

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Sea Lake – 24 March 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield	Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman	Dr D. V. Napthine
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Mr J. M. McQuilten	

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Witnesses

Mr J. McFarlane, Secretary (sworn); and
Mr T. Kiley, President, (affirmed), Mallee Football League; and
Mr A. Griffiths, Interim Regional Manager, North Central Region (affirmed), Victorian Country Football League

The CHAIR — Welcome, everybody! Thank you for your attendance today. 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 hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee, including one Independent, and we are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into country football. Welcome and thank you very much coming.

For the purposes of the transcript could you please provide your full names and addresses? If you are representing an organisation, please state the name of the organisation and your position within that organisation.

Mr KILEY — I am Terrence John Kiley. I live at Nyarrin Road, Sea Lake. I am the president of the Mallee Football League.

Mr McFARLANE — I am James Joseph McFarlane. I live in Brim East Road, Brim, and I am secretary of the Mallee Football League.

Mr GRIFFITHS — I am Andrew Griffiths of 25 Hammill Street, Donald. I am the interim regional manager for the north central region. When I say 'interim', we are going through a merging process at the moment and have not conclusively finalised that position. I am the outgoing regional manager, so I will say 'interim' at the moment.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Could you briefly make some comments, then afterwards we will ask some questions.

Mr KILEY — I will just outline where the current Mallee Football League has come from, probably over the last 25 years, and some of the reasons we have lost clubs and perhaps where we may be in the next five or 10 years.

In 1979 three football leagues existed within the current Mallee Football League — namely, the Tyrrell, the then Mallee and the Southern Mallee. The Tyrrell Football League disbanded and the clubs went into the Northern Mallee League, the Southern Mallee League and the Golden Rivers League. The current Mallee Football League was formed in 1997 with 12 teams. The league was the result of the merger the northern and southern Mallee leagues. The newly formed league consisted of the following clubs: Brim, Beulah, Jeparit-Rainbow, Berriwillock-Culgoa, Hopetoun, Nullawil, Woomelang-Lascalles, Yaapect, Walpeup-Underbool, Ouyen United, Sea Lake-Nandaly and Manangatang.

Today, only seven years since the merger of the two leagues, the Mallee Football League now consists of seven clubs. In the last seven years we have seen the shift of Nullawil to the Golden Rivers Football League, the disbanding of Yaapect, the merger of Brim and Warracknabeal, Berriwillock and Culgoa, Sea Lake and Nandaly, and Manangatang and Tooleybuc. Brim and Warracknabeal now play in the Wimmera Football League, and Manangatang and Tooleybuc will now play in the Central Murray Football League.

There are a number of reasons for the decline in the number of clubs, the primary one being the lack of player numbers. The reasons we have fewer player numbers is a lack of young people in the area due to farm rationalisation and sales. We do not know what the consequences of this year's sales will be; there has been a huge number of farm sales this year. Lack of player numbers is the result of declining birth rates, declining population, a decrease in government services with the rationalisation of environmental areas, water, power, telecommunications, schools and railways.

The new government regulators make it harder for farmers to employ farmhands in such areas as WorkCover, superannuation and taxation regulations. Young people go on to further education and therefore are not returning to farms in the local town. Any young talented players are forced into the statewide under-18 junior system if they are to have any realistic chance of being drafted to the AFL. While talking about the AFL, I have not been involved in this job for very long, but I have a pretty strong impression that the AFL is not really interested in grassroots football.

Some of the reasons for the drop in club numbers are the voluntary cost incurred by volunteers to do the jobs of club administration. This year we had one club that could not find a president until February. Most clubs have them appointed at the end of October. There is the cost of insurance, although the VCFL, with recent programs, has been very helpful in this area. There is the cost and availability of water. As we talked about before outside, we have trouble with some of the grounds in the southern part of our league that are not on the northern Mallee pipeline system. Any of the grounds that are on the pipeline system are in quite good shape, as you can see outside. Another problem is the distance between teams within the league. Probably the maximum distance within our league is 200 kilometres, and that is about the maximum clubs will accept. I do not know if they would be prepared to travel any further than that.

Some of the effects of this is that football and netball are the primary social activity in many of the small country towns within the Mallee Football League so that towns where the football club has disbanded or amalgamated have now virtually lost their identity and in some cases virtually have died. This has caused a loss of schools, shops, hotels and banks, and the families within these areas have moved on to bigger regional towns. The grounds and facilities of these clubs that have folded or amalgamated have now been left to those volunteers who remain in the area to try and maintain the good facilities for some use by the community groups.

