

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Leongatha – 7 April 2004

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Mr P. S. Francis, regional manager, Gippsland Power (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Peter. 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, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. Would you please provide your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, the name of that organisation and your position within it for the purposes of the transcript?

Mr FRANCIS — Peter Scott Francis, RMB 3125 Lardners Track, Lardner 3820. I am the regional manager, Gippsland Power.

The CHAIR — We can obviously read this. You might like to summarise it and provide us with some brief comments and after that we will ask some questions.

Mr FRANCIS — What I have done is just given the inquiry a brief history of the TAC Cup. It replaced the under-19s system in 1992. When that competition was abolished obviously there needed to be a competition built, with the AFL draft coming in, to attract young talented athletes so that they could aspire to their dream of playing AFL football. I guess while the other states like South Australia and Western Australia still have state youth-based programs in Adelaide and Perth, it was just felt that the Victorian model needed to cater for the aspiring players through the state and needed to be independent from the AFL club links. I guess the standard of AFL football is such that it is very difficult for players to go straight from school or local football into the AFL.

On the country teams coming in, Football Victoria wanted to ensure that talented young players from country areas, no matter how remote, were given the same opportunities to maximise their abilities as their metropolitan counterparts. That was something that the VFL/AFL under-19s did not achieve. I can give you a bit of an example of that, of myself. I came from a country club, Heathcote in northern Victoria — and Heathcote was in a minor league at that stage — and I went to Carlton as an 18-year-old. I guess what I am trying to say here is that under the old system in the under-19 days many of the players were lost to country football because they had to relocate to Melbourne, similar to myself. A lot of those boys who went down — and there were a lot from Bendigo at that stage going to Carlton — were playing under-19s and they never returned to Bendigo to play. They obviously got jobs through Carlton or were at university and things like that, and stayed in the metropolitan area and stayed playing metropolitan football.

On the operation of Gippsland Power, I know you might have some knowledge of it, but it is divided into two distinct areas. Obviously we have the talented player pathway, which is our under-15s, under-16s; the TAC Cup team, Gippsland Power, the under-18s; and also Football Victoria development. Also, as I said, we have a VCFL under-15s schoolboy side and all regions have under-15 squads, which compete in the Victorian under-15s championships, which are happening this week, actually, on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

Gippsland Power entered two teams in that competition, one from East Gippsland and one from the Latrobe Valley, and Football Victoria views the under-15 carnival as the commencement of the talented player pathway. We virtually are getting a lot of the boys in as 14 year-olds for one training session prior to their 15th year, then they come back and have six or seven training sessions prior to that carnival, play the carnival and then go back to their clubs. We try and make that participation as broad as we possibly can.

With the under-16 Victorian championships, which happen next weekend in Bendigo, each Football Victoria country region enters a team in the Victorian championships. The championships consist of two matches at a carnival, which is held in mid to late April during the term 1 school holidays. The Gippsland Power squad operates for the purpose of identifying potential players for the Gippsland Power under-18 team next year, where they will come in in their 17th year. Some boys in the under-16s will move into Gippsland Power in their 16th year. Leigh Brown is an example of that type of player. He is with the Kangaroos, but he played a lot of games as an under-16 player with Gippsland Power. Most of them will go back to their clubs after that carnival again and play the rest of the year with their clubs and come into Gippsland Power's pre-season the year after as 17-year-olds.

We also have, which I have not indicated in my submission, a legends squads game, which is for under-16s also later in the year. We pick upwards of between 20 and 30 boys to go to a camp during AFL Grand Final week for four days. We get different AFL identities to come in and talk about how to prepare for VFL-AFL football, weights and weight technique, sprinting technique, skill development and a whole range of topics. We bring different AFL

people in to talk to the boys so they have a bit of understanding. In that group we catch a lot of the back-age boys who might not have come to prominence earlier in the year in the under-16s, but they are six months older and all of a sudden they have grown a little bit more and things like that, so we utilise that maybe to get some of the back-age boys.

Obviously then we have the under-18 TAC Cup team. Each region enters a team in the Football Victoria TAC Cup under-18 competition, which since its inception has proved to be extremely successful in the development of talented players. The numbers of players drafted from the competition is in excess of the Victorian teams at the national championships and the quality of players to state and domestic competitions all indicates that it is a very successful competition. I have written down the competition coaching philosophy, and you might like to read it. The philosophy is to develop young footballers to their maximum ability. It is to try and achieve that potential players are coached in such a way to develop their skills and physical attributes, physical attributes and football knowledge and the personal characteristics and self-esteem of each player. It is not a win-at-all-costs competition. If we won one or two games a year and had three or four players drafted we would call ourselves winners. Our main goal is to develop the boys to their maximum potential so that they go back to their clubs better players for the experience. That is really the aim and philosophy of Gippsland Power, without having to read through the whole thing there.

