

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Shepparton – 14 April 2004

Members

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Witnesses

Mr V. D. McGee, president, (sworn);
Mr A. R. Dennett, general manager/treasurer, (sworn); and
Mr J. D. Hand, president, tribunal (sworn), Murray Football 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, is under the provisions of the Constitution Act granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, and we are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into country football.

I again welcome everybody, especially Jeanette Powell, the member for Shepparton, who is sitting through the hearings and certainly was keen for us to come up to Shepparton for these hearings.

Would the witnesses please state for the transcript their full names, addresses, positions and the organisation they represent.

Mr DENNETT — Alan Richard Dennett, 27 Brooks Avenue, Barooga, New South Wales 3644. I am the general manager/treasurer of the Murray Football League.

Mr HAND — My name is John Douglas Hand, 48 Osbourne Street, Finley, New South Wales 2713. I am chairman of the Murray Football League independent tribunal.

Mr McGEE — Vivian Darcy McGee, Jerilderie Street, Berrigan, New South Wales 2716. I am president of the Murray Football League.

The CHAIR — Would you give us your brief comments, and after that we will ask you some questions.

Mr DENNETT — Firstly at the bottom of page 2, the word is meant to be ‘pursue’ not ‘peruse’. I would not like young people to just peruse a thing; I want them to do it. As a sufferer of work-related chronic post-traumatic stress syndrome and severe depression I may be in a lather of sweat at the end of this presentation. If this occurs, I ask you please to forgive my appearance and to forgive me if I lose concentration.

Country sport has provided me with many of the highlights of my life, I represented my birth town, Ararat, in both football and A group country week cricket. Most importantly, I met my then wife-to-be after the Dimboola 1958 premiership in the Wimmera league. Unfortunately, my future mother-in-law thought I was drunk! Football took me from Dimboola to Portland in western Victoria, to Beaconsfield in south-west Gippsland and finally to Hampton Park near Dandenong. It also opened many other doors for my sporting love, cricket, which I played until my mid-40s. I took up umpiring in my third year and made Melbourne division 1st 11 grade.

Following my inability to continue in paid employment in 1999 it was recommended by my medical advisers that I find something to occupy my mind, and in 2002 the Murray Football League gave me the opportunity to try and fill the position of league general manager on a trial basis. This is my third year as a volunteer in this position which now also incorporates the work of treasurer of the league. Everyone involved appreciates that I work when I can, and there are always people to help when I have difficulties. I emphasise this as a demonstration of the community spirit that is the basis of country sport, particularly football, which I refer to in my written submission.

As a volunteer administrator, I have watched the big increase in workloads at both league and club levels reach the stage where it is almost impossible to complete all requirements. This is being reiterated by people at the grassroots of football, the club volunteers. New requirements pertaining to player insurance, new government regulations particularly in all aspects of health and safety, food handling, liquor licensing and responsible liquor serving, coaching accreditation, GST, player payments, taxation and superannuation have all had a big effect on the workloads expected to be carried, in the most part, by volunteers.

It is a strongly held belief that regional sports officers would greatly assist in removing some of the workload from club and league people, consequently reducing the turnover in administrators and importantly provide job training avenues for some young people, particularly some of the non-participating younger people. The final two references in the submission pertain to the federal government, but again country football under the VCFL banner involves three of the states so cannot be limited to rulings or recommendations governing Victoria only.

Football club and football league treasurers are usually everyday people who are trusted within communities to look after the enormous amount of money that is generated through country football. Rarely are they qualified

accountants or the like, but since GST, group certificates, income tax withholding, superannuation payments and allocations et cetera, clubs cannot afford to be lax in any avenue of paperwork or regulation in this complex area. An across-the-board survey of 12 contracted players in the Murray League indicates that in every case all moneys documented as earned from football is claimed as expenses. The maximum earnings from the individuals was \$6200.

Why is all this necessary? The paperwork and more importantly the worry and stress caused to administrators is of no benefit to anyone, particularly the ATO. Likewise, for clubs to provide superannuation benefits for any player receiving more than \$350 in any type of benefit in any calendar month is again a mammoth task and a responsibility to place on normal untrained volunteers. Volunteers are the lifeblood of country football — and please do not forget netball — and any consideration given to making their task easier will only benefit the communities which they are all proud to represent. Thank you.

The CHAIR — John, did you have something to add?

