

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Leongatha –7 April 2004

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Witnesses

Mr C. G. Soumilas, general manager (sworn); and
Mr R. I. Ferguson, president (sworn), West Gippsland Latrobe Football League.

The CHAIR — Welcome. For the purposes of the transcript would you provide us with your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, your position within that organisation?

Mr FERGUSON — My name is Rodney Ian Ferguson. I live at 62 Leigh Drive, Pakenham. I am the president of the West Gippsland Latrobe Football League.

Mr SOUMILAS — Christopher George Soumilas. I am the general manager of the West Gippsland Latrobe Football League. I live at 18 Flett Street, Bunyip.

The CHAIR — If you would provide us now with a brief presentation then we will move on to asking some questions.

Mr FERGUSON — The West Gippsland Latrobe Football League is in its third year of being one organisation. We were previously the West Gippsland Football League and the Gippsland Latrobe Football League. Chris and I were part of a subcommittee that three years ago helped amalgamate the two leagues, for a lot of various reasons. Part of them we are probably here for today as well; it is a continuing thing that seems to go on.

Our league consists of two divisions of 16 teams and has an area from Officer up to Sale and Maffra, down to here at Leongatha-Wonthaggi-Phillip Island, and then back up to Tooradin and across, so it covers a very large area. In that area we have 76 grades of football and 82 grades of netball. That is 2200 male and female participants in our sports of football and netball within our league, so we create a lot of activity in sport for the people within our league. That is just a rough overview of what we are made up of. Chris can summarise the other.

Mr SOUMILAS — I have heard some of the questions asked of earlier witnesses and I suppose they will come later. From our point of view we in country footy believe there should be an acknowledgement that we are needed, that we are helping the community by keeping kids off the streets and on the playing fields, that the powers that be should acknowledge that we are helping the community by occupying these young minds and that in some cases it is the only place where the youth today have any discipline given to them. I think they play a very important role there.

Some of the problems that we see are volunteers. It is very hard to get them because they are wary of involvement as a result of all the requirements that are placed on them. They are scared of litigation. They hear so many stories, such as that something happened when this bloke did something. When you go and ask someone, 'Do you mind joining a club?', they are wary straightaway. The old days of the country football club when the president would be the local publican, the secretary would be the school teacher or principal and the treasurer would be the local bank manager are finished because there is too much red tape and they are all busy. A lot of extra work has to be done and you just have to find people who are computer literate, et cetera — there are so many requirements.

On costs, insurance is sky high and the requirements to meet insurance just seem to be increasing. There is the registration that is needed for everything. We have a situation especially in Cardinia shire at the present time. Okay, everyone has to have their food premises registered, but it has gone from \$90 to \$280 in one year and they have told us that it will go up to \$360 next year. Now that is a fairly big hike, especially when some of these canteens are operating only eight times a year. Yet they have to be fully registered and they are paying the same amount of money that a full business that works seven days a week pays. We just feel there should be some pro rata system put in place.

On the issue of water, once upon a time we had an allowance of X amount of water that we were allowed to use to water our playing fields. Now we get slugged from the first drop that comes out of the tap. I just think if we want to have our playing fields in good condition and that, although it is all privatised now, maybe that allowance or a cheaper rate to a certain amount could help out.

On the rules of the VCFL and the AFL, some of them are not conducive to helping country footy. One of the practices that probably hurts us a bit is that we have the elite player program for under-18s. Then the VFL clubs get into the young players' ears and tell them, 'Look, come down here. You haven't made it from Gippsland Power, but come down here and have a game with us and you'll be watched by AFL scouts, et cetera'. All they do is plug away in the reserves down there and there is just this promise of something bigger and better and they are taking away our good kids just on this promise. We have lost a few players out of our league just this season to interstate. They are told, 'Come and play in the South Australian league or the Canberra league; you'll get spotted by the Sydney Swans or the Crows'. It is probably just a little bit of why can they not be spotted in our local areas? That is

a huge concern in some areas because, as I say, it is your 18-year-old or 19-year-old kid that you have nurtured, and he has gone to Gippsland Power, good luck to him, but he has not made it and it is just pie-in-the-sky stuff. The kid is probably never going to make it, but he has gone for three or four years until he finally comes back.

I have an issue with local government on a couple of things. At the present time, in insurance, we are asked by the VCFL and the insurers that we carry out ground match reports before we can play. They are all the insurance requirements. Now we have local governments wanting us to carry out a different report, but in their terminology. All of a sudden it is just a duplication of work that really does not need to be done. The insurance company insures the footy club. Whatever happens out on the ground is covered, so I am at a loss as to why we then have to do another one for the local council. Surely they can mix in? I believe most of the councils are with JLT Sport, which is the same insurer that the VCFL has.

