

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Lakes Entrance – 6 April 2004

#### Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield	Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman	Dr D. V. Naphthine
Mr C. Ingram	Mr P. L. Walsh
Mr J. M. McQuilten	

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

#### Staff

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

#### Witnesses

Mr R. Schrader (sworn); and  
Mr G. Allen, area manager, east, Victorian Country Football League.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome. Could you please give your full name and address? Could you also state whether you represent an organisation and, if so, please state your role in that organisation?

**Mr SCHRADER** — My name is Ronald Henry Schrader. My address is 77 Princess Highway, Bairnsdale. I am the president of the Bairnsdale Football Club, but today I am representing myself; these opinions are not necessarily the opinions of everybody in the Bairnsdale Football Club.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. Could you give us a presentation for a few minutes, then we will ask you some questions.

**Mr SCHRADER** — Do you mind if I repeat your questions first so that you know what I am talking about?

**The CHAIR** — Go for it!

**Mr SCHRADER** — As I said before, this is my opinion and not necessarily the opinion of anybody else. I would like to give what I believe are some of the answers to questions raised in your terms of reference. Term of reference (a) asks the committee to:

assess the current strength and long-term viability of Australian football competitions and clubs in regional and rural Victoria;

My answer to that is that I do not believe that there are any strengths or long-term viability of Australian Rules football competitions in regional and rural Victoria under the current system.

Term of reference (b) asks the committee to:

assess the role Australian football plays in building community identity, social interaction and pride in rural towns.

It is a well-known fact that to strike up a conversation in any Victorian country town, particularly if you like to go to the pub, you only have to be able to talk about Australian Rules football. Even though it is dropping off in participation popularity the local team still remains the most popular discussion point in most country towns. Sporting teams play a big part in building community identity, social interaction and pride in the rural towns of Victoria.

Term of reference (c) asks the committee to:

investigate how demographic shifts, changes in sport and entertainment and other social changes are impacting on participation in country-based football.

To me the shortage of players is the biggest problem facing most country clubs. A lot of this problem has been caused by the centralisation of government bodies to large country cities or Melbourne. Country clubs once relied on being able to gain new players each year when teachers, bank employees, DNR employees, police, VicRoads or any other government employees were transferred to the country in their employment. Today the system has changed. With the advent of early retirement in government jobs, any employees who arrive in rural areas have requested to move, looking to retiring in the region in a short time. Needless to say these people are not in the age group of playing active football. Also some schools seem to be doing their very best to discourage the sport by preventing the kicking of footballs in schools. This certainly helps to encourage the boys to spend their free time sitting in front of computers playing computer games instead of being active and playing outside.

Term of reference (d) asks the committee to:

identify the effects that the decline in the number of rural Australian football clubs is having on country towns including whether other sport and recreation clubs/activities are meeting community social needs in towns where the Australian football clubs have ceased to function.

To me, the loss of a local football club is usually the start of the decline in a small country town. I do not know how many of you gentlemen come from small country towns — I know Craig does and I know that Denis knows about Swifts Creek — but the small country town I am talking about has only 500 or 600 people in it. It usually affects the local hotel, the local hall and several shops. You then generally see the youth of the town spending their free time in a neighbouring town that they now play football for. At weekends the lack of young people congregating in the main street has a tendency to give a small country town a dead appearance. And there is always the loss of

money that would normally be spent by these young ones in the local shops. I believe the local football club or any sporting club is the backbone, both socially and recreationally, of any small country town.

Term of reference (e) is:

identify the impact that specific costs are having on rural Australian football associations and clubs. The costs to be investigated ... include insurance, local government charges and pricing policies, player payments and water availability and cost.

The cost of running a football club of any size is proving to be one of the biggest headaches facing the administration of the clubs. The days of being able to survive by running a chook raffle at the local pub on a Friday night no longer exist. The raising of funds is a 12-months-of-the-year job and involves hundreds of hours work by voluntary workers. The ever-growing increase in the number of people in the administration department of the VCFL and the amount of unnecessary paperwork that has been poured out to the secretaries of the clubs by this department is out of hand. It is taking up valuable voluntary time and is also an unnecessary expense to the clubs.

