

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Seymour – 14 April 2004

Members

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

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Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

Witness

Mr C. P. Kelly, executive committee member, Seymour District Junior Football League (sworn).

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Under the powers conferred on the committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I advise all 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 advise that any comments made outside the committee hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

Please state your full name and address and whether you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation, and if you are representing an organisation, please provide your position within that organisation.

Mr KELLY — My name is Colin Phillip Kelly. I am a committee member of the Seymour District Junior Football League. I am on the executive committee governing that board. I am not the president and I am not the vice-president. I fully apologise for their non-attendance. They are country people and they have work commitments which they have to attend to, so I have made myself available to address the committee.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — So you are speaking on behalf of the committee or as an individual?

Mr KELLY — On behalf of the committee.

Dr NAPHTHINE — We need an address so that the Hansard transcript can be sent to you.

Mr KELLY — My address is RMB 3996, Euroa, Victoria 3666.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Everything you say in evidence will be taken down and will be included as part of the committee's inquiry. I would like you to make some brief comments, and then the committee members will ask you questions on your comments.

Mr KELLY — Thank you. I welcome the committee here, too. Obviously we are from the Seymour District Junior Football League. The affiliated clubs within our organisation are Seymour; St Mary's, which is also Seymour based; Broadford; Heathcote; Euroa; and Tabilk, which is a combination of Nagambie and Avenel.

We are all aware, courtesy of the main industry submission that was distributed a little while back, that the restructuring and privatisation of both government departments and private industry has affected the country population. This in turn has reduced the family structure which provides playing and support staff, funding and football club turnover availability. As a league, we can only fully support this document which has been passed around and gone through our committee.

The issues that are severely affecting the Seymour District Junior League are: first, inadequate insurance cover; second, different age groups between the leagues; and third, the drought water availability for ground preparation. I will start on the first issue — insurance cover. Probably the most significant occurrence in our league for the 2003 season saw a volunteer field umpire suffer a broken leg on field, resulting in hospitalisation and 10 weeks loss of work, with a reported return of \$7.50 for his troubles. We feel that the current level of insurance for playing and support staff is inadequate, and we would like to hope that that will be further addressed in the 2004 season. We are just citing that example where last year we had a volunteer volunteering his time and, as a result, he suffered an injury and was off work with a loss of income for 10 weeks. He got back \$7.50 from the insurance, which was not very good from his point of view. The league sympathised, but we were stuck in the insurance cover structure.

In relation to the second issue, we have clubs expressing difficulty in fielding a team in the under-15 age group and, in turn, providing the follow-up transition to third-grade football which feeds into your senior football. The contributing factors include inadequate industry and government departments in country towns to support school leavers, and a lack of higher education and university needs and availability, which is forcing students to move to Melbourne to satisfy their requirements. The schooling factor has always been prevalent, but we are noticing a rise in the numbers of children in this category.

The biggest factor we feel that is affecting the loss in player numbers is the different age groups. Seymour District Junior League caters for the age groups of under-11½, under-13½ and under-15½ as at 30 June. These feeder clubs then send players on to the Goulburn Valley League 3rds, the Bendigo League 3rds, both major leagues with age groups under 18, forcing these boys to play against players who are two-and-a-half and three years older than them. We feel that this age jump from the under-15½s, to go and play against 18-year-old kids is too great. It is very difficult for those kids to handle. We are losing kids as a result of this.

The options available to these boys are either to give the game away or to find something else to do. I can cite Euroa. We happen to have a hockey team up there that is benefiting greatly from kids who are stepping out of this under-15½ age group because they find that jump is too high for them, so they go and play a different sport. Or else they go and play in minor league teams in Benalla and District and — Mr Ure is going to love this — Kyabram, Central Goulburn and Heathcote leagues, with age groups of under 16 and under 18. We feel that once these players are entering into these leagues — and once again I will cite Euroa; we are losing players from Euroa to Violet Town — once they get up there, and probably full credit to Violet Town, they are probably keeping them. The Euroa club is never getting them back again.

We find it is very difficult getting them back to their home town and back into the major league. The Seymour and District Junior Football League cannot alter its age groups for fear of losing two clubs from a six-team league that caters for all of these higher leagues. I am mentioning Broadford and Heathcote in this category. We feel that this would destroy the league because we would be reduced due to four teams if this did not happen. Due to the geographical problem mainly the kids are going to suffer as a result of this. We feel that the only answer to this problem is to standardise the age groups of all clubs statewide, and I am talking statewide, to under-12, under-14, under-16, and under-18.

The Victorian Country Football League appears very reluctant, despite many submissions statewide, to address this issue. We are asking that pressure from a higher authority, maybe from here, be placed on the VCFL to halt the decimation of this game, because we are losing kids who are coming out of this age group, because of their age difference. They either stay at that minor league or they are drifting out of the game. If a young kid gets up against a bigger kid who is three years older than him, he has got no hope. He is going to be demoralised in his attitude towards the game, so we are losing them.

I will move on from there to our third point, which is the drought. It certainly provided ground preparation problems for all clubs, and due to the occupational health and environment and safety requirements the watering of the playing surfaces has become an issue for us. I know two recent situations involving the Heathcote and Broadford clubs and various ground management committees whereby a kind donation of a water right from a local farmer encountered bureaucratic transfer and red-tape issues between the water authorities. They had a hell of a time trying to get a water right transferred to them. Fortunately it was resolved, but it delayed the preparation time of the ground. It even brought the situation where we may have considered transferring one or two of those early games away from the Heathcote ground to give them time to prepare their surface. The Broadford club and ground management committee, also due to water restriction problems, had to force the situation of searching for bore water successfully to prepare their grounds. In the interests of safety many country clubs would benefit from funding grants to sink bores or gain access to reclaimed water to provide a safe environment for all participants, be they senior or junior footballers.

