in front of us makes it more and more difficult to recruit people to do what we want to do. We believe umpiring is an integral part of the game, and the game is the thing that needs to survive, grow and prosper. There are a number of suggestions if people would like to help us achieve and to make sure that football does go on, grow and become even better.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — For the record I would like to hand the chairmanship of the committee back to Mr Ben Hardman.

The CHAIR — My apologies. Rob and I were at the opening of a police station in the area so we were unable to be here.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I have umpired for 14 years. I umpired on Saturday, in both sides of my electorate.

Mr DRANE — Good!

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Can you explain the linkage to the VCFL? What linkage does the umpires association have directly with the VCFL? Are you provided dollars from the VCFL or from Football Victoria?

Mr DRANE — Football Victoria contributes to the development of umpiring through the part funding of our umpire development manager's salary and to a number of the development programs. The VCFL and the VCFUA have just formed a really strong partnership, especially over the last 12 months, to improve umpiring and make it an integral part of country football. My position is jointly funded by the VCFL and VCFUA. The VCFL contributes to office and administration to help me in my role — and a car, transport, costs and things — but the partnership between the VCFL and umpiring has taken enormous steps in this last 12 months and will continue to do so as the partnership develops.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I would suggest that that partnership needs to improve. You are certainly flagging that there are significant programs in terms of admin. and umpire development that you are requiring funds from. My view is, and you might know through your background in regional sports assemblies, that government does not have money to provide those dollars to every single sporting organisation. Whilst government may have a role, could not Football Victoria or the AFL — clearly that is the structure — provide enough resources directly or via the VCFL to the umpires?

Mr DRANE — The AFL this year has made the first contribution it has ever made significantly to country umpiring through the funding of the new umpire mentor program, which is a program for young developing umpires. The AFL has taken an idea from the Bendigo umpires group and funded it nationally to the tune of \$70 000 to assist in the development of young umpires. That is the first time the AFL has contributed directly. Football Victoria has been part funding the development officer's job for the last couple of years. The VCFL has also introduced its new Most Disciplined Club program, of which umpiring will be a major beneficiary. So yes, the partnership is developing further and further, and there are opportunities for it to develop even further again.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — It certainly could. Some leagues do not have a code of conduct, and some leagues have been quite proactive in developing them. Again is that something that the VCFL needs to be a bit more proactive about in some leagues, particularly in relation to umpires? In Geelong, for argument's sake, there are one or two leagues that will not come to an agreement on it.

Mr DRANE — That is right. The VCFL has introduced this new Most Disciplined Club program, which is a code of conduct program in which umpires can vote or report on the conduct of players, officials, coaches and supporters or spectators. The VCFL is strongly encouraging every league to participate in that program. Some already have that in place and I guess they will continue to run their program as part of this new one, and some others will adopt it. It is not a compulsory program, but it is a strongly recommended program.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Should it be compulsory? What are the benefits of having a code of conduct from the umpire's point of view?

Mr DRANE — If the players, administrators and officials adhere to it, it certainly makes life better for an umpire, and he or she gets involved in less hassle, less abuse and less problems. Therefore it helps, firstly, as a retention tool, because if umpires can enjoy the game better they will probably stay; and secondly, as a recruiting tool, because if there is seen to be less hassle in relation to umpires, then perhaps it can help to recruit people to the game.

Mr McQUILTEN — What about lady umpires?

Mr DRANE — We would welcome them enormously, and there are some groups who have numbers of them.

Mr McQUILTEN — There are a few down at Geelong, I think.

Mr DRANE — Yes, there are some umpiring groups that have numbers of female umpires. An issue for female umpires across the state is change facilities and that kind of thing. Do they go off to the netball rooms and get changed with the netball girls, or do the male umpires stand outside the change rooms and get subjected to abuse by the crowd while the girls are inside getting changed? Whilst it is fantastic to have female umpires — and let's have them and encourage them to be involved in the game — there are other issues in relation to the facilities, the problems the clubs have in providing for them and things like that. But we would certainly encourage them.

