

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Ballarat – 27 April 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield
Mr B. P. Hardman
Mr C. Ingram
Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell
Dr D. V. Napthine
Mr P. L. Walsh

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

Staff

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

Witness

Mr G. Pigdon, president, Lexton Plains Football League and Netball Association
(sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome. 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 advise all present that all evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. For the purposes of the transcript, please provide your full name and address and whether you are representing a club or an organisation.

Mr PIGDON — My name is Graeme Pigdon, and I am president of the Lexton Plains Football League and Netball Association. My address is 313 Humffray Street North, Ballarat.

The CHAIR — Please give us a brief presentation and then we will have questions for you afterwards.

Mr PIGDON — Thank you for the opportunity. I have listed my responses as A, B, C et cetera, in line with the terms of reference. On paragraph (a) of the terms of reference, the current strength of the long-term viability of Australian rules football in rural communities, it is not yet at a crisis point, but it is a short-term view by administrators to think that this situation will maintain itself and not deteriorate. Money, as no doubt you have already heard before, is the bottom line. Young people cannot afford to stay in rural areas. There is a constant stream of young adults in the 17 to 23 age group gravitating to the large provincial cities or Melbourne for further education and/or increased employment opportunities. This is where the downward spiral begins in trying to maintain the local football and netball teams. Communities are forced to recruit players at an ever increasing cost to clubs. Increasing costs of running football clubs is now bordering on the ridiculous. Liability insurance and the cost of the authorised equipment to dispense food and drink are another increased burden, and in some cases the volunteers are reluctant to obtain these certificates, stating that the extra travel, time and costs are eating into their own personal finances.

On paragraph (b), sporting clubs fulfil many roles within rural communities, not only providing the opportunity to play sport in a healthy and competitive environment but also contributing to personal development. There are many educational aspects including leadership skills and respect for your team members, opponents and umpires. It would be fair to say that the majority of our community leaders can be thankful for their involvement in sport and the lessons learnt at an early age. Community spirit is developed through involvement in supporting your local team every Saturday, becoming invigorated, and that becomes the talking point for the coming week, giving everybody something in common and often allowing them to forget their depressing problems in the short term. For some people this is the only social outlet for the week. They do not just support local football; they live it.

On paragraph (c), shifts in demographics are only a problem that occur for those people who may not have a hospital or mortuary in their town. For a great percentage of rural towns this is a fact of life they live with each day, so it is looked upon with some apprehension to start with. However, the standards required by clubs to supply trainers at the lower levels is small compensation to keep, pay and maintain these people. Guess who pays?

On paragraph (d), for the most part this question can only be spoken with authority in our area. We have lost several teams, others have amalgamated over the period of time, and it would be fair to say that the local netball teams hold the football club together in some instances in our league due to the shift of the younger population which gravitates to the larger provincial centres for education and/or increased employment opportunities. With the economic situation in rural areas getting worse rather than better or even holding its own, this is an unavoidable consequence and as it worsens so will the number of clubs fall over. The costs of the local player have to be paid for by someone. The theory, of course, is that the player pays these fees, thus reducing the load from the club. It is absurdly simple, and as such for the most part it is not working. As a quick note on the costs for the player, these include the football guernseys for training, shorts, socks, boots, affiliation fees, club membership fees, ambulance membership, personal items, admission to the away games, the unknown costs of attending the club functions, raffles, fundraising and so on.

The running expenses for a vehicle to get to training and match days et cetera and the rough estimate for the football season are \$6000-plus; football is not a cheap sport for the country footballer. With unemployment and the like, it is no wonder that players are requesting more assistance from clubs just to break even. A lot of money is made from football in this state, but unfortunately very little seems to find its way back to the clubs that provide a large percentage of the elite footballers. For multinational companies to attempt to destroy simple pleasures like the world rabbit skinning championship or a game of country footy using the excuse of the HIIH collapse is not telling

it the way it is. I ask: how is it that a company organisation that does not have huge claims can have its premiums lifted from \$90 000 per annum to over \$300 000 per annum? The amount of \$90 000 was exorbitant, but to have this type of expense hanging over everybody's heads in sports is a major concern. We are fortunate that the VCFL program has been adopted by the AFL, which hopefully should keep the costs down in the next few years.

This is the hard part. We can all rant and rave about this and that and it really takes little ability to do that. To offer solutions is a vastly different process, especially when you are not privy to all the information. Cost sharing on a regional basis may be worth consideration, but I doubt if this would work as a number of clubs and leagues are very guarded about the operations. The salary cap — player payment — is the biggest paper tiger in the VCFL rules and regulations. The VCFL must enforce its rules in this area. Much has been said about it, but, as I understand it, very little if anything has ever been achieved in ensuring that this policy is working. If it is too hard to manage or you cannot make it work, get rid of it. Or when players are to receive payments, they are paid via the VCFL Area or Regional Manager after the club forwards the moneys to the person responsible for the payment. This may work and assist in some control of player payments.

Training and information seminars are great; I do not believe that enough people get the opportunity to attend. They are usually held in the off-season when the large majority of our rural people are in the midst of their harvest — shearing, haymaking, stripping of crops, carting in hay et cetera. It is very obvious that these dates are set without any consideration for rural people. Maybe these sessions should be aimed and held at the club level. I realise that this would create a bit of extra work for some, but the rewards may well outweigh the expense. This would bring back a little bit of a personal touch which is sadly missing and give all parties a better understanding of the problems that confront everybody.

