

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Kerang – 23 March 2004

Members

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Witnesses

Cr K. den Houting, Chief Executive Officer and Secretary/Treasurer (sworn); and
Mr B. Knowles, Chairman (sworn), Golden Rivers Football League; and
Mrs R. Laity, Past President (sworn), Golden Rivers Netball 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 to this inquiry into country football Cr den Houting, Mr Knowles and Mrs Laity. I invite each of you to give you name and address and the organisation you are representing and your position in that organisation.

Mr KNOWLES — My full name is Barry Knowles and I live at 103 Channel Street, Cohuna. I am the chairman of the Golden Rivers Football League.

Cr den HOUTING — My full name is Keith den Houting, and I am the chief executive officer and secretary /treasurer of the Golden Rivers Football League. I live at 9485 Murray Valley Highway, Kerang.

Mrs LAITY — My full name is Rhonda Joy Laity and I live at 189 Meering West Road, Kerang. I am the past president of the Golden Rivers Netball League.

The CHAIR — I invite you to present brief comments and then members will ask some questions afterwards.

Cr den HOUTING — The Golden Rivers Football League was renamed in 1997 at the direction of the Victorian Country Football League. The Kerang and District Football League (KDFL), as it was previously called, had been in existence since 1945 after recommencing after the war. In 1998 a board of management was instigated and elected.

The league incorporates 9 football and netball clubs — 6 in Victoria and 3 in New South Wales. It competes in four grades of football — seniors, reserves, under-17s and under-13s; and five grades of netball — A, B and B-reserve, and 17s and under, and 14s and under. Some netball clubs field an F troop in netball as well, which is made up of girls under 12.

Our football league also acknowledges the value of our netball ladies and hopes that our association will continue to flourish. Since 1998 the football league has been administered by a five-person board of management — a chairman, a deputy chairman, a football manager, an umpires coordinator and a secretary/treasurer. We also have a junior development officer, a complaints investigation officer and a salary cap investigation officer. To highlight the importance of football to country Victoria I will give two quotes.

The first is from the lady seated on my left, Mrs Laity, who is a past president of our netball league. She said:

Football netball clubs in the country serve as a community service in that they are an avenue for families to participate thereby strengthening the family nucleus.

The second quote is from the annual report of the Murrabit Football Club, one of the clubs in our league. The club's president, Mr Darryl Bray, made the following comments about the club's last season. He said:

Off the field the club continues to prosper with another strong financial result, in a year where the drought was expected to adversely impact on our fundraising efforts. I believe this underlines the importance of clubs as a place in the community at large, where they can gather to support each other in tough times as well as enjoying football and netball.

I thought that those two quotes were particularly relevant to this submission today. We have a summary page that I included in my submission. I think I sent it to Kristen — perhaps she bored you to tears with it — but I hope you have looked at the last page, where we have made some suggestions for solutions.

The insurance issue is very big, as you are all aware — and not just in football and netball but in life in general. It seems to us that where a club has a recreation reserve, which is normally a DSE property, there is public liability insurance to be paid by the committee of management. The netball girls also take out public liability insurance, as

does the football club. It seems to us that everybody is looking after their own patch and we are paying three lots of public liability insurance on one bit of real estate.

The second issue I have listed concerns umpires. This is a huge concern. Michael has told me over lunch that he has gone into umpiring after playing footy for Geelong, Subiaco and Fitzroy. I did not get time, but I would have liked to have asked him what his incentive was for going into umpiring, because he would not get paid as much as when he was playing footy. However, it is an interesting concept that leading players have gone back to umpiring.

As you can see in the resume I have put in, Barry is a past umpire. He was a very good umpire with a long association with the league, but it is getting very difficult to have people take these roles on for various reasons. One reason that is often quoted to us is what the spectators are saying over the fence, and that is of real concern. We have a code of conduct in our football league, and every club will adopt it this year. It is a code of conduct towards umpires, and we will strongly enforce it. If we find that it is breached we will certainly take strong action.