Football Victoria aims to provide 50 per cent of the AFL draftees each year, which has been able to be achieved so far. The players in the competition are coached in a manner that provides potential draftees with the maximum opportunity to be drafted and to facilitate a successful transition from TAC Cup to the AFL club for drafted players. The TAC competition via the conduct and coaching of the competition prepares and encourages existing players not drafted by an AFL club to continue playing football at a level commensurate to the player's ability, whether that be VFL or country football.

Under 'Gippsland Power' I have put some of the impact on local football. There is strong evidence that country-based TAC Cup players are staying involved in country football and enhancing it with the knowledge and skill that they have gleaned from the TAC Cup days, with 40 to 45 per cent of graduates returning to community football. There are 264 players in the TAC Cup each week, that is with the whole 12 sides. Most of the players are good enough to play open-age football, where we have approximately 2000 open-age under-17 and under-18 teams or one player lost to every 7.5 open-age under-17 and 18 teams. Annual research that we do at Football Victoria shows that of players selected on a TAC Cup list from 1997 to 2003 never less than 95 per cent of the graduating TAC Cup players continue to play football the year after exiting the TAC Cup.

TAC Cup clubs have reported on 432 players who completed a TAC Cup pre-season, but were not selected on the TAC Cup list that seven were reported as not playing football in 2003. The reasons provided for players not playing in 2003 included: concentrating on year 12, 1; injury, 2; overseas, 1; interstate, 1; talented program of a different sport, 1; and no reason given, 1. One of the main things is Gippsland Power's development programs. As I said, we are broken up into two — that is, Football Victoria development and the TAC Cup talented player pathway. Of the development programs that Gippsland Power runs for country local football in 2003 the Gippsland Coaches Association, which is run by Gippsland Power, had 512 financial members — that is, 512 coaches. These coaches were provided with the following resources. It is interesting, as you can see, they include: a level-1 coaching manual; playing tactics videos, and things like that, as well as local magazines for coaches and three editions of the Australian Football Coaches Association *Coaches Update*.

We have coaches of the year awards for our Auskick junior and youth and senior coaches. We run all coach education, which is our level 1s and level 0s. This year we conducted level 1s at the start of the year in March at Sale and Warragul, and in 2004 over 170 coaches across Gippsland attended the two courses. Gippsland Power conducts eight level 0 coaching courses across Gippsland for Auskick coordinators and parents. We run all secondary school football in the regions, so Gippsland Power continues its agreement via the Victorian Secondary School Sports Association to run secondary school and interschool football in Gippsland at years 7, 8, 9, 10 and senior school level.

In 2003, 28 individual schools from throughout Gippsland entered 97 teams — that is, 71 boys' teams and 26 girls' teams — in five competition sections. Each of Gippsland Power's three areas of South Gippsland, East Gippsland and West Gippsland conduct round-robin days in each of the five sections of the years 7 and 8 boys, years 7, 8 and 9 girls, years 9 and 10 boys, years 10, 11 and 12 girls, and senior boys. In addition a round-robin day was conducted in East Gippsland to cater for the smaller secondary schools of Lakes Entrance, Mallacoota and Orbost.

Secondary school clinics: in 2003 all secondary schools Gippsland were offered the opportunity to have an AFL player and Gippsland Power staff conduct a training session at their school. This offer was well received, with sessions held at 15 schools throughout the region. Normally those sessions are offered to the school football teams of years 7 and 8. So, as I said, 15 schools took up that offer.

Primary school football: many schools entered the statewide knockout Quit Cup in five Gippsland regions: Central Gippsland, East Gippsland, Latrobe Valley, South Gippsland and Wellington. The winning team from each region played off in the form of a round-robin day to determine the overall Gippsland winner. Gippsland Power staff assist with resources, which includes the payment of umpires, provision of balls and things like that, as well as running some of the zone days selection of players and so on to represent a Victorian country primary school side.

AFL player superclinics: each year AFL superclinics are conducted throughout Gippsland. On these days primary schools in an area are invited to send in grades 3 and 4 students to a central venue where AFL players, in conjunction with Gippsland Power staff, run the superclinic. In 2000 Gippsland Power conducted seven of these superclinics with players from Richmond, Hawthorn, Carlton and St Kilda attending. There were 4500 from 87 schools attending these clinics.