If the AFL, Football Victoria and the VCFL are genuinely concerned about the survival of our great game in the country, they must visit clubs and show more support, be prepared to listen and assist where they can. After all the majority of elite footballers commence their football career in the country. Consideration should also be given to moving the VCFL administration to the country. This would, I hope, make the VCFL more accessible to all concerned. None of this is of any use if costs cannot be controlled at all levels. This will take an enormous effort from politicians of all persuasions but the most drastic action may well be political suicide to attempt because the task is so difficult. However, it would be worth the efforts for the young and for the future leaders of the rural communities. I am a little embarrassed that the VCFL has allowed a lot of these matters to escalate to this stage. Country football will survive as it has throughout the years. Clubs, fire and drought come and go as well as some clubs, but never underestimate the fight and spirit of our rural communities in Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Graeme.

Dr NAPTHINE — It was pointed out in the previous submission that your league has a northern section and a southern section and there are clubs in the middle that belong to the Central Highlands League. Does that present any difficulties or challenges for your league? Have you had clubs seeking to relocate?

Mr PIGDON — You must remember that the Lexton Plains Football League is in its sixth year of operation. It was an amalgamation of the Western Plains League, which are the four clubs to the south, and of the remaining clubs to the north. Prior to the amalgamation those clubs had gone from leagues that were small in nature and had little travel to what we have today. The clubs have never complained about the travel. Two years ago the Avoca Football Club wanted to play in the Maryborough-Castlemaine District Football League and on both occasions that was refused by the VCFL investigating committee. At that stage, like all clubs and organisations, the local football club was having some difficulty. In the past it was very successful, but now, I surmise, that most of those people that were with the club years ago have drifted off a new group has come in. This year they seem to be quite happy; we have not had any complaints from that club, and last Saturday its senior side had its first win.

Dr NAPTHINE — I understand that the Avoca club had an American playing for it for one or two games?

Mr PIGDON — That is correct.

Dr NAPTHINE — How did that work?

Mr PIGDON — Basically through the vineyards up there. A lot of people come to the vineyards to experience Australian conditions. They got involved with the Avoca club and obtained the necessary permits and played a few games. I suppose you could say we had some international players.

Mr McQUILTEN — Taltarni is owned by the Americans.

Dr NAPTHINE — French-Americans. A person who was a player in the American Football League came out here and he ended up playing a few games for Avoca.

Mr PIGDON — One or two guys from France have also played over the years.

Dr NAPTHINE — I am particularly interested in your comments on salary cap and I must say that I wholeheartedly agree with them. I think it is a joke.

Mr PIGDON — So do I.

Dr NAPTHINE — I would just like to endorse those comments. I think it is impossible to police country Victoria, no matter how you do it.

Mr PIGDON — It is.

Dr NAPTHINE — The effort we spend on that is effort wasted.

Mr PIGDON — Yes, I think after my years involved it is definitely just a paper tiger.

The CHAIR — How do you and the Lexton Plains Football League go with umpires and — —

Mr PIGDON — Umpires. We receive central umpires for our main game — our first 18 — from the Ballarat Football Umpires Association. The Lexton Plains League and the clubs supply boundary and goal umpires and have since its inception. The clubs have umpires that look after their reserves, the under-17s and the under-14s. They are appointed by the clubs and are registered through the Ballarat Football League Umpires Group, but they are basically local club umpires, for want of a better word.

The CHAIR — Do you have a netball club associated with your league?

Mr PIGDON — Yes.

The CHAIR — We are hearing across Victoria that the level of facilities, both for umpires but also for the netballers, are below standard — there are a couple of exceptions. How do you find the facilities for the netballers in your league?

Mr PIGDON — I think the netball facilities in our league are as good as most.

The CHAIR — What do you mean by that?

Mr PIGDON — We believe our netball facilities are as good as the rest. We have been very fortunate that we have a strong netball contingent in our league. Our grounds are run a little differently; although they run under a local recreational committee of people. We just had an application from Rokewood Football-Netball club. It wants to improve and increase the size of its courts and the surrounds. It is the only one we have ever had problems with, and that is in the throes of being achieved in the next week or two.

The CHAIR — Your point about training and seminars for people and having them locally and at appropriate times when people can get there, and taking those things into consideration is important. We are hearing a lot about the condition of the grounds. Are there many opportunities for people to train in turf management or ensure they are getting the best value out of their grass, water and so on?

Mr PIGDON — We only have one club which plays at two grounds. The first half of the year it always plays at Linton and the last three or four games of the season it plays at Snake Valley, simply because Snake Valley never has any water. It is a very small community, and the Linton ground always got their water out of an old reservoir, but with the drought over the last few years that has dried up and it has been helped by people taking

water from the old reservoir. All the other grounds are in really good condition. They have bores in most cases or large dams. To give you an example, Natte Bealiba and Navarre had great diesel pumps running 6-inch pipes onto the ground, and flooded them, but three weeks later they were lovely. Skipton has its own bore, and that is a safety zone in case of disaster, so it is an assembly area and it has always been green and the ground is in excellent condition. We go around and check the grounds ourselves. I did green-keeping as a job many years ago and I still do it on bowling greens, and I have been taking it upon myself to see those clubs having problems. I believe the Linton ground will probably be ready for play within the next two to three weeks. So we have really only had to move one game.

The CHAIR — Your expertise is a great benefit.

Mr PIGDON — It has probably helped, but we do have a fairly close relationship between the clubs and they meet and help each other. They obtain their advice also from a lot of the farmers in the community.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time today. You will get a copy of the transcript and you will be able to correct any matter of error or fact but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.