Then there are the issues of people wanting to do something to help you around the ground. I mean, there is also the fact that if it is not a licensed contractor we then run the possibility that if something is actually fixed or made by someone and something happens we are not covered. They are issues that I suppose have worked in the past but I just think that somewhere along the line if something could be done so that volunteers, as long as they have made the commitment to do the best they can, are not obligated — whatever the word is — under litigation. On the rest, you will ask us questions on our relevant league.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Are you aware of the Volunteer Protection Act?

Mr SOUMILAS — I forget what the amount is, but there is still an amount that they can be sued for, is there not?

The CHAIR — I do not know.

Mr SOUMILAS — They have halved it, or something.

The CHAIR — We have been told that we need to promote that more, though.

Mr SOUMILAS — They have knocked it from about \$100 000 and something down to about \$50 000. You can only lose half your house now, instead of the whole lot.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Following that up, do you think it would be helpful if this committee recommended to government that funds be set aside for a three or four-year program across Victoria to provide education and training for existing and potential volunteers — on committees or whatever — to make sure that they are aware of what their rights and responsibilities are and to assist them through that process so that you could perhaps overcome some of the myths and legends about volunteers?

Mr SOUMILAS — The logistics are a problem. We did have programs running, and the VCFL did have advisory programs. but the problem is that it is the same one or two who go to them. I have been going to seminars for about 20 years, and you see the same blokes. The problem is trying to get to the next level, and I do not know what the answer is, because I have tried to get the other person to come to them. You will get a seminar on training or whatever particular thing it is, but it is the same person who goes every time. The program information has to be continued, but we have to develop something where we can get those extras there.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Chris, as has been flagged before, how do we stop your clubs just paying more players? If government or the AFL has a program, whether it is a capital fund or recurrent, the bottom line is that it saves clubs a significant amount of money, so how do we stop your clubs just paying more players? That is happening now.

Mr SOUMILAS — That is impossible. If you are going to allocate funding so that they have to have proof that that is what they have spent it on the proposal they have put up, that is not to say that they have a heap of money and they spend it on players.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I understand that.

Mr SOUMILAS — Other than that I do not know.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What about the salary cap in your league?

Mr SOUMILAS — We have different views on it. We are in a free enterprise country.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Let it rip, do you reckon?

Mr SOUMILAS — If the majority of clubs in a league settle on a figure, it should be worked out by the league, not just an overall figure given from the top. The Ovens and King Football League is a district league, and it is certainly a different type of league to what is down here. You have huge areas to travel, et cetera, whereas down in this area of Victoria we are probably the most populated country part of the state. Our leagues would have a different way of being run than up there, and different finance et cetera, so I do not think it is the right thing to whack on a salary cap and say, 'This is for everyone in Victoria'.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you think it might be unfair to have a much larger figure for different leagues that allows them to poach other players from other leagues?

Mr SOUMILAS — That is always going to happen. It is like water; it finds its own level. There are certain clubs in certain clubs that are going to have the capacity to do that. If you have a league with bigger towns in it you would expect that they would be able to raise more money and then attract — —

We have to have levels of football, and I believe it does find its own level eventually.

Mr WALSH — Why should government put any money into football clubs if they are just going to spend it on players? It is a substitution thing. If you save money here and you get a grant to build a football clubroom, then build it, that takes the pressure off your home account and it will have spare cash to do other things. If it just drives up the price of players, why should government do that?

Mr SOUMILAS — If there is the acknowledgment that the system is providing something for people and is keeping kids off the street, then you have to go the following step for what you have to have in place. I do not think the government should just throw money at clubs if they are going to build facilities. At the end of the day we are talking about having people playing sport, and we need facilities to do that. It then becomes a case of, 'We want to be better at it', and the dreaded case of money comes into it, but that is the case in everything we do in life. It is not to say that anything government is going to give to the clubs, of course they should not spend it on players. It is about providing facilities, et cetera.

Mr WALSH — Do you pay netballers in your league?

Mr SOUMILAS — I would not know. The clubs tell us what they want to tell us.

Mr MITCHELL — Officially do you pay them?

Mr FERGUSON — Officially no.

Mr WALSH — They generally do not pay cricketers, do they?

Mr FERGUSON — Coaches get paid.

Mr SOUMILAS — Some cricketers get paid and coaches of netball get paid.

Dr NAPHTHINE — To change the tack slightly, it was put to us yesterday — and you will probably guess where it came from — that perhaps at your premier division you should have seniors only, no reserves, and do what most of the AFL sides do. Players on Tuesday nights are told that they are not required the following Saturday for Morwell or Wonthaggi. They then go out to the district leagues that they originally came so you can be sure you have sufficient players in your district leagues and your premier league is a seniors competition only. What do you think of that sort of model?

