

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Lakes Entrance – 6 April 2004

Members

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Witness

Mr P. M. Ward, former secretary, East Gippsland Umpires Association (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Peter. For the purposes of the transcript, would you please give us your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, the name of the organisation and your role in it?

Mr WARD — Peter Michael Ward, 66 Windsor Drive, Sarsfield. I am the recently retired secretary of the East Gippsland Umpires Association. I will preface my notes, if I may?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr WARD — Most of what I have written down has already been said, thanks to everyone else — they have taken my thunder. Perhaps if I just put it in context a little bit from an umpire's point of view. The East Gippsland Umpires Association supplies umpires to the East Gippsland Football League, the Omeo and District Football Association and the Bairnsdale Junior Football Association. Total appointments for all matches, including field, boundary and goal, is 41. To meet this requirement, we are required to have at least 50 registered umpires, to provide for possible illness and unavailability. At present the number of registered field umpires is 18, and 23 are required each week; boundary, 14, and we require 12, so we have a couple of spares there; and goals, 6, and we require 6 each week. As can be seen from these figures, ongoing recruitment is a major project each year. Our yearly turnover is approximately eight umpires covering each area and losses are caused by a number of factors. One is the retirement of older umpires; the second has been mentioned by the leagues and clubs — younger umpires leaving the district for further education and employment; and the third one, which is now coming into vogue a little bit more, is peer group pressure: for young umpires at school to play football or harassment for a decision made during a previous game. I will not say bullying, but perhaps harassment would be the best description.

Umpires usually fit into the age range of 15 to 18 years and over 35 years. This is due to the fact that those aged 18 to 35 are mostly playing football or doing something else or nothing at all. All recruiting costs are met from association funds. In 2003 these costs amounted to \$480, with no success using all forms of local media. With the assistance of the Victorian Country Football League umpiring department, various publicity items are provided for distribution to schools and technical and further education colleges, with a view to stimulating interest in umpiring. We have found over the years that word of mouth and personal contact is still the best method of recruiting.

Major costs to the association are very similar to those of the leagues. WorkCover costs us just over \$1000; liability insurance, which is done through the Victorian Country Football Umpires Association, is \$826; ground rental is \$700, plus power costs, which we estimate this year to be around \$500; and education of umpires, to bring them up to accreditation levels as required by the VCFL umpiring department, is just over \$2000. Always these costs are met from members funds. We receive some grants from the VCFL through the local district board, but the majority of these costs are met through our own funds. We receive a sponsorship from the Bairnsdale RSL, which consists of a laptop computer and use of the club facilities for social functions. That laptop computer is on a three-year lease and the agreement is that they will pay the leasing arrangements for those three years, so it does help us out quite substantially. The costs are met by a 12.5 per cent deduction from umpires charges to contracted leagues for the supply of umpires. So it is taken out of umpires fees to meet those costs. Any shortfall has to be met from various social functions, raffles, and a kiosk at training nights that has to be organised by volunteers. Again, with recent changes to legislation in running raffles and food and alcohol regulations regarding the serving of food and alcohol, we find it difficult to obtain volunteers to take on these responsibilities and cover the additional costs involved. Again the food-serving regulations come into force.

From an administration point of view, I have recently retired as secretary of the EGUA after an involvement of 30 years in football administration. During that period, any moneys that I received did not cover my costs such as phone, stationery, fuel et cetera — the job was done because I enjoyed it, not for the money. In seeking a replacement, the executive received a number of applications for the position that was advertised, to which each person indicated that they require a minimum of \$10 000 to cover their costs and salary to fill my position. I probably got about \$1000 and that went in just costs and so forth. So the burden of running the association again falls on even fewer volunteers to continue its contribution to football. The EGUA currently operates with an administration of just five people. This is not the choice of the executive; it is caused by the lack of people who wish to contribute for the love of the game. Everyone approached either does not want to be involved or they want to be paid to take on any responsibility.

We are now in a perilous position. What to do in the future? Most members want to only just umpire, collect their pay and not get further involved. The demands of school, further education, employment and families mean that

there are not enough people prepared to give their time to assist in the running of the association. We can amalgamate with other umpiring bodies, which we have discussed with the Sale group, but it is in a similar situation. We could become part of an overall league administration, as Graeme mentioned, or we can just fold and leave the game without an organised umpires body to provide umpires in the area. Umpiring is a major part of country football. We are no different from any other area of country football. We do not have the people prepared to become involved. The area in which we operate is basically a retirement area, with a large ageing population. Other attractions within the area also have an effect on support. We need to attract employment to enable young people to remain in the area and thus continue to be a part of country football. Football and netball are a big part of the community and assist in bringing the community together to make our communities strong. The EGUA will survive in the future, but it will be in a different guise as the VCFL changes the local structure of football.

I will just add something that has not been brought up. The current Ausport program to respect the umpire is a very positive thing. This is being run by Ausport in Canberra. We can only hope it will work. Perhaps the VCFL, in conjunction with the government, could run an awareness campaign along the lines of 'Country sport — we need it' to promote all the benefits that country sport brings to our rural communities. I think we need to promote all aspects of country sport, not just football. Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Peter. It was worthwhile going through those issues, even for us to hear that your issues are the same.

Mr WALSH — We have heard a lot about the standard of clubrooms and stuff for the football players. Would you like to make some comments on the facilities for umpires?

Mr WARD — Pretty ordinary.

