

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Robinvale – 23 March 2004

Members

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Witnesses

Mr G. Shawcross, President (sworn);
Mr S. Rule, Vice-President (sworn); and
Mrs M. Leslie, Secretary-Treasurer (sworn), Robinvale Football Club.

The CHAIR — Welcome, and thank you for coming along 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 under the provisions of the Constitution Act all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party — including an Independent — parliamentary committee, and we are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into country football.

Please state your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, which organisation it is and your position within that organisation.

Mr RULE — My name is Simon Patrick Rule. I live at 4 Arnott Street, Robinvale. I am the vice-president of the Robinvale Football Club.

Mr SHAWCROSS — I am Gregory Wayne Shawcross. I live at 56E Wewak Road, Robinvale. I am the president of the Robinvale Football Club.

Mrs LESLIE — I am Marion May Leslie. I live at 3 Margaret Court, Robinvale. I am the secretary-treasurer of the Robinvale Football Club.

The CHAIR — If you do not mind, could you please make some brief comments, and after that we will ask some questions.

Mr SHAWCROSS — I will give a bit of history of what we do, for a start. Robinvale Football Club started in the Sunraysia Football League in 1958. Since 1958 we have won eight senior flags, the last one being in 1997. Also in that time we have won numerous under-age and reserves flags, so we have been a pretty successful club in that regard. At the present time we field two open-age sides, one under-18 side and three netball sides every Saturday. I will also add that what our junior club does. It is actually a separate club to the Robinvale Football Club. The juniors have five teams, and they play on Sunday. They have approximately 120 participants every Sunday. The Auskick program has 50 to 60 participants once a week for a short period of time through the footy season. With the senior club, with the three football and three netball clubs, there would be approximately 100 participants every Saturday. We have a very diverse ethnic range of people in this town, and we bring together a number of those ethnic backgrounds, including Caucasian, Italian, Aboriginal, Greek, Tongan, Maori, Fijian and Malaysian — we have people from all those communities who play in our sides.

Our underage and juniors players are often seen, we believe — and it is the same right throughout the whole state for all sports — as babysitting services. Parents will just drop off kids to play footy, or else if it is a home game the kids will walk to footy. The volunteers, coaches and the other parents will look after them for the day. Often underprivileged kids are supplied with their uniform, a pair of footy boots or whatever. They do not have their own but they want to play, so the club helps out in that regard.

The reasons for that happening, I suppose, can be that: parents are working, they could be single parents, they are parents who just do not care about football or whatever the sport may be, or they have too much to do. We feel there is too much left to too few people in a lot of circumstances. We were listening to the Sunraysia Football League's submission and the amount of money raised by clubs. It costs a lot of money to run a football club, as we all know. We raise money from bar sales — we have a full club licence, so we are fortunate in that regard — the kiosk, gate and membership sales, raffles and sponsorship. Also, once a year we have a gala night that attracts a huge crowd. That provides the opportunity to win a fair bit of money and have a good night of dancing and frivolity.

We hire the venue out for other purposes: engagements, baptisms, 21sts and that sort of thing. That is another way of raising money. Moneys raised by the club are spent on players for a start, not only in match payments but also in medical supplies, uniforms, footballs and entertainment for the players — not everyone gets paid but they all deserve something back because they try their guts out on the field for us every week, so we have to put on a night every now and then just for the players.

Insurance is very expensive, as well as ground upkeep, trainers, vandalism — which we have a bit of from time to time — and building and facility maintenance. The value of our facility, which is totally ours because it has totally

been paid for by the Robinvale Football Club, is \$750 000. But because it is on shire land the shire council owns it, we do not. That is a thorn in the side to probably most football clubs.

So far as helping out the community, our football club purchases locally pretty much everything that it resells over the bar, in the kiosk et cetera. Raffle prizes and so on are all purchased locally. We also purchase our medical supplies locally. We support the local pharmacist, and he supports us. As you can imagine, being a football club with that many players, the cost of medical supplies is extremely high over a full season. We spend a lot of money on bandages, and tape just seems to disappear for some reason!