We thank the inquiry committee for the opportunity to contribute to the rectification of this great game and the community in general. There are other issues which do affect country football, and we are sure they will be raised and discussed. We provide this submission as the issue affects our league. We thank you.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You are probably in a unique situation from what I understand, and tell me if I am wrong, in that your junior league overlaps two TAC areas — that is, the Murray Bushrangers and the Bendigo Diggers.

Mr KELLY — And also the — —

Dr NAPHTHINE — Calder Cannons?

Mr KELLY — Yes, correct. There are three.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You are absolutely unique. Can you compare the interaction your league, as a junior league, has with those three TAC teams? What do they do for you or do not do for you? Are there differences between the three, or is the whole TAC Cup thing fundamentally of no help to a junior footy league?

Mr KELLY — We have not had a lot of interaction with either of those leagues. I know we raised the issue regarding the Murray Bushrangers. I think three of the boys from St Mary's here in Seymour and one from Tahbilk got an invite to train with the Murray Bushrangers. I do not believe there were very many who came through from Heathcote or Broadford. Possibly a couple went from Broadford, but from Euroa we had absolutely

none. We actually made an approach. There has been a change of field officer, and no memorabilia or invites came from the Murray Bushrangers for any of our kids to go there. From Euroa alone we felt there were three, and whether they actually made it or not, they still should have been given that opportunity to train with them.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do any of the TAC sides send any of their coaches or staff out to your junior football clubs to help with coaching and skills development?

Mr KELLY — No.

Dr NAPTHINE — They do not? None of them?

Mr KELLY — From the AFL North Melbourne came through last year, and it is generally through or from the AFL. Nothing has come through to us from the TAC.

Dr NAPTHINE — Schools?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Does the TAC go to the schools, either secondary or primary?

Mr KELLY — I am not aware of that. It may happen, but that information has not filtered back through to us.

Dr NAPTHINE — So what you are saying to us as somebody who is involved in a junior football league is that you would see the TAC as perhaps taking your graduates, your best ones, but it does not put anything in at the grassroots.

Mr KELLY — We would like to see them take more.

Dr NAPTHINE — But perhaps you would like to see it put in a bit more at the grassroots in terms of coaching and assisting the clubs?

Mr KELLY — For sure. That would certainly help the coaching staff of all clubs within our league.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — How are you finding volunteerism in terms of numbers and ease for people to volunteer in the junior sides?

Mr KELLY — It quite often gets left to the same old people. We are finding that some people drift in and a few drift out probably through lack of numbers in the population here. We are not getting a lot of those volunteers coming through. We could certainly do with more.

Mr INGRAM — Just a clarification, from information we have your junior league covers a couple of different local league areas. Do you play on the same grounds as the senior leagues?

Mr KELLY — Yes.

Mr INGRAM — So basically the same issues that you are raising with water and ground condition things are covered there?

Mr KELLY — Excuse me for interrupting, but I think a lot of that can feed back through your ground management committees, which may show a problem. But, in turn, if that is the case, we would like to see something done through the grant schemes. We all know this drought has created a major problem. As we heard Mr Ure saying before, ground inspections have to be made, and if the ground is not up to scratch and somebody gets hurt it opens up a can of worms.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — You mentioned insurance cover. The VCFL has bought insurance policies for the clubs. In the senior clubs, their juniors can apply for that insurance. Is it the same situation for you, or not? Where does your insurance come from?

Mr KELLY — Yes, we can.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — But it does not cover volunteers; that was the issue you were raising?

Mr KELLY — I read the submission not long ago, and it did mention volunteers and what have you. But, as I said, as a result of that situation that occurred last year, we learnt the insurance really may not have been worth the paper it was written on, because all he got back was \$7.50, which we thought was pathetic. We were not happy with the situation.

Mr INGRAM — Basically the insurance was covering medical costs and not necessarily loss of income, which is additional?

Mr KELLY — Yes.

Dr NAPHTHINE — We are often told that at the Auskick level, which is perhaps even pre your level, there are huge numbers of people involved, and that the Auskick numbers are going through the roof. But from what you are saying, at the next level you are still struggling a bit for players.

Mr KELLY — We are still struggling. I could not be more complimentary of Auskick. I think it is a great innovation.

Dr NAPHTHINE — So do kids drop out of Auskick before playing competitive football?

Mr KELLY — Some do. The majority are going through, and I think it has a lot to do with the organisers in the various districts. Over the last five years Euroa has absolutely thrived on the feed coming through from Auskick, particularly with the kids, and it is showing out in their results. They are starting to filter through. We have a period now where we are starting to filter them through, but we have a big gap up the top there. We corrected that through the Auskick program. We got the right people in place to do that, and it is now starting to filter through. I believe Seymour had a problem with this over the last five years, and the information that has been fed to me is that they have now taken steps to put the right people in place so that they will start feeding through. But with the kids should come the parents, and in a lot of cases some of the parents are coming through, yes, but a lot of them are not. That is just one thing.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Finally, do you have girls playing at all levels in your junior football?

Mr KELLY — No. I would personally be pushing that from the league point of view. If a girl decided she would like to play, I would have no problem with that — no problem whatsoever. We have had them coming through Auskick, but they have not progressed. Maybe they are going into the netball or basketball sides of things. They will filter through as spectators for the under-age groups, but they are not filtering through as players.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you very much for that evidence. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. You are allowed to correct obvious errors of fact or grammar, but you cannot change any matters of substance.

Mr KELLY — Good. Thank you all.

Witness withdrew.