This year we have also negotiated with one of our umpiring bodies, the Northern District Umpires Association. It is a partnership, or an alliance — if you want to call it that — whereby it virtually becomes our 10th club, and it will provide umpires exclusively for our league. We have to make a concession on that. In the past we have had club umpires, club personnel, and they have boundary umpired, umpired 2nds and 3rds or reserves and under-17s, and goal umpired. However, if this body has a surplus of umpires we will be forced to utilise those, which is good for them. That will mean they will have a role to play, and it will take some pressure off some of the volunteers within our structure.

Howard mentioned the water issue. It is a real concern, especially at the moment. We have had dry conditions since 1995. One of our concerns is the great fluctuation between some of our clubs. One club paid \$5600 last year just for water — not power and water; just water. Another club is subsidised by its shire, the Hay Football Club. They do not pay any cost for water. At the club which paid \$5600 for water, they used tankers to come onto the ground and water the ground with spray behind them. That club is Nullawil and is in the Grampians Water area, so of course it is on stage 3 water restrictions. It is very difficult to get water for sportsgrounds.

With volunteers there is the cost of training. We are not just talking about people travelling from here, from Nullawil or even from Hay to Swan Hill to attend a course. There is also their time and the cost of the course. Some courses may cost them \$170, and they might get \$70 reimbursed through the VCFL for a trainer. But it is still \$100, plus their day and their travel. People are not prepared to put those sorts of terms in these days. They do not see the reimbursement from it in their football, although some of our trainers are now being paid because they are qualified people, highly qualified people some of them. They do a very important job.

Volunteers fill roles within the club, as Howard described. We talked about the concept of a hub, which was mooted by a chap called Paul Shelley from Chiltern Football Club. Some of you will be aware of Paul's background. Paul mooted the concept that maybe we can approach bodies within our local shire or within our local region so that we can have a central administrator. We probably could have a little bit more body behind us and a little bit more clout. However, there is a reluctance for clubs and leagues — netball, cricket, soccer, tennis, and bowls clubs — To all go to one common administrator. I suspect it is going to be very difficult to get people to accept that concept.

Howard has already mentioned grant applications. I guess you get this rehashed time and again, no matter where you go. Grant applications are terribly important to some of our clubs. We have built netball courts and installed sprinkler systems on football club ovals. These are the sorts of things that are being done through grants. Some people are very skilled at putting in grant applications, but other clubs cannot cope with it and we need some training. My suggestion was that people within government organisations who are already dealing with grant applications could come up and run some courses to help people with them, or even help the club or body concerned with their applications. That would certainly be beneficial and would save the clubs a lot of time and hassle.

One day I walked into the Commercial Hotel down the street here for a function. There were seven people from one of our clubs sitting around a table doing a submission. It is a meeting place, so that is why they went there. That is the sort of concept that you have to get through — that is, that it is a big job for a club to apply for a \$25 000 or \$30 000 grant. A lot of work is involved — pages and pages of it — and there are a lot of requirements for those people to meet.

Then there are schools. You will note in my submission that I mentioned that a perception persists that we have a lot more female teachers at primary schools. That is not just a perception; the statistics back it up. There is also a bit of concern that some of our female teachers are not keen for young people to take part in strenuous physical activity. By that I mean practising footy. They are quite happy for kids to play softball, tunnel ball and those type of things, but football seems to be a bit of a no-no. This is partly due to adverse publicity and partly due to boys having to run into other boys to try and get the ball. There is a popular sport coming up now called non-contact footy or touch football, and that is probably one of the things they could look at as an interim stage for young boys at schools to take part in.

AFL promotion is an interesting question, Michael. It is certainly very badly looked upon in country Victoria. Certainly within our concept we get no assistance whatsoever from the AFL. You have seen the region; there are small towns that you have to look up on a map to see where they are, and the AFL does not even know they exist. We get no feedback from them, and we get no promotion within the region. Bendigo and Shepparton might get a promo, or Ballarat and Geelong. Tori mentioned Essendon footballers coming up to Swan Hill three years ago. The AFL cancelled the darn trip because those boys had to sit in a car for 3½ hours — and that is a fact; it is not just a story — Tori told you so. We can even name the three footballers involved.