The competitiveness between clubs for players has created a situation where player payments are also out of hand. But that is the old issue of supply and demand and if you want to be successful it is necessary to be part of it. It was interesting to see in yesterday's *Herald Sun* — I do not know whether you gentlemen saw it — that Portarlington had a fair sort of a touch up on the weekend. They were talking to the secretary there. This is in the Bellarine Football League, which is close to Melbourne — it is more or less a suburb of Melbourne. The secretary was quite willing to say that Portarlington could not afford to be paying \$30 000 to AFL and VFL players to come and play for Portarlington. So that gives you an idea. If they cannot get them in Portarlington, what hope have we in East Gippsland got of getting the footballers here? It is nearly impossible.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — They cannot get them at Geelong, either.

**Mr SCHRADER** — Insurance, like a lot of other administration costs, has certainly grown over the last couple of years. Again there is very little that can be done about it — it is a necessary part of running a club. This year being so dry has proven to be a costly year regarding the upkeep of ovals, but again there is very little that can be done to keep the costs down during such a period — nobody can do anything about the weather, and we are under drought conditions.

Term of reference (f) is:

recommend actions that peak football organisations (administrators, leagues and clubs) might consider undertaking to support the future success of country football and participation in sport in regional and rural Victoria.

I have my own ideas on this and I have been pushing them probably ever since we came out of the Latrobe Valley Football League. I believe right through Victoria all leagues such as the East Gippsland Football League or any leagues with major league status should have combined sides from their respective teams playing in their local major or premier league competition every week, in both seniors and under-18 games. This would create strong major leagues and give good players in minor leagues something to strive for, as well as easing the boredom of playing each other so often. We have a lot of very good footballers playing in the East Gippsland Football League. They have nowhere they can go from here. They are just playing each other. Especially when there were only six teams last year, they were playing each other every couple of weeks, the same blokes, the same teams. It becomes a bore to very good footballers and we have very good footballers in our seniors and under-18 teams. The minor leagues, with the exception of the reserves, could continue as they are now, acting as reserves for the combined side — in other words, they do not stay in the East Gippsland Football League.

In East Gippsland fielding reserves is proving a problem at the moment to most clubs. I cannot see any reason why those clubs could not go without reserves and feed their excess players into the Omeo and District Football League on a permit system. The clubs that have no trouble in fielding reserves could play their reserves teams in the Omeo and District Football League, thus creating a bigger and stronger league. In other words, all that I am saying is that it could work similarly to the way that inter-league sides are working today. It is working in Melbourne. You do not have reserves — North Melbourne does not have reserves; they are combined with a VFL side. It is the same when you go to Sydney. Sydney play a side in the Canberra league. In Western Australia they have one side; the rest farm their players out to the district league. I just cannot see how that cannot be done in this league.

With insurance being so important and the necessity to provide a safe workplace, just to make up numbers, clubs sometimes play people regardless of age and knowing full well that they are not fit and more likely to be injured. I

have seen some pretty old players go out on the ground — and Craig will agree with this one — just to make up the numbers. My question is: where does that leave the club if one of these people is seriously hurt? Today we are told by WorkSafe and all these sorts of people that we have to supply a safe workplace. We know full well that those blokes are not fit and we are sending them out on the ground to play in a game in which they could very easily be hurt. Are we supplying them with a safe workplace? I do not believe we are. It is another reason why I do not like the idea of reserves being made up with old ex-players, and that is what is happening. If any of these ideas can be simplified and finance acquired, I believe it could rekindle interest and help assure the future of country football.

I heard you talking a moment ago on salary caps. The salary caps in the minor leagues — and the East Gippsland Football League is one — is \$30 000 and that includes everything: your coach and your players. And even awards that are given to the players during the year are valued into that. In the Latrobe Valley Football League, which is a premier league, it is \$50 000, plus your coach or your top-paid player. So you could be paying \$50 000 to your players and you can get a \$50 000 coach. There are clubs down there which are \$30 000-odd for a coach. We have a problem here where we have our young ones going to Melbourne, to go to school or to work. Once we used to get a carload of them — we might bring four or five of them — and they would travel every week and come back and play. At the moment we have some young ones down in Melbourne who are playing in suburban sides down there. They would not make the Bairnsdale seniors and yet they are being paid \$150 and \$200 by suburban sides in Melbourne to play. I think I asked Graeme: how come we've got a \$30 000 salary cap and yet we know full well that there are suburban sides in Melbourne playing in minor football leagues that are allowed to play this sort of money? Is that right, Graeme, there is no salary cap?