Mr FERGUSON — Personally I am not in favour of it. With the club I have been involved with, and knowing the clubs in our leagues, the backbone of your club is generally your reserve players. They are the ones who watch the seniors play, eat at the canteen and drink during the game. During the week they are probably the ones you get most of your workers from, so I feel they do fill a role in a club by helping in its survival. I am not in favour of that; I have heard the suggestion, but that is just a personal opinion, and for those exact reasons. The reserves help the club survive.

Mr SOUMILAS — I do not agree with it, but if the clubs want to remain in premier division and they all agree to it, that is up to them, but personally I do not agree with not having reserves in the premier division.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you have promotion and relegation between your two divisions?

Mr SOUMILAS — No.

Mr FERGUSON — The area of distance is a problem.

Dr NAPTHINE — How come a town as big as Warragul is running around in the western division? What are they, wimps or something?

Mr SOUMILAS — I am not answering that one!

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — On Gippsland Power, I know you talked about kids going away, but that has happened forever. You are not going to stop that. I was the one who went away from my club; I went to Western Australia, and that is always going to happen in a league. My view is that you should be encouraging those players to better themselves. What is your view — and I am not trying to lead you at all — about Gippsland Power? Is it positive or negative? What is the league's view? We have heard a couple of views about shortening the season. I am not saying that is right or wrong; I am offering an opinion, but that is one of the examples.

Mr FERGUSON — If you offered any 14, 15, 16 or 17-year-old the chance and opportunity to play Gippsland Power they would lose sleep, they would be that excited about it. From that age level I think it is very good, because it helps them develop and encourage to achieve, whether it be in sport or otherwise — it instils in them to aim at the highest workplace, and hopefully that continues on in the workplace for them as well. I do believe in it that way. The relationship is very good between the leagues and Gippsland Power. They do bring a lot back to the individual leagues as well, so I think it is positive in that way. It is probably touching on what Chris said before, and it might differ from what you think, but it is when they finish that hopefully they come back to the club and what they have learnt can bring something back if they have not made it, as long as employment does not take them away, because that has to come first — a lot of clubs tend to lose that.

Mr SOUMILAS — I agree with the Gippsland Power concept. The only comment I have is with what I heard you asking before about zoning. The kids who are playing Power have huge parental support, and they have to have it to make it. They are driven everywhere. One of my concerns relates to players like Leigh Brown. He came off a farm and his parents came to watch him for two years. He is from a very close-knit family, then he gets drafted and taken out of that close-knit family and goes 3000 miles away. That is probably one of the things that is at fault with it. Now the kid is back in Melbourne and he is a lot happier. They do come from close-knit families because they have to have that parental support to make it. Then we whip them out of it and send them to the other side of the country.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — It is called a national league!

Mr SOUMILAS — I realise that; I am not arguing about that. I just feel that it is one of the faults, that is all.

The CHAIR — You mentioned before as well that water is a bit of an issue in the area, and you talked about affordability more than accessibility. Do you have the same problems with accessibility in your clubs or are most of them on town water supplies?

Mr SOUMILAS — For some clubs the city or shire council look after their grounds, and then we have other grounds that are under a maintenance grant. I think most of the grounds are on town water. It is just the cost of providing that water. I am not sure what happens here, actually, but I know that in Moe, Morwell and Traralgon the City of Latrobe looks after that. In the case of, say, Cardinia shire, they get a grant. They are given about \$8000 a year to maintain the ground. That is very hard to do on \$8000 because I am president of the Garfield Recreation Reserve still. It is very hard to get everything up to scratch on \$8000 a year.

Dr NAPTHINE — Should Traralgon or your combine league have a team in the VFL?

Mr FERGUSON — It should be out of Pakenham. That is just a personal opinion. I think that the Traralgon concept, one of the reasons it did not work is because it included towns down at Officer and places like that and travel became an issue, whereas I think that if it had been closer it might still be in existence now. I think it became an issue for Traralgon. I know they put a lot of time, a lot of effort and a lot of money into it. I just think that the way the growth is down there — I also think they should be playing up here, too, but that is a different matter again — out of Pakenham it could still then draw from the metropolitan area as well as from the country. That is just a personal opinion.

Mr SOUMILAS — The other thing, too, is that a lot of money is needed to run a football club like that. I do not know what the right thing should have been. They ran as just Traralgon. Some people have told me that it should have been as a regional team. I was told that it would cost about \$700 000 a year. If that sort of money is going to be pulled out, it is going to hurt the other clubs around in that area. You have to justify whether it is worth it. You are going to find that they are not going to have the base that all the other clubs have and that is probably where they are always going to struggle with a team like that, just starting it, because they have no culture and they have no history. Then you have to go and interfere with everyone else's sponsorship, so I am not 100 per cent on what would happen there.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Rod and Chris, for your time today. You will get a copy of the transcript and you can correct matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.