Bendigo was going to have a country day match. The AFL cancelled it because it felt the Queen Elizabeth Oval was not suitable. That is garbage! The QEO is perfectly all right. I have played on a lot worse conditions, and I would suspect that Michael has played on worse ovals than that as well. It is just a thing within the AFL. Because the footballers are not tied to a zone they have the program all laid out for them. Young kids come up through the TAC Cup and they are exposed to the AFL coaches and the recruiting people.

They do not even have to move: they can sit in their chair and watch the kids; they can go to the Australian Institute of Sport and see how they perform so far as physical programs, lung capacity et cetera are concerned. Those sorts of things are in place for them, so they will not go back to country Victoria to help.

So far as retaining young people in country areas is concerned, that is impossible. Young people have to go away to school and to tertiary studies. Even if they did not have to go away for those reasons, they would be attracted by the bright lights and the possibilities of an exciting lifestyle in the big cities, I guess. We are fighting a bit of a losing battle there.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Congratulations on the code of conduct for your league. Is it just your football league that has adopted it so far?

Mr KNOWLES — That is it, just our league.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — It was tried in Geelong. I know the members here heard a presentation from some Geelong football umpires, and the leagues down there have not agreed to it. That is disappointing for Geelong. Congratulations to your league; it is certainly one of the few that has come to that stage. It makes a difference where you can not just train but instruct your players as to how their supporters should behave towards umpires. I am umpiring at the moment, and it is a real issue in getting the young kids from schools to work as boundary umpires or central umpires, because they often mention the over-the-fence stuff.

My question relates to the administrative work. I again use Geelong as an example. It has combined the administration of a number of its leagues and in terms of promotion/relegation. I am not saying promotion/relegation would be an issue in this neck of the woods, but have there been discussions between all three leagues, or even two leagues, about amalgamating their administration so that you can have more clout — I think that was the word you used earlier, Cr den Houting?

Cr den HOUTING — Three years ago we went into the concept where we met with the Central Murray Football League. We had quite extensive meetings, but it came down to a couple of issues that we could not resolve and it did not go on. We were looking at a first and second division with different voting powers, different alliances. There were a couple of issues that we could not resolve at club level or at leagues level, and it could not go on. But there have been discussions in that respect.

So far as centralising the administration, we have not taken that any further at this stage, partly because most of the guys that do it do so because they really love their footy and netball and would not like to give it up — I know myself that I would hate to give it up at this stage. But with greater demand on administrators and public liability

and issues involving government registration and legislation, I suspect the time will come when we may have to go to even professional people.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — In terms of the administration side, I have found that where they have a paid administrator that is either shared by the one league or across leagues, that administrator's role often involves what you talked about earlier — educating individual clubs about their applications. That can be one of the roles. They may liaise with the shire council and there are a lot more professional applications coming from the clubs because of it, and I encourage you to pursue it.

Cr den HOUTING — It could be done that way, that is correct. One of the problems we have is that we have huge distances to cover. Ours is probably the largest league geographically in Victoria and New South Wales, although there are a couple of pretty big ones up near the Farrer up there. I know one boy there that travelled 500 kilometres to go to inter-league training one year when we were playing inter-league footy against them. That is a big travel, but it is a very large area so far as travelling goes.

Mr KNOWLES — When you look at Hay, there are people who travel another 100–140 kilometres from the other side of Hay just to go to Hay to play footy. So when you add that on top, you are into a massive league.

Dr NAPHTHINE — In a lot of the minor leagues — and excuse me calling them minor — —

Cr den HOUTING — District leagues.

Dr NAPHTHINE — In a lot of the district leagues the reserves vary in terms of ages, quality and quantity; and some clubs have difficulty fielding reserves while others have players to spare. What flexibility do you have within your league in terms of being able to ensure that anybody who wants a game can get a game? Do you have unlimited interchange benches at reserves? Do you have the ability to swap players between teams? What sort of flexibility do you have in your reserves?