Mr WALSH — Have you got any women umpires in your association?

Mr WARD — Not at the moment.

Mr WALSH — If you did have, would they be able to be accommodated?

Mr WARD — No. In most cases, the women will come dressed in their uniforms and if they need to use any of the facilities the rooms are evacuated and they have the rooms to themselves to use as they desire. Generally speaking, some clubs are very good; others are pretty ordinary. Garry mentioned Orbost. It is a difficult situation with rooms of the particular size and facility.

Mr WALSH — Does that have an impact on people's desire to be an umpire?

Mr WARD — I do not think so.

Dr NAPHTHINE — What are your umpires be paid at various levels and how does tax work with that?

Mr WARD — At the moment there is a ceiling that has been agreed by the VCFUA and the taxation department that they will not charge tax under \$85, I think it is. At the moment our umpires are being paid \$79 for a senior umpire down to \$45 for an under-18 umpire.

Dr NAPHTHINE — What were the goal umpires and boundaries on?

Mr WARD — Goal umpires are on \$27, and boundaries from memory are on about \$41. Out of that they have to pay for their own uniform costs and the maintenance costs of that uniform fully. They have got to pay for the whole lot.

Dr NAPHTHINE — And travel?

Mr WARD — And travel. There is a travel component in there, but most leagues will only pay for one car to go to a ground, although I think East Gippsland is paying for two at the moment. That usually just covers the senior panel, and the under-18s and reserves umpires have to get there under their own steam, and costs.

Mr WALSH — Given that a good senior player might earn \$500 a match, if you doubled or tripled the umpires' pay would that solve some of the problems for umpires?

Mr WARD — Of the umpires who are in our panel at the moment I do not think many of them would run for the money. If you have got two training nights, you have got to pay for all your gear, all the maintenance of the gear and then run as an umpire for 2½ hours and get abused fairly comfortably. I do not think they do it for the money. I think they do it because they enjoy it and would like.

Mr WALSH — I appreciate that, but would it actually help attract some new blood?

Mr WARD — Yes. I think all umpires, and I as a long-term administrator, find it difficult to accept that a player gets paid \$500 for running around and probably covering 3 or 4 kilometres a day while an umpire gets paid \$76 to run for the equivalent of a half marathon each day — and they have to make decisions within 3 seconds. A player can make a decision, make the wrong one and not cop any abuse. If the umpires make the wrong decisions in the eyes of the spectators they get all sorts of personal abuse thrown at them. This is why the new Ausport program is excellent. It makes people aware that they look bigger idiots when they abuse an umpire than they make the umpire out to be.

Mr MITCHELL — What are the relevant leagues doing in supporting the umpires because abuse is a big problem?

Mr WARD — We have a very good relationship with all our leagues. If we have a major problem with abuse towards umpires or behaviour of a player or a club towards an umpire, we advise the league immediately. They take action with that club and with that player immediately to rectify the problem. We are probably one of the lucky ones in the state, where we have made that an issue over the years to ensure that umpires do not suffer as much abuse as what occurs in some other areas in the state.

Mr MITCHELL — Do you have policing-type people at different grounds to watch games and maybe see these things?

Mr WARD — Yes, we have observers there who are usually there to examine the performance of the umpire, but if an incident comes up and they are not happy with it they will certainly notify, in the last few seasons, me as the umpires administrator, and I would be immediately in touch with the league secretary to advise them that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. We have been very lucky because of our relationship with the leagues that we have worked on this over the years and managed to get an excellent response from the leagues.

Mr INGRAM — Do you see any changing attitudes? You are saying some good work is being done, but as a long-term administrator do you see attitudes either positive or negative over time?

Mr WARD — I think they are becoming positive. From what I have seen from when I first started in the Eastern Suburban Churches in Melbourne and then with Southern Umpires around the Frankston area, I think there has been a positive reaction to umpiring. The average player understands that an umpire has a job to do and if he is not out there there is no game. It is probably the spectators who still forget or do not understand what the role of the umpire is. But even there, if we get a major problem with a spectator who is being quite unruly and getting very personal in their abuse, again we will try to identify that spectator and advise the league accordingly.

Mr INGRAM — Do you see any difference across leagues? As a spectator I go to the AFL, and I think some of the behaviour of other spectators there is atrocious compared to most country leagues. Do you see that as an issue: different league standards that have a better respect for umpires?

Mr WARD — Yes, I do. I think some of the major league umpires bodies have a bigger problem than what we do with it. I know at Geelong — I have been down there quite a few times because my family lives down there — some of the comments from spectators towards umpires in the Geelong area are certainly off the wall. When I go regularly down to the Mornington area the same thing applies, but the players themselves are excellent. It is a spectator problem, and I think the work that Ausport is starting to do in this area is excellent.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Retired players used to be a reasonable source of umpires. We have heard a lot of evidence that players are playing on much longer to make up the numbers in seconds and things like that. Is that drying up a source of umpires?

Mr WARD — Yes it is — very much so. We have approached a number of retired players to take on umpiring, and they say, 'No, I have had enough. I do not want to do it. I want to concentrate on my family and do

the family sorts of things'. I find that travelling around grounds that you really do not see them at matches anyway after they have retired. Maybe the club guys could correct me on that but just the games I have been to locally in the last few years, if a player retires he is gone. That is the problem. They do not go into administration either, so it has an effect all the way down.

The CHAIR — Thank very much. 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.

Witness withdrew.