Mr INGRAM — As someone who is pretty passionate about the game and who has enjoyed both playing and being a spectator, I do not quite know how to put this question, but do you see a different level of abuse of umpires at different levels of the game? I have observed that there are a couple of areas where it seems to be worse — that is, at the most senior level of AFL football, where there seems to be an element of spectators who are extremely aggressive, and also arguably at the very junior level, where there is the aggressive-parent syndrome. Do you as an observer see that as an issue, or is just where I have been watching my football?

Mr DRANE — No, I think you are exactly right. I know where you have been watching your football, and I would totally agree with you. Yes, there is a problem in relation to abuse in senior football, and I guess that has something to do with our society these days. But what I have seen over the last four or five years is that abuse of umpires is much more personal now, and it is directed a lot at the umpires themselves. That happens because in a lot of cases umpires live, work and do everything in the local community, and they are known to people in the local community. There are some people in our community who just want to go along and abuse them and take advantage of that situation. The specific naming of umpires in abuse and all that sort of thing is a lot stronger these days than it was maybe five years ago.

I agree there is a problem at the junior level, and I have seen some fairly ordinary things happen in what I call the fog on Saturday morning at the fourths, where the parents are on the fence and all hell is let loose. Sometimes the problems that are created at that level are not the fault of the player or the umpire, they are the fault of the parent and the supporter who is there at that time of the day and just lets forth and creates issues. So you are totally right in what you say.

Mr INGRAM — I have been involved in a couple of different leagues in Gippsland where the program you are talking about has been given a reasonable amount of prominence, and it gives awards at the end of the year to the best clubs, particularly junior clubs, and that includes supporters, players and officials, who are voted on by the umpires. How do you get that respect back into some of those other leagues? Do you think it is important that when there are incidents of spectator abuse where supporters breach a particular code, particularly in junior football, points should be deducted? Is that a solution to bringing respect into the game, or is there another way of doing it?

Mr DRANE — No, that is one way of doing it, and as part of the new VCFL Most Disciplined Club program, there is an expectation that league secretaries will open the votes, have a look at them and periodically put a report in their local record of the progressive points of the clubs. If a club happens to be at the bottom of a list or happens to get low votes for a number of weeks, that club will be brought in to explain why. It puts responsibility back onto the club and the officials of the club to take some responsibility for the parents of their players and for their supporters. That is very difficult for clubs to handle, and deciding how they are going to do that is a challenge for them, but it puts the responsibility back onto the clubs.

Similarly with umpires, if there is a situation where every other umpire gives a club 5 points every week but a particular umpire gives the club 1 point every time he has that club, that is an issue that comes to me which I need to address, because there could be personal issues that have to be addressed. It is only fair to the club that the problem is addressed from the umpiring side as well as the playing side. Yes, there is an expectation that under the new VCFL program leagues will make the local football community aware of the progressive state of the clubs and how they are going in relation to their code of conduct, which is a good part of the new program.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You have been fairly firm in your recommendations with regard to WorkCover, and you are fundamentally saying that WorkCover should be changed so umpires are considered contestants. Just to follow that through, does that pose any risk to umpires in terms of being worse off if they are injured? How would that be covered?

Mr DRANE — No, if the opportunity arose we would look at the current player accident insurance program and see if the benefits were of equal standing to those of WorkCover, and we would direct the umpires association into the place where the umpires would benefit most. But it seems to us that at least we would have the opportunity to do that, whereas at the moment we do not. By far the majority of the player accident insurance program could well cover umpires, and if it did not the VCFL may well look at adjusting that to make provision for total coverage. But at the moment we do not have the opportunity to do that.

Dr NAPTHINE — Under the current WorkCover arrangements, if an umpire is umpiring a game and he is getting, say, \$50 or \$100 to umpire that game and he is injured, is he given WorkCover benefits only in relation to the income he was receiving for that job as an umpire, or does it relate back to his broader workplace benefits?

Mr DRANE — It is my understanding that it depends on how much of the policy the umpiring association buys — that is, if it buys a total policy that includes benefits or if it just buys a policy to refund umpiring fees. There are options in what umpiring groups can purchase.

Dr NAPTHINE — Within WorkCover?

Mr DRANE — Yes.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for that, David. You will get a copy of the transcript and you will be able to make any corrections to matters of fact or grammar but not to matters of substance.

Mr DRANE — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.