VCFL regional board programs: the VCFL Gippsland regional board has been active in supporting development of football in the region. In conjunction with Football Victoria development and Gippsland Power the board has assisted the following programs. These are programs that Gippsland Power runs on behalf of the board, but we do not run all of them. The regional board puts money into junior interleague football. There are also club junior development officers, and league development officers. At local primary school clinics are run and there is a regional equipment pool. That is a clinic program in which the local clubs have a number of schools in their area where they go as a fostering program to get kids to play come and play football. They are run so that their local players go out to a school and run a clinic and we provide all of the footballs and the gear that they go out there with as well as the expertise.

We also have umpiring development grants and code of conduct awards. Gippsland Power reports on all talented player programs and development programs via the regional board and local league meetings. The AFL Auskick program is a skills-based program for primary school-aged children and acts as an excellent feeder to junior clubs. We at Gippsland Power run some 51 centres with over 3200 children throughout our two regions.

On the relationship with local clubs, Gippsland Power staff are always available to assist local clubs through assisting coaches with new methods and taking training sessions for both junior and senior teams. Our coach, Lachlan Sim, who is here today, would be out at least one other night a week other than when he is training with Gippsland Power, taking either a senior or junior local team. We also assist with resources such as tackle bags, bump bags, ruck bags et cetera. We do motivational talks with clubs and we also have a talls player program. The clubs are invited to send in young ruckmen — young talls — from the age of 14 to 22. That actually will start in three weeks time; I am just doing the mail-out tomorrow for that. Gippsland Power really is here to assist local football and to improve the quality of football.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Peter. Gippsland Power is obviously doing a fair bit of work with schools. We are hearing around the state that we need to reinvigorate football within primary schools especially, but also in secondary schools. Are the other TAC Cup sides doing the same kind of work that Gippsland Power is doing in development in the schools around the state?

Mr FRANCIS — I would imagine so. I cannot speak for them because I do not know. The programs that we all do are similar and they certainly would be running the clinics and doing all those sorts of things in the schools — Auskick; the coaches courses, coach education; the whole works, so I would imagine so. We probably are one out of the box in that we do clinics in secondary schools. Not a lot of the other regions do clinics in secondary schools, but Gippsland Power certainly sees that as a critical component.

The CHAIR — I certainly have a much better idea now of what you do, so thanks very much for the submission. It has been really good like that.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — On that, Peter, congratulations. You obviously have a good relationship with the leagues in this region. There have been other areas we have gone to where the TAC Cup has not been thought of as kindly as yours. so it is obviously a reflection on the program here. We also have not had as comprehensive an

expansion, as you were alluding to, Chair, in terms of TAC providers in the region. So well done on that. I just want to touch on your figures. The recurring theme — I do not know whether it is geographical as much as program based — in some of the other regions which the TAC Cup is a fair way away from, whether the areas be up north or across in the west, is that you say 40 per cent to 45 per cent of graduates return to community football.

Mr FRANCIS — That is across the whole TAC Cup, so that is metropolitan and country.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Can we get figures? Have the TAC or Football Victoria got figures for all the TAC regions, so we know how many of your kids actually come back to Gippsland — their clubs or a club in Gippsland — or up at Robinvale or down Portland way? Are those figures available?

Mr FRANCIS — I am not too sure. I could certainly find out for you. I could give you Gippsland Power's figures for 2003, for the players.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — That may in fact be misleading for some of the more geographically isolated areas.

Mr FRANCIS — Yes.

Dr NAPTHINE — It also could be misleading if, for example, a young fellow played for Gippsland Power and the year after exit actually played in a suburban league in Melbourne. That would be counted as a return to community football.

Mr FRANCIS — Exactly.

Dr NAPTHINE — But he would not be returning to community football in country Victoria.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — That is right. That is what I was alluding to.

Mr FRANCIS — I guess that is a social issue, though, in that if it is a boy from East Gippsland who is exiting the TAC Cup and he is going to university in Melbourne and he goes and plays for Vermont, that is probably the only choice. So I do not think it is misleading, probably, in that sort of form.

Dr NAPTHINE — No, but it is different if he is playing for Mooroolbark because he is getting \$150 a week, rather than playing for Moe or Bairnsdale. Then perhaps it is a different issue, if he has come to the attention of Mooroolbark through the TAC and they have just scooped him out and offered him a bit of money and a job.