There is a lack of administration and volunteers to help run the club and raise finances. In all sports — football, netball, golf, bowls, cricket et cetera — in small country towns there is a lack of personnel to take on leadership roles or executive positions, therefore it is left to the same people to fill these positions. Over time there has been a decline in the number of people living in country areas, and clubs are struggling to maintain and/or fill the key personnel positions required to run their club.

While numbers in country towns continue to decline the administration role of the club is growing. There is also a problem within these towns of getting sponsorship because they have been raided by each club within that town. We have to have a solution and perhaps numbers is the key issue. Player numbers is the key problem within our region. This is a personal thought, but I think team numbers should be reduced. But this would have to be done on a statewide basis otherwise you would never recruit anyone coming into a league that had fewer numbers on the field. For example, I think we could have 15 a side on field and we could even minimise the ground sizes. Another question should be whether reserves football should be replaced by an underage group so that our schoolchildren could have football right through their school years, like an under-18s competition.

Where will we be in the next five years? At our current rate of losing one team per year, within five years we will be down to two, so something will have to be done. There are probably two scenarios. There could be an amalgamation of leagues within the north-central, Mallee and perhaps Wimmera areas. This could keep us in our same dryland agricultural environment, and within this region I think football and family involvement are run on the same level with junior football groups.

The other scenario could be a regional grouping which could be centred around the major cities of Horsham, Mildura and Swan Hill. This has its attractions, especially to the younger generation, with the nightlife et cetera. The problem with the regional grouping is that the underage football is run by separate administrations, and there could be a lot more travelling involved and a split in family groups.

We need to help clubs that are struggling in the water situation to find water to help maintain their grounds. We also need to have schools embrace football/netball so that it is pushed a bit more thoroughly through the schools.

Mr INGRAM — You mentioned player numbers on the ground and the impact on your reserves. Obviously looking at the presentation you have made and listening to what you have been saying, you are probably at the very brunt of some of the restructures which will impact most on small towns which have declining numbers of young people. The Omeo football league has only seniors and juniors and has only 16 players on the field at one time. Do you see that as a potential way of easing the pressure on your clubs in fielding sides? What impact would that have on the outside perception of your league and attracting players to play in your league?

Mr KILEY — I mentioned that, and I believe it would have to be taken on a statewide basis. It would have to be taken up by the Victorian Country Football League (VCFL) and pushed right across the state, be it 15 or 16 a side on the field. Numbers is the problem, and that would relieve the numbers a little bit anyway, and also the cost.

Mr GRIFFITHS — You can play with 14.

Mr WALSH — Are you talking about district leagues or major leagues as well?

Mr KILEY — Major leagues as well, otherwise I think you would have trouble recruiting players out of the major centres to play in the district leagues.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Have you raised it with the VCFL?

Mr KILEY — No.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — It might be possible to do that if you had a league-wide agreement.

Mr INGRAM — I think Mr Kiley was saying it should be a statewide issue. Are you saying that there would be a negative perception if your team decided to reduce the number of players on the field?

Mr KILEY — I think there would be, yes.

Mr INGRAM — How hard is it for teams in your league to field seconds? Obviously if you are struggling for numbers that is where it would show up. Is that broadly across the league, or is it just that when clubs are going through some tough years they have real trouble? How often do teams turn out without their full contingent of seconds?

Mr McFARLANE — Not really. Most teams will come with their full team list, but a lot of them are made up of older players or older people and people they have perhaps picked up out of the town. They will try to get their seconds, and last year we did not have any seconds that forfeited. In the year before I think we had two games forfeited for the year, but you are probably looking at some players playing that are over 45 to make up those numbers, and also drawing out of the juniors that have already played an under-16s game and coming in to help to fill those spots in a lot of cases. But they will put a team on the grounds.

Mr KILEY — Before they merged with Sea Lake-Nandaly, Berriwillock-Culgoa never had a reserves side, did they, or was it the under-16s?

Mr McFARLANE — It was under-16s in the final year.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You touched on the AFL in your comments. It would be fair to say that there would be a majority who would agree with you in terms of presenters before this committee. Has any of you thought of how the Australian Football League can actually contribute more tangibly to grassroots football, particularly in areas like this, whether it be capital, programs or players? Do you have any thoughts about that? There is that perception, or reality — whichever way you want to go.

Mr KILEY — The obvious thing would be for it to provide player access. It is like we do not exist so far as the AFL is concerned. That is my personal view anyway.