As the committee has already heard from the league, about six months ago — perhaps not even that long ago — we were able to obtain a loan from the Swan Hill Rural City Council for \$50 000, and we are contributing \$25 000 as well, to upgrade our facilities. Our club has been the first in the league to have female change rooms, totally separate from anywhere else, so it caters for the netballers and the female umpires that are starting to creep into the game. We have also upgraded one half — obviously, the home side — of our own showers because, as the committee has already heard, they were becoming a bit dilapidated and they were even getting to the stage where they could have been a health hazard, with people getting fungal infections and things like that from the shoddy grouting in the tiles and that sort of thing. It has all been redone, and we believe that was for safety reasons.

Of course the occupational health and safety legislation will require us as employers to have a safe workplace for our players. They have to train in the dark, so we have to have adequate lighting on the ground. It will cost us in the vicinity of \$25 000 to upgrade one half of the ground, and we are hoping to get it right, because we have to raise the poles, put in all new globes; and then the wiring is not good enough to cater for it, so we have to put all new wiring in as well. It is just an ongoing amount of money to make sure that things are right, safe and so on. As I said, the building is on council land. We are not only spending money on it but we are borrowing money to improve the facility that the council owns. It is a bit back to front.

The Victorian Country Football League (VCFL) insurance in 2003 was great in that it had everyone's liability under the same banner. It was a really good idea. As the league said before, perhaps the extra health cover or injury cover left a little bit to be desired. But then we saw in 2004 the AFL became involved with it as well and the price has gone up. It is more expensive than it was in 2003. It is hard enough for us to raise money anyway, but that sort of irks us a little bit that it went up when another big organisation got involved with it.

Water is no problem for our football club because the council irrigates the area once a week and the cost is included in our ground hire, which is very reasonable compared to what some clubs have to pay. We pay about \$1400 year for the ground hire. In terms of team numbers, getting people to play football in the senior age group is probably not a problem; we have adequate numbers there, but in the underage, under 18s side, we quite often do not have anyone sitting on the bench so that if a player on the ground is injured you are one man short. That is getting to be a problem.

The Sunraysia Junior Football League and Robinvale Football Club are in the process at the moment of appointing a junior development officer to coach the school sides and to attend junior training and junior games. He will actually be a Robinvale Football Club senior player and hopefully he will be a role model to the kids at the schools and to the junior players, and we are hoping it will encourage these kids to keep going and play football once they get out of under 13s and under 15s or something and move on to be senior players for us.

Getting volunteers is always a problem. Our committee comprises nine people, and we have gone to the trouble of becoming responsible-service-of-alcohol trained people — the whole lot of us. We have a ladies committee that comprises 10 to 12 people; the juniors have 10 to 12 people; we have probably another 10 regular match-day volunteers to help out with other jobs on match day. But then you have your gatekeepers and barmen, and even down as far as water boys — they want to be paid; they do not want to be volunteers, so there is more money to hand out.

I have jotted down some reasons for the huge lack of volunteers: people are shy; they cannot be bothered; Joe Blow down the road is doing a good job, so we will all just let him keep doing it; the other one which is hard to cop is that they do not like the criticism — they try to do a job for nothing and then people go around and criticise them, so people get hurt and back off from it; and there is always the fear of the possible litigation that could come along with the job if you do happen to make a mistake when you are trying to help out by doing something for nothing.

Another initiative we have is that some of our players will be attending the local health service youth drop-in centre in town. Hopefully a lot of these kids like footy and they will see some of their heroes, I suppose — even though they are heroes in a small country town — and if we can help even one in the right direction, it will be a good help.

We have presented a précis of what we do. The Robinvale Football Club employs people on a part-time basis; we have worked it out to be approximately 35 people, including the paid players.

We work with youth, and we entertain the public with regards to football matches on a Saturday, and the crowds can range from 600 to 1500 depending on the weather, who you are playing and what position you are on the ladder. As we all know, supporters are fickle, and success on the field leads to much more success off the field.

Mr McQUILTEN — Just like politics!

Mr SHAWCROSS — We bring many varied groups in the community together, whether they be ethnic groups, farmers, businessmen, nurses, doctors or whatever, they all come together because it is the footy. People come to the footy. If you are standing on the hill you have a beer with blokes you might not even have seen for a while, or if you are in the bar afterwards or whatever. It brings people together and the Robinvale Football Club is a focal point in the winter time, and it is very important to the community.

As I mentioned earlier, our major social function is probably the biggest social function in the Robinvale calendar per year, so that is another thing. Most people do not dress in a suit and tie every day, probably not even twice a year, but once a year all the blokes get pretty well flashed up and head off to this dance that we have. It is a good night, and we have some pretty good entertainment at it. Often something that someone does is the talk of the town from one year to the next. It is pretty good.