**Mr ALLEN** — There is no salary cap

**Mr SCHRADER** — At the moment that is one of the problems that we have. We lose players to Melbourne and we do not get them back. We cannot get them back because we just cannot match the payments. Even if the salary cap was bigger, we still would not have the money to do it. Thank you very much for your interest. I hope something comes out of it. That is all I have to say.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — I am interested in your concept of having the combined leagues. Was that not what Bairnsdale was — a team that previously played in the Latrobe Valley Football League — and that did not work?

**Mr SCHRADER** — We played in the Latrobe Valley Football League from 1960 and finished in 1997. We had played seniors, reserves and under 18s. We found that in the end we could not field three sides to travel that far.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — You say that if you were just fielding a seniors and an under 18s you would — —

**Mr SCHRADER** — This would be a combined East Gippsland side. We would be competitive.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — But is that not the issue? If I am a club member for one of the other clubs and I am paying one of my best players \$150 a week, I do not want him to go off a play for a combined league side every second or third week. Also, similarly, the player himself often opts to play in the district league because he does not want to travel the length and breadth of Gippsland.

**Mr SCHRADER** — He would sign a contract at the start of the year that he would be available for selection for that side if he was picked. You would come up with a good side. Latrobe Valley is shot at the moment as far as the league is concerned; it could fold next year. They are gone if they do not come up with a bit more strength, more teams. It is a well-known fact. If you can come up with somewhere for your good footballers to play it strengthens that league. We have got a surplus of players. We have got to have reserves because we might be able to scrape up 30 players at Bairnsdale, and if we can pick 22 or 21 as a side, we have still got 9. To make up another team for the reserves we have to scrounge off the streets; we are down the street trying to find somebody to play football. If we did away with our reserves, those nine players could be shared out into the Omeo district league. We could still keep them, the same as West Coast keeps its players. They would have their players all tied up, but they send them out playing for the district leagues.

I understand what you are saying. Probably one of the biggest troubles with blokes my age is that you get parochial about your football club. You forget about the under 18 who is trying to get on in life and who is trying to get on in a football career. He can be playing up here, but nobody ever sees him. If you have a look at the list of players, there are very few kids who have come out of East Gippsland, because you are too far away from anywhere and

you are not in the limelight. If you are playing in the Latrobe Valley they see you, but if you are up here nobody sees you. So you get the best of your under 18s and you play them down there as well as the senior side. Their biggest problem is finance and travel. That is something that I have said. If you can come up with a more simple idea and the finances that are required, I reckon it could honestly be looked at, and it would strengthen not just East Gippsland but North Gippsland. You have got every minor league, and if you go through those minor leagues —

You have only to pick up the Monday morning *Herald Sun* and go through the country football clubs. Have a look at the reserves and the results. Some of them do not even score, yet they fielded a team. It is not just here that we are having trouble; we are having it all through Victoria, as you would know. You have travelled around Victoria, and you would have heard the complaining.

**Mr WALSH** — Rod, can we clarify this salary cap thing? The VCFL club leagues are the only ones that have a salary cap. Does any metropolitan league or district league — —

**Mr ALLEN** — No, they do not.

**Mr WALSH** — They do not have salary caps anywhere in there?

**Mr ALLEN** — The VCFL is the only junior body under the AFL and the VFL that has a salary cap.

**Mr WALSH** — So all the rest of those leagues are looked after by — —

**Mr ALLEN** — If you are playing for Doncaster and you have \$150 000 to spend, you can spend \$150 000. If you are playing for Murrumbena and you can only afford \$20 000, that is all you spend.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Ron, the salary cap in major leagues has just increased from \$50 000 to \$70 000. The story on the back page of one of my local papers, the *Hamilton Spectator* was ‘Salary crap’, saying that it is an absolute waste of time. They cannot raise the money, nobody can police how you spend the money and that it is an absolute heap of salary crap. What is your comment on whether the salary cap is worth wasting time on? Is it worth pursuing, or is it something that people just get around anyway — a dog chasing its tail?

**Mr SCHRADER** — We have discussed the salary cap. I have discussed it with Luke and Rod. With our salary cap, the option is there to take it from \$30 000 to \$35 000. Mind you, \$30 000 was the salary cap in 1994, so it has not gone up with CPI or anything else. But getting back, we have an option of getting it up to \$35 000. We are probably better off if we just leave it at \$30 000 and we can have our coach without him being on the salary cap.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — But do you believe your clubs take any notice of the salary cap?

