

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Seymour – 14 April 2004

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Mr P. Cox, president, Seymour Football Club (sworn).

The CHAIR — For the purposes of the transcript, please give us your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, the name of that organisation and your position within it.

Mr COX — My full name is Paul John Cox from 385 Kobyboyn Road, Seymour. I am here representing the Seymour Football Club.

The CHAIR — If you can now give us some brief comments, we will ask you some questions.

Mr COX — I am just here as a fellow who has played footy for 30 years, coached and been on committees, and now I am president. I just want to give my views on the six points we are going through here, and I hope I will be of some help to you. I am not here to complain about how things are going or anything like that; I will just give my views.

The first one is on the current strength of country footy. The top level we play in, which is division 1 of Goulburn Valley League, is in the best position it has been in for many years. The reason is mainly because of the recruiting of outside people. Seymour has had to recruit heavily from players in Melbourne to draw a crowd, to draw membership and get the town excited about coming down to watch their side. But sometimes there is a bit of a domino effect in the minor leagues if we have fringe players who are not getting a senior game as they will move on to the minor leagues where they will get paid, whereas they would not get paid here. That is one of the problems.

Talking about the interaction and the pride of the town, it is probably the best thing you can do if you move to a country town, like I did from Melbourne. You instantly know 200 or 300 people. You get to know just about everyone who is involved in the footy club. It is great for the kids. Seymour footy club is a really good place to come down to at this time because everyone is welcome and we have a lot of fun. It is great; we provide a great opportunity for kids. We are also starting a junior development squad this year, which will help in later years. In that way we will not have to go out and recruit players. Those sorts of things are fantastic. Without your footy club you would be pretty disappointed. A few of the minor leagues are losing clubs as we speak, which is a real shame, but sometimes it has to be done. Perhaps they can amalgamate or do things that would help.

There are a couple of things, like shifts in entertainment, that are impacting on country footy. When I first started playing in Melbourne in 1986 I do not think anyone ever commented, 'I do not think I will play this year because if I get injured I will lose my job or be out of pocket'. In those days you just wanted to play footy and if you got injured, bad luck. These days we lose a lot of players for that reason. First of all it is hard to get a job, especially in a country area. Employment is not too crash hot in places like Shepparton, as you all know, and even in Seymour. People's jobs are far more important than football these days in a lot of cases. Everyone is different, but back in 1986 and before that it was never an issue, but now it is probably issue no. 1; we do lose players for that reason. That could be involved with the decline in numbers.

We talked about the extra costs of running a club. This is the second year I have been president, although I have been on the committee prior to that. Mainly there are the running costs, such as utilities and user-pay fees. They were not an issue in the past. Obviously the volunteers have to work twice as hard as they probably used to because they did not have to pay players as much money, and they did not have to pay all these other fees. In saying that, it is difficult, but we love doing it; that is why we here. It is not really a complaint. You need more people to help out, and sometimes that is difficult. We are lucky at Seymour at the moment; we have good people. There is a big committee and there are a lot of helpers and things are going okay, but it has been a long trek. It has been hard work through the years.

Water is another. We are quite lucky because we have reclaimed water, which is magnificent, but not every town's footy ground has that. If you have a look at the other two ovals in Seymour, they are bone dry. We are lucky in that respect. We have put in a grant to have an oval rebuilt. We will find out in May. It will be fantastic if we can do that, instead of dragging hoses around the ground.

Most people in country footy are passionate. They love it and they would hate to see anything happen to their clubs, especially here in Seymour. That is my view anyway. I would just like to say to all the people here that it is getting harder, but with the right people looking after the clubs we will survive for many years to come. That is about all I have to say.

Dr NAPTHINE — Paul, if I can start and be a little bit direct. When I look at the board over there I see that in the last decade Seymour's results have been moderate. Don't take this the wrong way, as I am a Geelong supporter, so I can hardly criticise, but that makes it harder for the club to attract volunteers and players to compete in what is a very, very competitive league, the Goulburn Valley league.

Mr COX — That is right.

Dr NAPTHINE — So how does a club deal with a decade of moderate results and still try to compete at that division 1 level?

Mr COX — It is very difficult. Probably the hardest thing is to keep your good players, who could be going to play finals somewhere else. When I came here from Melbourne, as soon as I landed in Seymour I thought, 'What a great club', and that is what we pride ourselves on. So we have been pretty lucky in that respect, but we have to go out and recruit players, and it has been hard. Unless you get the results, players are not going to come to you.

In a footy club it is all about your administration and your coaching staff. We were lucky enough to recruit good coaching staff, who were able to help us in recruiting. We got some players from Melbourne, and the reason we got them was because of the coach we recruited. If I were the coach and had to go to Melbourne to get players, I would not get them. So it is all about the way you structure things, and at Seymour this year we have done it pretty well. We have been building up to this for about three or four years now, and hopefully we will get success. Without that success you could have a \$1500 gate, which is pretty ordinary, but if you have a good side you can go up to \$4000 or \$5000 per gate. The Goulburn Valley league gates averaged \$4000 on the weekend — some were higher, and some were a lot higher. You need to get people through the doors and buying memberships. Like the AFL clubs, if we do not have the membership and if we do not have the people coming through the doors, we are going to find it hard. You basically have to have a good side to succeed and compete.