Mr McFARLANE — Last year we had an Auskick roadshow in Hopetoun, where over 400 kids came along. The AFL, or Football Victoria in charge of Auskick, sent up a squad. I think there were five players, and Dipper — Robert Dipierdomenico — came up. Dipper was the only one known; the others were in their first year of being drafted. They were unknown to the kids, and that was part of the problem. To come to these areas with people who are unknown, you might as well not come. It was very disappointing to the organisers and more disappointing to the kids who attended. With those players, I think only one had played any football, the rest of them have disappeared and this year they are off the list, so that is one way we are not getting much support.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about the VCFL restructure, which is undecided at this stage? Do you see some benefits?

Mr McFARLANE — It is very hard to come up with any answer there. The Mallee North Central has been lumped in with the Wimmera and Horsham District this year. It is going to run from Ararat to Ouyen, and from Wedderburn-Boort across to Dimboola-Nhill, I think is the other side of it. It is going to be very hard to say it will go. I have my reservations about it, but we will just have to wait and see, because where we had two regional managers before we are down to one, so it is a very big area.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Where is your regional manager? Is it Alan Davies?

Mr GRIFFITHS — With respect, Chair, I was previously the regional manager. As I said in the introduction, I am the interim one. Alan Davies is the area manager, and that is a full-time VCFL job.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — He is your area manager?

Mr GRIFFITHS — Yes, Alan Davies; it was previously Rod Ward. They only introduced area managers last year. Rod Ward has stepped aside and Alan Davies from Swan Hill is the current area manager. At the next level down are regional managers. There is going to be one regional manager for the newly merged regions of Wimmera region and North Central region. They are currently about to discuss that appointment. They could not get anyone at this stage. To reiterate, I am stepping aside. Previously there was the North Central regional manager, and there was a Wimmera regional manager, now there will be one. Alan Davies is the area manager, which is a full-time VCFL job.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Are they having trouble filling that position?

Mr GRIFFITHS — Yes they are, which is understandable, with all due respect Michael, and that emphasises what Terry has said. The army of volunteers is no longer there. It is not an honorary position; it is a reimbursed position. They have stated categorically that the regional managers now will be able to take up to, including expenses, \$5000. But by the same token to do, as James has said, from Boort to Nhill, from Underbool-Ouyen to Ararat and to do appeals and things like that, people stepped back at 100 miles an hour, not forward.

Dr NAPTHINE — To change the subject, you have talked about the struggle with players and teams — and we understand the way agriculture has changed, which is the basis of the economy here — but what about the umpire situation? How is the league going in terms of umpires?

Mr KILEY — For a number of years clubs have had to supply their under-16 and reserve grade umpires. Up until this year we have had the North Central umpires group, and it has had the numbers, but this year the numbers have declined, so it will be interesting to see how we go. There is going to be one less game per week with Manangatang leaving the league, so we are down to three games per weekend.

Dr NAPTHINE — So what do they supply in terms of umpires for your main game day?

Mr KILEY — Main, senior umpires.

Dr NAPTHINE — So clubs provide goal and boundary umpires?

Mr KILEY — Clubs provide goal and boundary, reserves and under-16 field umpires.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Two centrals?

Mr McFARLANE — Yes, two centrals. It is a problem.

Mr KILEY — We had a meeting last week with the umpires group, and the main reason for the loss of umpires this year was abuse.

Dr NAPTHINE — That would not be from your league though, would it?

Mr KILEY — No.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you have a code of conduct in your league?

Mr KILEY — Yes, that is through the VCFL.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — And your teams have agreed to that?

Mr KILEY — Yes.

Dr NAPHTHINE — We are going to be reporting to the Parliament, but ultimately the state government responds, and I understand the broader issues of rationalisation and player numbers, but if there was any single thing that the state government could do to assist your football league, what would it be?

Mr KILEY — To push the recommendations, or what recommendations we have had, to the VCFL because that is where it is going to come from. I believe it has to be VCFL-led.

Mr GRIFFITHS — Short of being branded a heretic or anything like that, the AFL does not help. The club that it is affecting this area directly is the Bendigo Pioneers. The AFL formed the TAC Cup as the elite channel. You have to be careful what you say here; I have brought this up at VCFL meetings in the past and you are condemned as being negative. You have to be very careful what you say, but the fact is that it is part of the decline of country football. The fact is that some players may go on to make it, sure. Do you understand what I am saying about the TAC Cup and the Bendigo Pioneers? Peter would know.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — It has come up before.

Mr GRIFFITHS — Has it? That is interesting.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You are not the only one.