**Mr SCHRADER** — We do.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Do people just put money in players’ pockets, in the back door, in their shoe or in their pants or down the pub that Saturday night?

**Mr SCHRADER** — I do not know about other clubs, but I can assure you that at Bairnsdale we do the right thing by our salary cap.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — You are on oath here! Sorry, I should not be so frivolous.

**Mr SCHRADER** — I would say we are very financial now. Possibly one of the things that a lot of these parochial people do not realise — and I have been through this one — is how easy it is for a football club to not exist any more. In 1998, a fortnight before the first Latrobe game, the committee called a major meeting of the Bairnsdale Football Club. The Bairnsdale club has been going for 130 years, except for the years of the Second World War, so it is an old club. The decision had to be made whether the club would fold up, whether we shut the doors or not. There were a few people there who had a better view of it and we kept the club going. We had to take a step back the following year, back into the East Gippsland league, but at least we have still got a club, and it is a good club. That is one of the biggest problems. People think they have got a club and it is going to be there forever and a day, but overnight things can change. We came out of Latrobe Valley on \$50 000. Warragul went at the same time, and I think they reckoned they owed nearly \$100 000 in debt. Do not quote me on that one because I may not

be right, but that is what they were talking about. So one minute you think you are going along all right, but a lot of these people do not understand that can happen; you can shut down overnight in football. So when you talk about people not wanting to let their good players go and play in a major league, are they looking after the club and themselves or are they looking after the players as well.

**Mr WALSH** — A lot of people, yourself included, have talked about the issue of administering a club and the extra paperwork that is now required. Instead of training people to do the extra paperwork, is there paperwork we could get rid of that does not serve a useful purpose.

**Mr SCHRADER** — You would have to be the secretary to see that it drives him mad.

**Mr WALSH** — Does it all serve a useful purpose?

**Mr SCHRADER** — It comes through. I get it through him, my emails. I do not know how Rod gets on, but he is forever sending emails with stuff that is coming through. I should not say it, but I am yet to see what the VCFL has done. I do not think the administration side of football has improved in 40 years, to be quite honest. I do not think the clubs are any better off than they were 40 years ago. I know Rod probably will give me a smack under the ear when he hears this, but, as I just said, I would like to see a list of all the people employed by the VCFL and a job description for each one as to what they actually do. Graeme works — I will give him credit, he is around a lot — but there are a lot of people and I do not know what they do. They create paperwork. I was in local government long enough to know about paperwork, I can assure you.

**Mr WALSH** — With the likes of the food handling regulations that were mentioned earlier on, are the barbecues that are run by the footy club any safer now than they were before?

**Mr SCHRADER** — No, not really. They are run exactly the same, but then again I did not hear of anybody dying of poisoning from any barbecue at a football club either.

**Mr WALSH** — Mine is dark, so you cannot see what you are eating.

**Mr NAPHTHINE** — That might be all right at Swan Hill!

**Mr MITCHELL** — Ron, you were talking about people being parochial. Do you think that is an underlying issue that is probably not looked at enough; that people are worried about their own little bit of territory and are not prepared to change for the long-term benefits?

**Mr SCHRADER** — It is natural that you are going to be parochial if you are an old player, you have played for a club for years, and then a club looks as if it is going to split up. Even with the football club of a little town called Ensay that folded up, they still have reunions. They have still got photos of themselves. Swifts Creek played in the Ensay colours a couple of years ago. It was a reunion. Ensay has not existed for about 10 years. It is just a natural thing. I am a Sydney Swans supporter, and there is no-one more parochial than I am with the Sydney Swans. You people all have your league clubs you admire.

**Mr WALSH** — I do not know whether I am parochial about them any more though.

**Mr SCHRADER** — You would be if they were on top! It is a big issue, being parochial, but what do you do? Do you look after your young ones and try and encourage it, or do you let the club die. That is what I am saying. You can die very quick.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — Were you better off under zoning?

**Mr SCHRADER** — No. We had Footscray zoning up here. Ron Barassi got in there and got all the good footballers before Footscray got the zone. No, I do not think so, not really as far as I am concerned. I do not think it has made much difference.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks very much, Ron. You will get a copy of the transcript; you can correct errors of fact but not matters of substance.

**Witnesses withdrew.**