

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Shepparton – 14 April 2004

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Witnesses

Mr W. Bott, general manager,(sworn); and

Mr I. J. Fitzsimmons, chairman, (sworn), Goulburn Valley Football League.

The CHAIR — Welcome. Would you please state your full names, addresses and positions for the transcript.

Mr BOTT — My name is William Bott. I live at 29 Holland Street in Shepparton. I am employed as the general manager of the Goulburn Valley Football League.

Mr FITZSIMMONS — My name is Ian John Fitzsimmons. I live at 30 Boucher Street, Shepparton. I am chairman of the Goulburn Valley Football League.

Mr BOTT — I want to set the scene. I will take you to the footy in a moment just to show you what I am talking about, because you can be dry and just talk about things, but I have a few slides to run through. I made a submission to the country football inquiry back in November when I said that country community football clubs are to be recognised for their role and status in the areas of leadership and health promotion, including drug education and the responsible serving of alcohol. Junior members are able to develop a spirit of the community through the club. A football club is a place of tolerance and acceptance, developing roles and responsibilities within the club and society. It is a place of belonging and comradeship for men and women, and boys and girls, which is my summation of what Paul Briggs was saying just a few moments ago.

Overheads shown.

Mr BOTT — Our football season started off last weekend. We had a game on Friday at Tongala and we can notice from these slides — I will not show much of the footy — that we have timekeepers and scoreboard attendants. The older gentleman in the bottom right-hand corner tells me he has been doing his job at the Tongala Football Club for 30 years.

Netball plays a big part, and on this next slide you will notice that in the top left-hand corner there is a gentleman who is well known in the area and who is the chairman of the Tatura Netball Club. That role was taken on this year, but he has been around footy in the past. He was the junior development officer for the Tatura club for the last two years as well. On the next slide we see netball girls. The girl at the back is also umpiring. Obviously she will be going to play later.

We have volunteers putting their efforts into the canteen. Then we have gatekeepers. You can see our learned gentleman Mr Repacholi at the top right-hand side trying to get the day organised with his cohorts. The gatekeeper is on duty at about 8 o'clock in the morning and knocks off at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. It is interesting to note that the two people on the left are volunteer club umpires. The clubs support our umpires. The people at the top are two young umpires with the umpires observer on that day. All those slides show the whole issue of volunteerism.

Moving on the Saturday's game, we go to Deakin Reserve. The lady shown in the right-hand corner is a life member of the Goulburn Valley Football League and has been with our league for a long time. The lady in the bottom left-hand corner is also a life member of the league, and they are two of the stalwarts of our competition. You can see a shot of the ladies working in the canteen, hiding from the cameras. Going down to the ground, there is a difference between the environments of Deakin Reserve and Tongala. I was speaking to a business leader in the Kyabram area, and it was interesting to note that 20 small businesses closed down in Kyabram in the last 18 months — 11 farms and 9 small businesses — and the clubs are operating in that environment. I was at Katandra the week before for the flag unfurling. The water bailiff was telling me that in that community, 12 of the former dairy farmers have become dry farmers because of the drought and economic conditions.

The next slide deals with the finances. I have given you a copy of our 2003 annual report for your perusal. Our total receipts for the year were \$444 000, expenditure was \$443 000. We work as a non-profit organisation, so the budget worked pretty well last year. I have given an example of three or four of our clubs and broken it down into player payments, expenses, ground charges, insurances et cetera. These will vary as we go through, but as we can see the receipts are \$240 000. Given that there are 10 home games, which is when you have your people together most of all, you are actually trying to raise \$20 000 each week at your home game. In 2001 the premier team had an income of \$195 000 and spent \$46 300 on players and coaches. The size in cash terms of the business of football in the Goulburn Valley is \$3 million. That does not include contra sponsorship and the volunteer labour, because that is not included at all. Within the league I am the only person employed under football terms. I wanted to give

you a notion of how big our business is and to show you our costs for players and expenses for running the club, which I believe is one of the questions you wanted to address in your inquiry.

What I am now showing you is the result of a brainstorm between Ian and myself in the last couple of days. It is a list of some of the things that clubs have to do. Kyabram, with its 220 volunteers who come and do one day's labour, was mentioned before. These are the sorts of things that people do right around the club. There are many aspects. A former chairman of our league listed 128 activities that a club has to do before the first ball is bounced on a Saturday, including putting paper in the toilets and making sure the umpire's paperwork is there et cetera. Footy is big job, and as I showed you before it is a huge business as well.

The GVFL submission focused on some broad-reaching areas such as pressure on institutional development and regional employment. In one of the submissions I have made is the transcript that the amateur football league has sent our league this year for the players transferring to Melbourne. A whole team of footballers is going to amateur football this year — no money, no nothing — and they are going down there for universities, employment et cetera.