Mr HAND — Part of Alan's submission relates to assistance to provide work experience for young people in the recording area. I guess unfortunately not every youngster playing football in Finley ends up being a Jumping Jack Hawkins or a Shane Crawford. Young people today are more technology minded, and the submission that Alan has presented in regard to the compilation and recording of results and the work experience gained is a very positive area for young people to be involved in, given, as I say, that abilities vary from waving the flags for the fourth 18 through to boundary umpiring the seniors or playing in the seniors. There is a broad cross-section of abilities in a country football club.

Volunteers, as Alan says, are the lifeblood of country clubs, and I think all of you coming from country areas would very much appreciate how important the football and netball clubs are as a fabric of society. The towns that have unfortunately had to let go of football clubs, as much on one side we may see the lack of players on the other side the lack of volunteers to keep the clubs running leaves a big hole in a community.

Mr McGEE — I have nothing written, but if I may I want to reiterate what both these gentlemen have said. Alan made the point that football and netball clubs are the fabric of particularly small towns in any community. I do not think we have to tell you people that. But it is so important that whether they are players, volunteers, or whatever, if your football-netball club is not functioning, it is pretty much the death of your community because there is not much left after that, particularly in the winter months. In Alan's submission where he has suggested this role for younger people, I think that is a very positive move, and we also need to recognise and take the burden off some of the volunteers. Perhaps we can do it by some involvement from a government level, as Alan has suggested, in reference to tax and superannuation and all of these types of things. I think it can only be positive.

Mr McQUILTEN — What about the AFL? Are you getting enough support from the AFL?

Mr DENNETT — Could I draw your attention to the back sheet? That is the team we selected last year — 3051 games. Every player on that is a star. Every one of them commenced their junior football in the Murray Football League.

Mr McQUILTEN — In other words, you have put into the AFL, but are you getting anything back?

Mr DENNETT — No.

Mr McGEE — Sadly it is one way — the bulk of it is one-way trade.

Mr DENNETT — The good old days of giving us a reasonable fund back to the club — and that is where it belongs — has gone. Now the TAC takes a share, Football Victoria takes a share and the dribble gets down to the club. It is the club that is still doing all the work at the junior level, and it is the volunteers who are doing the coaching at the junior level.

Mr WALSH — How do you correct that imbalance then?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Are there some programs that you see that the AFL could involve themselves in?

Mr DENNETT — I was lucky enough to be brought up in Ararat, where we were in a zone. A VFL club in those days came up and spent time with us. They taught us things. They were always available.

Mr McQUILTEN — Was that Essendon?

Mr DENNETT — No comment. I did coach Barry Price at one stage of his career. The AFL is taking everything, but more importantly it is the little gap from the elite. It is that next step down. They take them away from the country club for a year, put them into the TAC — those ones that do not make the top grade. A lot of those kids get absolutely broken hearted. They do not come back to the country club because they are ashamed that they did not make the grade. There is not enough support at that level for a starter. I am sorry, but the AFL really do disappoint me in every way, shape and form.

Mr McGEE — Even to the point of getting clinics and footballers to the bush, or to the country clubs, it is an onerous task. There is so much money involved that clubs cannot afford it. If we could get them to spend a weekend, a day, or whatever, at clinics and seminars, but in clubs of the likes of my home town of 1000 people, it was costing us when I was involved at club level \$150 000 turnover at the club. Now when it comes to paying up to get clinics from so-called AFL players, the money is just not there any more.

Mr McQUILTEN — We have heard that if you are more than 2½ hours drive away from Melbourne you have to pay for their air fares up. Is that right?

Mr DENNETT — Correct. If I could just point out one thing: in that side that we selected last year we invited them all up to our presentation night; Brian Gleeson and all those older type players, it was not a problem. They came up and gave everything. The younger players — and I will name them — John Barnes, Bill Brownless, Hocking, wanted money to attend. Francis Burke, who was captain of that side, spent all Good Friday at the Barooga game, went on to the night game at Finley, then had to open a newsagency on the Saturday morning. That is the type of person that the AFL should be holding up in front of all the rest of them and saying, ‘This is what a 300-game footballer does for country football’. Shane Crawford was on a pushbike going to Sydney when we held the presentation night. Shane rang and said, ‘I will be in Gundagai. If I am running late or anything goes wrong and I am in Albury, can you send a car across? I will gladly come across to be there for the night’. There is the difference with true, home-grown country footballers — your Francis Bourke just wants to be buried at Nathalia! But sorry, generally the AFL just wipe its hands. Because we are six/five, six New South Wales, five Victoria —

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about the Murray Bushrangers? Do they assist in your schools — your TAC under-18 places? How do they assist you in club level, or even at school level?