Dr NAPTHINE — It is interesting that we have heard different views about salary caps and issues like that. We have had some evidence from presidents of footy clubs saying that getting in good players, even if you have to pay money for them, is a good investment, because you get better membership sales, better sponsorship and better returns. Perhaps you could comment on a club down the road from you, Mansfield football club. Even those of us from the other side of the state have heard about Mansfield's recruiting David Mensch, Trent Hotten and other players. What impact has that had on Mansfield football club as a club and as a community?

Mr COX — When Mansfield first came into the Goulburn Valley league from a minor league in 1998, you would go up there and you would be lucky to see 100 people there, if that. We went up there last year and they had gates of well over 4000. That has brought sponsorship to the team, and it has brought supporters and membership. It has gone through the roof. Seymour could be in a similar position, and that is why we have done what we have done this year in our club. It has not happened just like that, it has been in motion for three or four years. We have seen what has happened with Mansfield. The good thing about Mansfield is it will have all the young players wanting to play for Mansfield, because they will be going to the games, they will be seeing them win, they will be seeing them succeed, and they will know they will develop quicker with good players around them and all that sort of thing. That is basically what has happened with Mansfield. The hard thing is to continue that year in, year out.

You have to have that structure in place and keep it there for as long as you can. You have to keep filtering good people. People who start it off cannot be there forever. That is probably another hard thing — that is, to get the people to come in who can stay there, and make sure that you keep doing it. You might do it for three or four years, then all of a sudden the people who started it are not there any more. You can bring in a whole lot of new inexperienced people to run the club, and then you are back to where you started.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Certainly in Geelong there are clubs that are well outside the salary cap, and up here I would suggest there are even more. Firstly, what is the point of having a salary cap? And secondly, what is to stop clubs, if we defray their costs directly from the government to the AFL, from paying more players?

Mr COX — It is a difficult thing. They do have a salary cap in the Goulburn Valley which is —

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Unenforceable.

Mr COX — The salary cap is \$50 000.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — It is \$70 000.

Mr COX — No, it is \$50 000 plus your highest paid person, whether they are a coach or player, is not included. In other leagues it is higher. If I was to say what I thought about the salary cap I would say, 'Do not have it'. I have been to the delegates' meeting, and it is on the record that I have said it. I think I was the only one. One team comes out and everyone says, 'They would be over the salary cap', and the next year they would be over the salary cap. They will be saying it about Seymour this year. I said, 'Why have it?' That is my view anyway, but they seem to always want to have it there.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Why could we not we encourage the VCFL to have a stronger policy that may be linked to the federal — I do not know if it is a possible, but I am throwing it out there — tax department, and that there be automatic audits of clubs and/or individuals?

Mr COX — It is a difficult thing, I suppose. As Jimmy Ure was saying, you do not know where the money is coming from. Someone could be a patron and just hand money to a player or a coach and no-one will ever know that. It is a dicey situation; you just try your best I guess. I would say, 'Do not have it'.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Let us go to the other question. How does government or the AFL, or whoever, get any comfort from increased resources being allocated to the leagues on their own? How can we be sure it is not just spent on another Melbourne player?

Mr COX — That is probably something I cannot answer because I am probably not qualified to do that, but I find it very difficult, yes.

Dr NAPHTHINE — How do you go with regard to people like your trainers? You need to have semi-skilled or skilled people working as trainers. How do you go about attracting and keeping trainers? Is there anything the AFL or the government could do to assist in ensuring that those people are attracted, maintained and appropriately skilled?

Mr COX — That is a good one. They all have to be qualified to be trainers otherwise they cannot train. They have to do the courses. We have three trainers and one masseuse, and they are all trained. We are lucky, and I suppose a lot of clubs are the same. We also have a doctor on our selection committee, which is great. A lot of clubs have to pay these people whereas we do not. The best we do for them is give them a membership card and a bit of fuel money to go to the ground.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Would it be an advantage if they were able to attend, at no charge to them, training courses paid for by the government, the AFL or a combination of the two?

Mr COX — That would be marvellous, because we, the clubs, pay for these people to do the courses. Most of them are voluntary, so we are not going to get them to fork out the money. It basically comes from the clubs. If there was a bit of money put aside for that sort of thing, it would be terrific. It is a hard situation. You could have a club that is down the bottom paying no players, and you could have a club that is spending well over the salary cap. Where do you find an equal? It is difficult.

Mr INGRAM — Minor leagues poach some of your players and pay them where they would not be the standard of player who is going to receive payment — basically they are a reasonable seconds player or something like, but they are attracted to a minor league. And also you are right here on the fringe or the outskirts of the VCFL. The metro leagues do not have salary cap. Are we getting into a situation where there is a bidding war for players who probably are not of the standard that should be being regularly paid? Is not that what the salary cap is designed to fix?

Mr COX — The way I look at it, if a player demands a certain amount of money if he is a very good player he may deserve to get it, but you definitely have to do your homework on each player you are looking at to be a contracted player. A lot of guys ask for a certain amount of money, and you just do not give it to them. If you were desperate you might weaken and do those sorts of things, but that is why you have to have good people in place who do their homework on each individual person. Seymour is a perfect example of a club that would never do that.

Mr INGRAM — But some of the other clubs obviously are.

Mr COX — Like you said, a bidding war would happen. I know that has happened in the Goulburn Valley this year, not with Seymour but with a couple of employers who were going to go somewhere else but ended up going to another place because they were offered more money. The thing is that if smaller towns like Euroa, Seymour, Tongala and places like that did not recruit players from outside their towns, they would not have the numbers or the quality of numbers.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You will get a copy of the transcript. You will be able to correct any errors of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.