Mr GRIFFITHS — I am probably reiterating what people have said to you before, but I want to emphasise that you cannot condemn anyone who does go on to make it, that is why you are condemned as being negative for even speaking out on it. But so many do not make it, yet they are taken away and do not come back. This has probably been said before as well. This is where it is negative. With the TAC Cup, and in our case it is the Bendigo Pioneers — or it may be the North Ballarat Rebels depending on what area you are in — as I said you have to be careful and diplomatic with what you say, but in actual fact it is contributing to the decline in country football. It is taking away young kids. Obviously they are excited about getting the opportunity to go, but what is the percentage who do make it? It is a high percentage who do not, and they do not come back. They are being taken away from a club which can ill afford to lose them, and they do not come back. With all due respect, the Bendigo recruiting scouts from the Bendigo clubs go and snap them up once they drop of from the Pioneers, and they are lost to Mallee, North Central and Sunraysia clubs too.

Mr INGRAM — I will follow up on that. It has been raised before as an issue. Is a potential solution — and I would just like your view on it — that the Pioneers or the TAC Cup reduce their number of games and allow those young players to come back to their home clubs for a number of games through the season, and actually have a number of weeks through the year where those players come back to those local home clubs so they still keep their connection with their roots, where they were selected from.

Mr GRIFFITHS — You would not decline that, Craig, certainly not. It would be a step in the right direction. What do you think, Terry?

Mr KILEY — Yes.

Mr GRIFFITHS — I have known instances where it depends on, even apart from what the regulations allowed in the VCFL handbook, but some players were not even allowed to come back when they could have because of the bloody practice match. The coach said, 'You will stay right there'.

Dr NAPHTHINE — So they will not let them come back and play anyway, even if you say they will only play three weeks out of — —

Mr GRIFFITHS — Have you heard that, Denis?

Dr NAPHTHINE — Yes. In our area players from Portland go up and board at Ballarat to play for the Ballarat Rebels. If they have a week off traditionally they have come back and played at Hamilton or Heywood. In recent years the Ballarat Rebels have said no, because they are worried about the grounds, the conditions and the lack of trainers. With due respect, they get in the kid's ear and tell him, 'If you do your knee playing down there, you have got Buckley's of getting selected for the AFL in the draft. You are running a big risk. Have the week off. You can rest those hammies'. They talk the kids into not going back and playing.

The CHAIR — How big is the Bendigo Pioneers squad?

Mr GRIFFITHS — It just finalised it to 32. I know there are three from Donald, a couple from Charlton and the North Central league made it. It was just finalised to 32 from the previous larger squads. That was about a week ago. I think that is their final squad of 32. Those kids are excited about it, there is no doubt about it, but back home you could go and ask club officials from anywhere in the whole region and they would say, 'Stuff the Bendigo Pioneers!'.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — It is a difficult one, isn't it?

Mr GRIFFITHS — You are condemned.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — How do you develop the league without punishing the clubs?

Mr GRIFFITHS — Exactly. If you come out against it you are condemned for stopping a bloke who may make it, that is right.

Mr KILEY — But only a few make it, though.

Mr GRIFFITHS — That is what has to be weighed up. The percentages need to be considered.

The CHAIR — Do you have any idea of the percentage it would be?

Mr KILEY — There are only two or three each year that come out of Bendigo Pioneers that are drafted.

Mr GRIFFITHS — We can only estimate. Comfortably you could say 95 per cent do not make it, with all due respect.

Mr McFARLANE — There was one bloke in six years that made it. He went to Perth and I think he has played 15 games since he has been over there. That is Kane Munro.

Mr WALSH — The committee has heard about club infrastructure, such as clubrooms, lack of facilities for female umpires or netballers to change and so on. Are your facilities pretty much up to scratch in that regard?

Mr KILEY — Ouyen have just built new clubrooms and I think generally in the league it is not too bad.

Mr McFARLANE — Generally, the area that would have some of the bigger problems is where you are now, but most of the clubs throughout the league are probably really good.

Mr WALSH — So, do you have change facilities for female umpires?

Mr KILEY — Yes.

Mr WALSH — In your clubs?

Mr KILEY — I am not sure.

Mr McFARLANE — No, because we do not have any female umpires at this stage.

Mr KILEY — Do you mean female football umpires?

Mr WALSH — Yes.

Mr KILEY — We do not have any at this stage.

Mr McFARLANE — I have just passed some photos around. They show grounds at Brim in the Wimmera, where I come from. It shows what grounds commonly look like that are not on the pipeline. I just believe that when we are talking about what the state government could do, I believe water, whether it is underground water or not, will have an effect on the survival of ground throughout this area. In the northern area it has cost them a lot of money to get their grounds up, even like the one out here, but where you do not have water you have nothing, and then that will be the demise of football and the demise of towns.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submission and your obvious passion about the game. You will receive a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks and you will be able to correct matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.