

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Sea Lake – 24 March 2004

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Mr P. Doig, Director of Football Operations, Swan Hill Football-Netball Club
(sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Peter. For the purpose of the transcript would you mind giving us your full name and address? If you are representing an organisation, could you give the name of that organisation and your position within it, please?

Mr DOIG — My name is Peter Doig. My address is 78 Rutherford Street, Swan Hill. I represent the Swan Hill Football-Netball Club, with apologies from Craig Davies, the president, who had to go to Queensland rather hurriedly. I am the director of football operations for the club, and I am president of the Central Murray Football League, so maybe I can put a bit in about them as well as we are not represented here.

The CHAIR — Could you make some brief comments, then after that we will ask you some questions?

Mr DOIG — That is fine. I have quite an act to follow; she was very good!

The Swan Hill Football Club is the second-oldest football club in what is now the Central Murray Football League. It changed in the late 1940s to the Mid-Murray Football League, and we were just the Swan Hill Football Club. It is without any doubt one of the most successful clubs in the league, and it has been a leader in a number of areas over some time in both fundraising and a number of social issues as well.

The football-netball club came into being in the early 1990s. That is one of the most progressive moves the club has ever made. While other clubs have certainly joined together with others before in our league, I think the way the Swan Hill Football-Netball Club did it and continues to do it today, as very much a joint operation, has been one of the successes of the club and why it goes from strength to strength. That is basically some background to the Swan Hill Football-Netball Club as it stands today.

One issue of most concern to the club at the moment is the current grant system that the sporting clubs are able to access. While the grant system is fair and equitable — there is no doubt about that — it is more like a bit of a competition. If a club misses out on a grant in one year, it takes another year before it can apply again. Some clubs are under some pressure to improve their facilities, or they want to do so, or whatever they might have at hand. They cannot start any work and then apply for a grant down the track, so it puts them back another year.

Although they may have a very good case, other clubs out there may have a better case, so that puts them behind. It puts them into a corner and in the end they have to proceed in some shape or form if they are unable to get a grant. Player payments are a big issue within our league. Clubs are struggling to meet player payments. No doubt that is the case across the state. I am informed, and have some regret, that unfortunately the Victorian Country Football League (VCFL) has upped the player payments as of today, which is in my view a poor decision. However, we will have to deal with that.

There is also the lack of policing by the salary cap officer in our league. That is not a judgment of the person involved. The VCFL and the league have the salary cap in place, but no-one really does anything about it. Until something is done about it you might as well not have it. It is also a burden in country areas. The current local salary cap officer in the Central Murray league lives in the league area and has a business himself. That obviously places great personal pressure on him if he has to try to make any real inquiries. So, until the VCFL does something or gets some teeth with regard to salary cap officers it might as well not have the salary cap, because there is no doubt that it has been breached on many occasions.

The club believes that while there is a user-pays system in place, and it has been in place for some time, the provision and watering of reserves should be met by the whole community. I would think the benefit, sporting wise and social wise, would be undoubted. We feel the cost of providing those reserves should be borne by the whole community, seeing as the benefit goes to the community. There has been an increasing workload on volunteer committee people and the legalities involved over the past five years. As everyone knows, unfortunately we have moved into lots of areas where we have to be very careful and legal matters might arise out of the non-provision of safe playing areas and all the rest of it. However, it is definitely having an impact on getting people to join committees.

They see the workload that is now put on people to come and to sign all sorts of documents. A lot of people just will not sign documents or are very reluctant to do so, even if you assure them as much as possible that you are an incorporated body and you are protected so long as you are doing lawful things. But people will not go on committees because of the extra workload that has now been put on people.

The Swan Hill Football-Netball Club's situation is the centre, I suppose, of a large area. While in the town the number of players has been sufficient — just sufficient, and there is certainly not a great number of players — with the number of clubs that are centred around Swan Hill, they also have to have their share of the players as well and do, and compete with the players there. It is getting harder and harder to keep junior sides on the ground for all clubs and therefore that transfers itself into the senior area. It is particularly difficult here, and also in our area the outlying district leagues are fighting like hell to keep their clubs — which is what they should do and I can understand them doing that — but of course to make sure they field teams they also up the ante as far as players go. We have found over the past few years that the number of players leaving major-league footy to play district football at a younger age has increased. That therefore puts pressure on everybody as well. I appreciate there is not easy answer to that, but that is just a fact; and that is how it is at the moment.

Dr NAPHTHINE — With your other hat on, what is the health of junior football and Auskick in Swan Hill? I note you said you are president of the Central Murray Junior Football League.