If you have been following the news, which am I am sure Mr Hardman has, we have secured eight players coming back to the Goulburn Valley Football League. Those people are being paid — they are working out of an environment where they are being paid \$2000 or \$3000 a year to play country football. The packages that we are talking about for communities to support these people are in the order of \$120 000. Jobs, cars, houses, and the footy club might throw in \$20 000 to coach the footy side. The community is supporting what is happening within their community football club.

One of the areas I spoke about in our submission was also facility development. There are a lot of grants around, and it is a big task to sit down and write a grant. Our league and clubs have secured a lot of grants over the time, and you will see later on that I think there is a way we can develop better ways of improving our facilities.

As to football in schools, our clubs do it; the AFL does it. I believe it is very ad hoc. I think the development of recreational football by the AFL will give us an opportunity to get football into schools, as well as umpiring. Alan Dennett spent a lot of time on administrative support, I understand. It has become a very bureaucratic job filling out forms and risk management sheets, and making sure that everything is in place. Litigation has become huge in our areas. As to the tax office, people are getting paid \$450 a month. They should be paying superannuation. That is happening, but I am sure if you look through the situation there are some clubs that are unaware of their responsibilities in that area. I think it is an area we need to educate our clubs about. It is something that football has not done as yet.

Risk management is a huge issue. Currently the league and several of our clubs have litigation against the league for a player injured in 1997. I was not the general manager at the time and I am dealing with this matter. That is our society. It is happening to us all. We have skills in place at the moment that were not there in 1997. We are having a heck of a time trying to put our cases together for that.

The situation with droughts and floods is another submission I made here. This is about what is happening in the community. This is attributed to Jeanette Powell: state affairs and agriculture industry concerns. Record low rains, milk price rises, dry conditions prevail, city records third driest year on record, Murray River suffers. This is our environment. This is what is happening. This is just in the newspapers from the last week. This is what is happening. We have here a person who came forward who wanted to commit suicide because things were so tough. I believe this person has been invited into a football club. The last one here I put forward is about high costs driving patients to city and a facility at the local hospital that is not covered by a Medicare rebate where the people getting an MRI scan are driving to Melbourne and the facility is being used once or twice a day at the GV hospital. That is the environment that our footy clubs are operating in. I put forward the *Shepparton News* articles, transfer lists from the amateurs and our annual reports for your use. GVFL recommendation: we do need assistance with reduction of bureaucratic requirements.

Development of regionally based tertiary institutes with a program on Australian rules football and umpiring into schools: we have Auskick. When kids have a break they start playing upper primary school footy; they go into secondary school and then they step up into senior footy. A young player will have to jump about four or five different hurdles to continue to stay in the game. I think it is a nonsense.

As to direct funding, this is based on what is happening in the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales, with the AFL giving \$7 million, \$8 million per state to develop the game. We basically get nothing in the Victorian country league. We have a wonderful under-18 competition at the VSFL, but here in the country we used to get 50 per cent of the draft moneys that were coming back from the AFL — about \$20 000 a player. Now we get 20 per cent back into our clubs. The rest of it goes to the VSFL. We are still producing 50 per cent of the AFL players based in our country towns. This is based on a figure of \$1.5 million to \$1.75 million — \$3000 for each senior club, \$1500 for a district league club, \$500 for a junior club. We do not throw the money out there just to be spent on buying extra barrels or anything like that.

Funds to be provided to the league: 50 per cent of those funds will be tied to minor facility development grants, repairs, those types of things, to put up a new scoreboard, run some proper school clinics; employ people within our own communities; 50 per cent for administrative support — perhaps a way of taking some of that bureaucracy away from the clubs. I present that to you as a continuation of my previous submission which, as you note, was developed through our league throughout last year, and I have tried to give you a summary of that in terms of the submission of 28 November.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much.

Mr WALSH — The saying ‘reduction in bureaucratic requirements’ rolls off the tongue very easily. Can you be more specific about what they are and what should be done?

Mr BOTT — The sorts of things we have spoken about tonight are the re-registration policies, the whole aspect of the risk management procedures that we have in place.

Mr WALSH — If you do not have risk management procedures in place, what happens if you get sued?

Mr BOTT — You are not covered by public liability as part of our requirements with insurance.

Mr WALSH — To have that?

Mr BOTT — We have to do it, under our teams.

Mr WALSH — You want to cut that out, do you?

Mr BOTT — I want to present it in a different way, to take it away from the people who turn up to training on Thursday night to support their team and spend an hour making sure everything is in place for the day — whether that is a council officer or someone of that nature, someone who is in a position to be able to do that work for us.

Mr WALSH — Any others?