Mr DENNETT — They do not. Again, all our kids have to travel to Shepparton or Wangaratta to attend all the pre-season, all the clinics, all that sort of thing; and again it falls back on volunteers, parents and people like that to transport them across. There are no allowances, there is no financial help, nothing.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — So you are sure that the TAC clubs do not do any school programs? We heard that Gippsland Power did quite extensive school-based programs.

Mr McGEE — In a place like Albury, where they are centred, sure they would be. In Shepparton I think you would find exactly the same thing, and in Wangaratta — the bigger centres. But to try and get them —

Mr McQUILTEN — But not in Finley.

Mr McGEE — In our clubs — the Finleys, the Berrigans, the Baroogas — we do not see them.

Mr HAND — Two of the players played on the MCG in the grand final for the Murray Bushrangers, one from Finley and one from Berrigan, which would suggest that here should be some support there, but no.

Mr MITCHELL — Do they offer you any administrative support in any way or assistance?

Mr DENNETT — Not a drop. I spoke to Mr Hardman about another matter that the VCFL dumped in our laps one week before the opening of our season regarding the salary cap. I am very pleased to advise that that

has been rescinded, or is in the throes of being rescinded, because the way it was dumped on clubs was an absolute disgrace and against the rules of the VCFL. As I say, sometimes they listen.

Dr NAPHTHINE — In a similar situation to Western Port, which is my home area, are there any glaring issues that are different in New South Wales and Victoria that make it difficult to run your league that perhaps we could as a committee take up?

Mr DENNETT — As I pointed out in the written submission, the difference in rules and regulations pertaining to food handling, liquor licensing and liquor serving do vary, but they are a vital part of health and safety, of presenting safety and looking after people. Any problems there are things that we have to resolve. We have just got to stay within those rules because they are there to look after us, but they do not cause us any major hassles.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Second question: the AFL have made it clear that New South Wales and Queensland are part of their challenges for the future. Do you receive any benefit through the AFL's push into New South Wales via, say, Sydney and the Sydney Swans?

Mr DENNETT — If I could answer that with a demonstration from the Hume Football League. Hume wanted to conduct a four team competition like our games against Western Port or in Horsham in June, and they asked AFL New South Wales for \$2000 towards the expenses of running that carnival. They got knocked back.

Mr McGEE — Sadly, it all ends up in Sydney and Brisbane. Again, the bush sees very little of it.

Mr WALSH — Alan, If you were chairman of the AFL for a day, what would you do differently to correct the things that you have talked about? Our challenge as a committee is to come up with some solutions, not just articulate the problems; so if you had the power for a day, what would you do?

Mr McQUILTEN — We will give it to you for a week if you like!

Mr WALSH — Yes, If takes a week, that is fine — or a year, as long as you get more players for Geelong up there!

Mr DENNETT — The initial response is to get more back to country football.

Mr WALSH — What is your definition of more?

Mr DENNETT — That is not really what we need. What we need is the assistance to make sure that the volunteers — the people like this bloke who drives from Finley to Barooga every time there is a tribunal — are given something to keep them coming and to get the AFL to understand that the tier down from the elite are not just discarded.

Mr WALSH — What are the recommendations on how to do that? What are the specific actions?

Mr McQUILTEN — If I could make one suggestion from the things we have talked about in other areas — I am just helping with the answer — there is the possibility of the AFL asking volunteers to come down to Melbourne, to go to matches and have a couple of days training with trainers, coaching with coaches and managing with managers. No money would be involved; they would just be a part of it.

Mr DENNETT — No, our coaching accreditation is I think the best it will ever be. Our trainers' accreditation is as good as it will get. I think every club takes pride in the fact that they have all their coaches and trainers fully accredited. One thing I would like to see is the TAC Cup finish a lot earlier than it does. They do not need finals. Those kids could all come back to their country clubs where they belong for finals. They have done all the hard work, and they could help their country clubs just for those few weeks at the end of the year.