Basically we are hamstrung by the lack of funding we get from wherever to make things safer in the workplace for the players, for the spectators who watch the game and for everyone involved. In an ideal world everything could be made nice and safe, all pretty and with good lighting. As I said, we have no problems waterwise. The grounds are not hard and there is plenty of grass on them. It may be that our insurance fees might be able to drop, but they probably would not, would they?

That is pretty much all we have, apart from there being some talk at the end of the league's presentation about the TAC competition. We had four boys playing for Bendigo Pioneers last season, so it meant that those boys, their parents and family were all away from Robinvale on Saturdays. Parents have to pay money to allow their sons to play footy for the Bendigo Pioneers. These kids are the up-and-coming Nathan Buckleys, or whoever else, of the AFL. Their parents might be struggling and have to fork out brass for the right for their kids to play footy for the Bendigo Pioneers, and that is a big issue. As was also said, once these kids go down to Bendigo, if they are going to make it they have to move there and go to school and get a job. They become mates with someone who might say, 'We will go and play at Sandhurst today. It will be right. Do not worry about Robinvale'. They are gone and lost forever, and that is a problem. Back in the old zone days, when the AFL clubs had to come and watch their people play to be able to get them instead of the players going to Melbourne for them to watch, the good players still made it. There have been a few from Robinvale who have played AFL footy and been successful at it. So, yes, we would invite any questions that you may have.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — The salary cap: you would have heard the conversation we had. What is your view on the salary cap? I am not asking you to tell the parameters but to answer in terms of the general issue about salary caps in your league.

Mr SHAWCROSS — Being a major league, it is \$50 000 at the moment. Then of course you are allowed a coach or one highly paid player who does not have to be included in that salary cap, so it depends on how affluent the club is as to how much it is going to pay that coach.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — If we guaranteed that everyone was within the salary cap, which I am certain many of your clubs are not, what difference would it make if you guaranteed that everyone was in the salary cap. Would it make any difference?

Mr SHAWCROSS — To a place as isolated as we are, I do not think it would, because it is still a matter of actually getting players to come and live in Robinvale. It is very difficult. We are pretty much local. There are always one or two players from out of town, but pretty much locals.

Dr NAPTHINE — Wayne, do you know of any clubs in the league that pay netballers or netball coaches?

Mr SHAWCROSS — No.

Dr NAPTHINE — Have you heard of any across Victoria paying netballers or netball coaches?

Mr SHAWCROSS — No.

Dr NAPTHINE — To move on to another matter, in terms of your trainers it has been raised with us previously about whether the AFL, or even the state government, could provide some assistance in training the trainers to provide better service and skills to support them in their work, and hence support the football club itself, and that the trainers are perhaps some of the unsung heroes of football clubs, and that if we could provide some better training and support for them that would be of greater assistance. Is that a comment that your club would endorse?

Mr RULE — Again, we think that with us it comes down to the point of actually finding people who want to do the time to be a trainer. We pay our trainers. They do Thursday nights and three games on a Saturday. The ones who we have had for the last couple of years have been very good. One is an on-call paramedic with Rural Ambulance Victoria. The other one has worked with the rowing club for a number of years as well, so he has a very broad knowledge of what sportsmen put themselves through, I suppose. But again our problem is finding people who are prepared to give up the time to do it. The league offered to pay people to go to TAFE and do a first-aid certificate or get a certain level of training so that they can help us out, but again with training people just have not, so I do not really know of how much benefit it would be for us. For other organisations in, say, Mildura, it might be a little bit more of a bonus for them.

Mr INGRAM — The issue that was raised today was that as an incentive — because of the difficulty in attracting trainers — the AFL clubs could provide opportunities for trainers to go down and work with an AFL club, particularly in the pre-season, see how they handle match days, and see how their trainers operate. That was seen as an incentive, because that is something they can offer without it costing any money; actually giving the trainers an opportunity. I do not know if the trainers here would see that as a bonus — that is, working with AFL players and match day experience probably would be the highlight of their careers, I would have thought. Do you have a comment on that?

Mr SHAWCROSS — Once again, if you found the person who would be prepared to do it, it would be a great experience. We have even advertised at the hospital for nurses. We have said ‘We will pay you to do it’, and nurses must be overpaid or something because they are not interested in coming to help us out.