Mr BOTT — We have a whole range. This whole clearance registration process that is in place is quite difficult. The other aspect that I find — and we had a meeting tonight with our league — is we have become frustrated in that we are playing catch-up because of the ad hoc nature of decision making within our own organisation.

Mr WALSH — The VCFL, you mean?

Mr BOTT — Yes. I raise a couple of examples. I think the player registration program was introduced 12 months too early. It was under-prepared. The web site was introduced 12 months too early; it was under-prepared. Two weeks before our season commenced, the VCFL released an increase of \$20 000 you were permitted to pay on your players. That sort of adhocery needs to change.

Mr WALSH — Would it be possible to do a supplementary with the details of those bureaucracies that you want changed?

Mr BOTT — Absolutely.

Mr WALSH — You talked about the tolerance of the league. Have you got a code of behaviour for the players and the clubs for umpires?

Mr BOTT — We have a code of practice and standards of practice that we have had our coaches sign off for the last three seasons. We have had a code of conduct in place in my entire time with the league, et cetera, and that includes umpiring. For the last four years we have had a measured code of conduct for under-18s, and we introduced last year a measure of code of conduct for our seniors and reserves which are voted on by the umpires and the feedback is given to clubs.

Mr WALSH — Do you have any lady umpires?

Mr BOTT — Only boundary. No centrals, no goals.

Dr NAPHTHINE — I could not help but notice the score at three-quarter time on the board there. It would seem that there may be some significant gap between some of your teams. Is that a situation in your league and is that a trend or a worrying concern for the league?

Mr BOTT — Yes, there are some disparities. In round 1 we have played six games. At senior level we had three games which you would class as crackers, beauties, and three games that were pretty much blow-outs. One of those clubs, Tongala, which we had on the screen there in three grades competed okay in the under-18s, which is a pleasing thing, but I have spoken to one of their officials tonight. They had a meeting with surrounding clubs. I am in my seventh year here, and when I arrived Congupna and the Shepparton Swans were in real trouble as football clubs — numbers, finances, all sorts of things. The problem shifted to Tongala. These clubs built up and Tongala became an issue. They came good and the others are struggling again. We have Wunghnu in the district league, which two years ago was ready to fold. They were supported. At the moment we have a club, Ardmona, which you may have heard about, that is in crisis talks. It is an ongoing problem to keep all clubs viable, operational and competitive at the one time. Within our league it has been quite surprisingly cyclic. Shepparton Swans; Lemnos won the premierships in 1970; the 11 foundation members have all won a premiership between then and now, 9 of them since 1980, so they go up and down at various levels depending on what situation they are at.

One of the big issues we cannot balance out is the under-18 football. We are running teams out of a population of 30 000 people against Tongala with a population of just over 1000 and Euroa with 2000 people. It is very hard to get the balance there. We have introduced internal permits so we can balance numbers up to make it more competitive. It is a reality for some of those smaller clubs that they cannot compete with three grades of football and four grades of netball.

Mr WALSH — You have a TAC Cup team, have you?

Mr BOTT — Murray Bushrangers.

Mr WALSH — What is your relationship with them?

Mr BOTT — Fine. We are delighted with the process that it provides for some of our players. In fact we have had eight players from the Goulburn Valley league — registered players — who have joined AFL this year. That would be a statistic unheard of for one regional league to be able to have eight players join the AFL lists. And then to get eight AFL players coming back into our league, that is one out of the box! That does not happen all the time. Our players are promoted to play in the TAC. We get some players back; some who do not make the grade go over to Western Australia or up to Canberra, all those things happen. It is the system that is in place for those players. They are supported. We would like some further support back at the grassroots with our transfer fees more equitably shared with us.

Mr INGRAM — Would you prefer to have some of those TAC players playing in your finals or coming back on a more regular basis to provide a bit more excitement and interest in your league?

Mr BOTT — It is a school of thought to say the TAC competition should be a one-round competition with finals that finish in July and that all those players should then be released back to their home club so they can have what will be for some of them their last opportunity — they play with their club, and the next game they are playing with the AFL. That would be so exciting, and it would add to the support of those players. I support that personally.

Mr WALSH — You were probably here when some of the other leagues said they were very unhappy with the feedback and involvement from the TAC team. What can be done to improve that?

Mr BOTT — Football Victoria put officers in place to run their competition. Part of their role is to liaise with us. The guy who works here, Greg Liddell, is wonderful. Greg is a former league medallist of our league and runs our coaches' courses, et cetera, but he is also the bus driver who takes the Shepparton-based players to training at Wangaratta and goes to their games et cetera. We just do not have access to this person. There are not enough personnel in the system to provide that hands-on experience or support.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Erica and Ian. You will receive a copy of the transcript. You will be able to correct any matters of substance or grammar or but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.