Mr DOIG — The present Central Murray Junior Football League, which encompasses Koondrook–Barham right through to Balranald and now Tooleybuc–Manangatang — so it is a huge area — is such that each club has been able to provide all teams. We have under 11s, under 13s and under 15s. All clubs bar two have been able to provide teams in each level of competition. Leitchville–Gunbower were unable to supply under 11s for a couple of years but they now have them this year; and Cohuna did not want to provide under 11s for a couple of years, but I think having Leitchville-Gunbower provide under 11s has now put pressure on them because they are close by each other, so they now have a team.

At this stage — and we are still a month out from the season — every club has indicated to me it will be fielding a team in every level of competition. Each club, and it does not matter whether the club is based directly in Swan Hill or outside it, will go through years where it is short of players in a particular grade, and that will go through; if they are short one year in under 11s, that will follow all the way through until the under 15s, but at this stage it is quite healthy.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — My question is regarding the Australian Football League. I am sure you would agree that the AFL has a significant role in the development of the game, particularly in rural and country areas. It would argue that it spends millions of dollars on the development of the game. Do you have any suggestions about whether the AFL could improve its service delivery, if you like, to areas like this? You may be happy with it, and please articulate that if you are; if you are not, can you suggest areas where it could improve its support, whether it be in dollar terms, capital terms, program wise, or with players? What are your thoughts?

Mr DOIG — The AFL's Auskick program over the past two to three years, in my view, has been very good. The AFL provides a lot of money, backup and support and the material it sends out to the coaches has become in my view very good. At that level it is excellent. Once the kids have moved from Auskick and into junior football and all the way through to senior football, I think AFL support drops away dramatically. While it would argue that it spends a lot of money, and it does, it is aiming at the elite end of the competition all the time. It is interested only in the better players and it feeds those through the Bendigo Pioneers in our area. The better players go through there, and that is where the AFL's money and the expertise go.

The role of Daryl Powell, who is our AFL development officer and has been in our area for a long time, has changed dramatically over the years. Whereas he used to visit schools a lot — and he still does occasionally now — and also help coach clubs and visit them on nights and that sort of thing, he virtually does not do any of that any more because he is not allowed to; he has to concentrate solely on the elite end of it, Bendigo Pioneers, shuffling kids around, picking them up and taking them to training, and concentrating on that end of the market. So I think the AFL could do a lot more, even in financial assistance to clubs and even development of facilities, seeing it is a huge business — although I understand that the clubs there want their fair whack out of it too. The AFL's general development is excellent at the very young kids age, at Auskick level, but it drops right away to virtually nothing, unless you are at the elite end of it.

Mr WALSH — You spoke about how, when you put the netball and football clubs together, you felt you did a lot better than a lot of other clubs. Would like to elaborate?

Mr DOIG — I have been at the club for 17 years. When I first came to Swan Hill it was very much a men's club, and alcohol was the top end of it; there was football first and then alcohol. Alcohol made all the

money. You would go to training on a Thursday night and there would be beer there, on Friday night you would have a beer there, and certainly on Saturdays after the game there would be beer well into the night, and then on Sunday the barrel. It would roll on and on.

About five years after I came here we found that we were definitely losing the families and women from the game, and we made a conscious decision back then when I was president of the club that we had to change that because our pool of resources was getting smaller and smaller. Not without some disgruntlement from some of the old-timers, there is no doubt about it, we decided to become the Swan Hill Football-Netball Club. When we decided to do that the committee that we still have in place now had two netball representatives on it, and they have equal say in every part of the club. They do not just have input to netball matters, and then sit there quietly at the committee. They have input about everything — player payments to footballers and all manner of things.

We have deliberately gone out and sought and want family involvement within the club at every level. In the last five years that has started to pay off handsomely. Early on a Saturday night it is like a kids' crèche — kids and women everywhere — and the input of ladies to the club at every level has been terrific, but it had to be a push at the top end to make sure that the ladies started to feel comfortable, and it took a couple of years before it started to happen. It has been outstanding.

On payments, for the first time in the last two years we have started paying the A-grade netball coach. It is the only person in netball we pay, but that has started to happen.

The CHAIR — You said you have women on the committee who have equal say. Is that what happens in all the other football-netball clubs, or are they running separate?

Mr DOIG — There are still a lot of clubs within the league that are running separate organisations entirely; very separate organisations. I cannot tell you exactly how many, but it is probably still less than half that are football-netball clubs or one organisation. I may not be correct on that; I am not exactly sure. A lot of the others are still very separate.

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

Mr DOIG — Thank you for your time.

Witness withdrew.