Cr den HOUTING — Firstly, we are still tied by certain parameters laid down by the Victorian Country Football League. However, we have in place an arrangement whereby, say, your club and my club might meet on the day; my club is a bit short, so we have a day permit whereby 2, 3 or 4 from your club can play for my club. It is a concept that we adopted sometime back because there is a problem with numbers in the reserves, and we also have a large range of ages; our under-17s play reserves regularly, and we also have older people over the age of 45. Those over 45 have to sign an exemption from insurance claims against heart attack — not against a knee or a shoulder injury or something like that, but only against heart attack. That is a fact of life; they have to sign that at the start of the year. If they are over 45 and play footy, they have to sign an exemption. These are the sorts of ranges we are talking about, and it is pretty difficult.

Dr NAPHTHINE — If two reserves teams fronted on the day and they both had 26 players, could they play an unlimited interchange on the bench?

Cr den HOUTING — We also have in place an arrangement whereby every club fills in a team sheet prior to the team taking to the field. The coaches can agree on the number of players on the ground on that day. If they sign their name and they circle the number, if they want to put 24 there, or 18, or 16 — we can go down to 16 — we accept that on the day. There is quite a lot of flexibility built in. In our under-17s we sought and received permission from the VCFL to play 14 players a side, so we can reduce the numbers and let the kids have a game of footy; that is all we are interested in.

Mr KNOWLES — In response to your question, Dr Napthine, I do not think we have ever had a situation where we had 26 players!

Dr NAPHTHINE — I know in a number of district leagues you have much greater numbers when it comes to finals. It seems to me that one of the things that puts particularly young kids off football is that if they are playing in the seconds, if they have played 12 or 14 games throughout the year and then they do not get a game in the finals because everybody fronts up. It seems to me that it would not matter whether you had 5, 7 or 10 players on the interchange bench in the seconds — if you are limited to 18 on the field — so long as everybody is able to participate. In that way you would not have the situation of the 17½ to 18-year-old who has just come out of under-17s playing 10 games of footy and then clearing off and never appearing again, and two years later that same

team is struggling for numbers. I just cannot understand why we put a lot of kids off playing football by having petty rules in what is, with due respect, reserves competition in district leagues.

Cr den HOUTING — It does not just apply to footy; it happens in tennis, cricket and all sorts of sports that kids play all year: kids play the whole year, and in the finals they get put out because maybe a better or more stable player turns up.

Dr NAPHTHINE — When you have the option of an interchange bench, I do not see why you should not use it.

Mr KNOWLES — We certainly have qualifying games, so there is no risk of certain footballers dropping back. We have certainly picked that one up.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I know I am pushing the boundaries here, but we have not always had a netball representative before the committee. I realise we are over time, but can I ask you, Mrs Laity — because in my opinion netball is a critical part of the football/netball club in the community aspect, which is really important —

Dr NAPHTHINE — That is why you have not included it in the inquiry's terms of reference!

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Shut up! If you do not mind, Dr Napthine, I shall address Mrs Laity.

Mrs Laity, what is your view in terms of some of the issues that impact on your netball club? Clearly a lot of volunteers who contribute to that community aspect of country football come from among the netballers.

Mrs LAITY — The issues of volunteers and the officials and the qualifications needed to become an official in either the football or the netball side are very similar.

The amount of travel that we have to undertake to become qualified and to become a qualified umpire at base level, which is the C badge in umpiring, can take up to 12 months. In that 12 months we are travelling from here to Swan Hill, or wherever, on a weekly basis to become accredited, so it does become expensive. In the main part we are using secondary school-age kids to undertake that, and like the football it is very difficult to get kids to undertake training when they have studies and so forth, because of the time angle and the expense on parents.

As far as the facilities and that type of thing go, I have written a few references for clubs that have been trying to upgrade their facilities, and those clubs have been knocked back time and time again. That is so difficult. The facilities that are required are very difficult to maintain in very small country areas, particularly in the last few years when money has not been in districts because of the drought and the level of income has dropped off. Our issues are very much the same as those of the guys. We communicate with the football league on a very regular basis. Basically the football and netball club sides of our league are combined; the issues concerning our guys concern us as well.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Rhonda and Barry. You will get a copy of the transcripts. You will be able to correct matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.