Mr RULE — That is a touchy topic at the moment.

Dr NAPTHINE — Their caseload is one to four, not one to 22 for a football team!

Mr SHAWCROSS — That is where the problem is.

Dr NAPTHINE — My anecdotal knowledge of this league is that one of the things that makes this league great is that it does have a significant number of Aboriginal players, some of them local and some who come from Darwin, and that it has added colour, glamour and excitement to this league. How many players would you import from Darwin, and what would be the average number for clubs in this area?

Mr SHAWCROSS — Three fellows who are going to play for us this year originated from Darwin and the Northern Territory area — or that is where they started playing their footy. They are basically from South Australia, but it depends on the year. In some seasons three or four clubs may have two or maybe three of those players. Last year I think one club may have had four or five. You are right, they are exciting players to watch.

Dr NAPTHINE — The committee heard from a very interesting witness in western Victoria who said that we should forget all this rubbish about salary caps and payment of players, that it is an investment; that if we can

attract good and dynamic and exciting players, that brings interest to the league and interest in the town and many of those people are good people in the community, and that we are mad pursuing the salary caps and so on. What is your experience of bringing coaches and players into the community? Have you found over time that they have been a valuable addition?

Mrs LESLIE — That is true. We had a very lean year in football last year, when three or four of our players whom we had been pinning our hopes on left us, and we were left without anywhere to go. We appointed a local coach too, a young fellow who did a very good job. We were left high and dry, so to speak, by those people. Because we did not win games, although we felt we did very well with what we worked with, that was reflected in our end-of-financial year result. The gates were down, our bar and kiosk sales were down, and everything was down because we did not have these exciting players. Robinvale is probably a bit unique in our cultural mix because over the years some of these Aboriginal boys have acquitted themselves very well on the football field. They have captained our sides, we have had an Aboriginal coach, so I think Robinvale has done very well with Aboriginal people, and we have a lot of Aboriginal players among our juniors and our seniors.

Mr RULE — It still comes down to the fact that to get these players to come in not only to Robinvale but into the league, you have to pay them. It just costs a lot of money to get these players to want to come to this area whereas if they were living in Melbourne, for example, and they could go and play in Bendigo, Albury or Shepparton or places like that they would still be able to live in Melbourne and then maybe go there and train once a week and still get \$1000 a game. But to get those sorts of players to come up here you have to give them \$1500 a game — and that is a rough estimate — just to lure them up here. So while the theory is great, it is expensive to get the really high-profile players to come in and really lift the league.

We had a coach who until two years ago played for Port Adelaide and got sick of playing AFL footy; we had him for two years. He kicked 140-odd goals in the season; in the first year he was here we lost the grand final by 17 points, and so we got a lot of money that year. But to keep him here for more than two seasons was just costing us too much money. You have to find the money to get these players to come to the area, and the salary cap limits your ability to do that.

Mrs LESLIE — And employment and housing are a problem as well.

The CHAIR — One of the things the committee has heard about consistently throughout its public hearings every day is that the female facilities, change rooms et cetera for the netballers, are very important and clubs are talking about moving towards providing those, but they have not quite got to the will yet to do that, as your club has done now. I know your club is not the only one in the league, but that puts your league ahead of the others because you have one. What processes did you go through to convince the club as a whole that it was important to actually invest in these facilities?

Mrs LESLIE — It was mainly trying to encourage our netballers so that they felt part of the club. We recognised the fact that we had shower and toilet facilities in our social rooms. Whereas there was only one there, we are now providing them with two showers. We were very well aware that they needed a section of their own to change in, and that is what brought us to the idea of doing it, as well as being very aware that female umpires were coming down, so we thought we would combine that room so as to facilitate both. But it was mainly also to probably let the netballers know that we cared about them, that they were just as important in our club as our footballers.

Mr RULE — I think the league also indicated that it would be very grateful if clubs would look at providing female change rooms for their umpires and we decided that if it was not going to happen this year, it would happen in the next couple of years, when we would have been told that it had to happen. So we decided we had a bit of money at the time and that we would do it then when it was cost effective and not in two or three years time, when we could be struggling for money and actually may not be able to do it.

Mrs LESLIE — The facilities are adjacent to the female umpire rooms, too.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving us your time and providing your insights into country footy. You will receive a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks. You may correct any matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.