Mr FRANCIS — I know a lot of our boys do not do that. A lot of our boys actually do return to their home club or they go into the VFL. It would be the majority of them that are returning to their home club after exiting the TAC Cup.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — That is what I was alluding to. I came from Warrnambool to Melbourne and I stayed in Melbourne and went to university. I said to one of the others you will never stop the kids who should be encouraged to go to Western Australia or South Australia, or wherever they may go. You will never stop that. I just thought it would be useful to have some more accurate statistics in respect of that. The second question is: clearly you would be talking to a lot of the major players around this region. What are they raising with you as some service delivery gaps, whether it be with Football Victoria, the AFL or the state government? You have not heard the rest, so what are some of the issues that they raise with you?

Mr FRANCIS — Can you expand a little bit, Michael?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What are they saying? Are there programs, perhaps, whether it is the state government in terms of volunteer support programs, or the VCFL in terms of administrative support programs; is it a capital program that the AFL could run in conjunction with the state government, or is it an educative role that Football Victoria could be more hands on or hands off in schools? What are the areas that the clubs or leagues raise?

Mr FRANCIS — A lot of the clubs say they feel that the VCFL could at times do more. In what areas, I am not too sure. I have not really had that sort of feedback from clubs in the areas that they really need help with.

Mr MITCHELL — What happens if you get a good young fellow, he goes through the TAC Cup, he gets drafted or put on a rookie list and then dropped off the next year? Do you guys then get involved because he is a former player, to encourage him back and sort of help him along the way so that he can readjust back into a local side?

Mr FRANCIS — We certainly stay involved with our TAC Cup players and talk to the ones that go to AFL. We had a situation where Hayden Burgiel was drafted to Hawthorn, had a year with Hawthorn and then went back to his home club, Maffra, and is a sensational player for them. We encouraged Hayden to go back. A lot of our boys have actually played and are still playing a lot of league football. So we have not had a lot of boys who have actually been drafted and have been dropped off in their first or second year. A lot of them are still at a league club. I think we have something like 18 or 19 boys still on league lists.

Mr MITCHELL — There would be a big readjustment for them to come back from Hawthorn or a side like that into a local club?

Mr FRANCIS — That is right, yes, it certainly would be. A number of them have come back to Maffra after they have been down at local clubs. Obviously the Maffra Football Club has done a terrific job, too, with those players.

Dr NAPTHINE — What is the structure of Gippsland Power Football Club? Are you wholly owned by the VCFL or Football Victoria?

Mr FRANCIS — Football Victoria.

Dr NAPTHINE — So you do not have a local committee?

Mr FRANCIS — No, we do not.

Dr NAPTHINE — What about local sponsorship? Do you seek or gain any local sponsorship?

Mr FRANCIS — Yes, we do.

Dr NAPTHINE — Is that perceived as taking potential football sponsorship from local district clubs?

Mr FRANCIS — It may be. A lot of the sponsors that we have only sponsor Gippsland Power because they do not want to sponsor a club and be seen to be supportive of just a club. Because we are a regional side they see that as not a problem. A lot of the sponsors that we have are that way. They do not see that as a problem. I have not had any negative reports from any clubs saying that Gippsland Power is taking potential sponsors at all.

Dr NAPTHINE — Your club and I think the Murray Bushrangers are the only TAC clubs that do not have a VFL club in close proximity.

Mr FRANCIS — Yes.

Dr NAPTHINE — Is that a disadvantage, or do you think it would be an advantage to have a VFL club linked to or in some way nearby Gippsland Power?

Mr FRANCIS — Our link is the Springvale Football Club, which is obviously not — —

Dr NAPTHINE — Not quite close; not really that close.

Mr FRANCIS — No, not really that close, but a lot of our boys go and do pre-season at Springvale and things like that. The Traralgon situation was tried a number of years ago, but not with a lot of success. I think it would be good for our boys if they did have a senior body that they could go on and try for their second chance in Gippsland, I really do.

Dr NAPTHINE — I do not think that I am breaching any confidence, but at one stage the Kangaroos were looking at having something in Casey.

Mr FRANCIS — That is correct. They still are.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Is that something that Gippsland Power would be interested in being involved with?

Mr FRANCIS — Yes, certainly.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for your submission, Peter. It has been enlightening for us to hear from you about the TAC Cup and what it does. You will get a copy of the transcript. You will be able to correct any errors of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.