Young Mark McGough from Mulwala went down and dominated in the Anzac Day match a few years ago. If Mulwala had been able to get young Mark back for the grand final I daresay it may have turned the tables. That kid had to stand out. He would have been a qualified Mulwala player, but no, they have to carry on with the TAC thing into the finals for whose glorification? Not the kids! Seriously, I do not think it is for the kids.

Mr McGEE — If I can butt in there on what we could expect from the AFL or Football Victoria, it could be as Alan mentioned in relation to the accreditation of coaches and upgrading of the accreditation of volunteers in regard to responsible serving of alcohol and food serving as is coming into vogue now; all those courses have to be paid for either by the volunteers themselves or by their clubs. If the clubs are financial they will pay, but in lots of cases clubs are not financial so the volunteer pays for his own accreditation out of his own pocket. Some remuneration in that line is I think a step in the right direction. It would give some assistance to clubs to continue into the future along all those lines. I do not think any of us disagree with the proper, responsible serving of alcohol and food, it is all good stuff, but somebody has to pay. We are running out of money in the bush but there seems to be a lot of money down at the headquarters of the AFL and Football Victoria, so a little bit back to the grassroots clubs in some form of subsidy or assistance would be of big assistance.

Mr WALSH — Would there be support for again having some form of zoning that gave clubs priority draft picks for their zone or something?

Mr DENNETT — From what I hear, yes.

Mr McGEE — From what I have heard from around the traps there would be some support for going back to the zoning principle.

Mr HAND — I think an indication of the AFL's support for country football is the direct telecasting of games on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. That probably says a lot in itself.

Mr INGRAM — In your comments on the enforceability of the salary cap you mentioned how you did not appreciate the rise, as it came with very little notice. How accurately enforced is the salary cap within your leagues?

Mr DENNETT — Extremely.

Mr INGRAM — And how do you do it? What sorts of measures do you put in place?

Mr DENNETT — On 15 April every club has to present me with a list of their contracted players and the payments they intend to make for the year. On 30 June they have to give me an updated report on it. On 15 October — and one of the blokes up the back will yell at me and tell me I have got my date wrong — they have to give me a final report. I also get their annual financial report. I have the authority through the VCFL to examine all their books. Our clubs cannot afford to go over a \$50 000 salary cap. They just cannot afford it.

Mr McGEE — That we know of, anyway.

Mr DENNETT — I am more than happy in the couple of years I have been doing it that there is not a Murray Football League club that is spending any more than the salary cap.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — You are the first.

Mr INGRAM — Do you believe some of the players are potentially getting outside payments from sponsors?

Mr DENNETT — No, because they are not coming close to the \$50 000. The clubs are not coming close to it. Mulwala embarked on a new thing two years ago. They got rid of some very rough footballers. They were costing me and John every Wednesday night of the year. They cleaned it all out. Last year they set about getting their local boys up. This year they have gone out and bought some players. The president of the Mulwala Football Club would have loved to have known about the extra \$20 000 because he could have done something with it, but rather than do that, he said no, he would not go and buy this very good footballer that was available, because it would have meant he would have lost three other players, and he would rather have three players than one top player so that he could stay in the salary cap. That was a plain, straight out and verifiable fact, so they are not going to go outside the salary cap when they are doing that sort of thing.

Mr INGRAM — What is the impact on young people, because the further away from the metro areas there is a greater loss of young people out of the areas for education, employment and other issues? That is a

problem pretty well right across rural Australia. What sort of impact does that have on your club, and are there any simple solutions that you see? Is it something we need to be dealing with?

Mr McGEE — One of the ways of addressing it is to build universities in Berrigan and Finley. Logically, that is not going to happen. We want a big paper mill in Berrigan or Finley or Barooga. Logically, that is not going to happen. Unfortunately we are faced with the fact that there are very few employment opportunities in our bush towns. There are farm amalgamations today. I work for a farmer these days and we have consolidated four farms. There were four families there once, and now there is only one. That is happening all across country Victoria and New South Wales. That is having a tremendous effect on us. I do not know what the solution is to that. I do not think governments or politicians can fix that either. It is a huge problem.

Mr DENNETT — As I addressed that matter in the written submission, we have to encourage them to come back home for their football. A lot of clubs will pay their fuel and that sort of thing, and a heck of a lot of university kids are more than glad to come home for their football. But volunteers — I still come back to it — are what keep it going. While we look after them, football will continue on in country Victoria and New South Wales.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving us your time tonight and making a very good submission. You will get a copy of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. You will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance in them.

Witnesses withdrew.