

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Wangaratta – 15 April 2004

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Witness

Mr P. McCudden, secretary, Wangaratta and District Cricket Association (sworn).

The CHAIR — Under the powers conferred on this 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 wish to advise all present 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 wish to advise witnesses that any comments made outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

Mr McCUDDEN — My full name is Peter McCudden. I live at 123 Williams Road in Wangaratta. I am here today as secretary of the Wangaratta and District Cricket Association.

I want to emphasise that, too, because in the initial documentation I was listed as administration manager of the Victorian Country Cricket League, which I am, but in today's hearing I am here only in my capacity of voluntary secretary of the WDCA and I am not representing the VCCL today. The peak body in Victorian cricket will be making a submission to this inquiry through Cricket Victoria and our secretary, Mr Ed Parker. I also wish to enter an apology for two other members of our association who were to be with us, Geoff Welch and Graham Kerr. Graham has been called away on business, and Geoff unfortunately is out of town today.

In regard to this inquiry, it was clear to me that part of the terms of reference would be to look at the impact of country football and what is happening to country football and other sports in the community. Essentially what I have tried to do in these notes today — I would rather refer to them as notes than as a submission — is to refer to part B of the terms of reference. I do not wish to make any comment on any other matters within it, so the evidence that I will give will deal solely with that part.

I will start off by talking about the relationship in the past between cricket and football because it is a very long one, and might I say a very successful and harmonious one. It goes back well over 100 years. Both cricket and football have been very closely intertwined as part of the social fabric of the community, because for decades it was the done thing that a chap would play football in winter and cricket in summer and the transition from one to another was a pretty natural one. As I mentioned in the second paragraph, it is not quite that easy these days because that bond between them has been broken to some extent by the fact that football now no longer confines itself to 6 or 7 months of the year but now spreads over almost 11 months. The pattern set by the AFL training regimes which sometimes begin as early as October, certainly November, has transferred to country football and is certainly having some impact which I will come to later.

Nevertheless, I believe the bond is a very strong one. Speaking solely as a representative of the Wangaratta and District Cricket Association, I am very certain that the relationship between football associations and cricket clubs is still a very harmonious one. The few hiccups that occur are very rare and usually very minor and solved on the spot fairly rapidly. I cannot remember any major crisis between ourselves and football in my experience in administration. I might say that the word 'district' in the name Wangaratta and District Cricket Association refers to 13 clubs that field 30 senior teams and 31 junior teams in 4 divisions of senior cricket and 3 subdivisions of juniors. However, we stretch a fair distance — from approximately 146 kilometres from the little hamlet of Harrierville at the bottom of Mount Hotham though to the New South Wales town of Corowa on the Murray. That is a fair distance when you talk about people travelling on a Saturday backwards and forwards. It is sometimes up to 3 hours travel there and back just to play cricket.

I am also talking not just about Wangaratta but communities like the ones we represent — Corowa, Rutherglen, Myrtleford and Bright. A few years ago we subsumed the previous Ovens and Kiewa association, or at least the clubs from the Ovens Valley. The clubs on the Kiewa Valley side tended to go to the Wodonga Cricket Association, so Harrierville and Bright and so on have come to us and we are spread over a fair distance. I want to make those comments clear — that I still believe the continuing relationship between football and cricket clubs is a very good one and one that we find, as the executive of the association, is mutually supportive and certainly shows mutual respect for each other's games, even if it is not quite as common as it used to be where players would play both sports. Anyway, we will come to that.

In recent years there have been a couple of trends, however, which concern me, and I welcome this opportunity to raise them. I am not necessarily wishing to lay blame or fault with anyone; it is just to note it. I think some of the problems are going to be very difficult to overcome. Country cricket on the surface has probably never looked stronger than at the moment. As mentioned in the notes, we were successful in winning the Australian country

championships in January in Mount Gambier — the first time we had done so since 1991. We were undefeated in that two-week carnival.

The census last season by Cricket Victoria indicates there has never been a greater number of junior players under 18 downwards taking up cricket. This includes the Milo Have-A-Go program for from 5 and 6-year-olds to 10-year-olds, of which we have four such squads in the area. Our experience in the Wangaratta district is exactly that of the rest of the state, where our junior numbers up to 18 are growing substantially.

Finally, of course, we had the success of the Victorian state team in the Pura Cup, where country cricket has a very strong influence. I think something like 21 out of the 30 on contract in the Bushranger squad are from the country, and 7 out of the 12 players who defeated Queensland in the final were from the country, so it is a pretty strong influence there. However, that apparent success highlights a couple of things. The first point I mentioned is on the second page. It is more the long-term problem, and is the one that worries me and many administrators. I wish to keep this relevant, and I must try and do that, but football is not fully but is certainly part of the problem.

The problem is that we are losing our cricketers in the 18 to 25 age group. It is a big experience. It is well experienced in our Wangaratta association, and having spoken to cricket administrators right throughout the state, it is happening everywhere. We are struggling to hold onto our cricketers once they get to 18. There are at least six players that I am aware of who played for Wangaratta teams who in the last year or so have given it away. It is not coincidental that those six all play country football as well. The reason is that the commencement of the training period for country football has been pushed further and further back till now it is November. The days where we used to finish cricket and then start pre-season training are just no longer there.

I do not wish to lay blame there, and I certainly do not want to infer that either the Ovens and Murray Football League — because it is mainly those senior teams who are involved — nor the two teams in Wangaratta, the Rovers and the Magpies, have anything deliberate to do with that. They certainly do not. I have no evidence whatsoever to suggest that players are being pressurised to train rather than play cricket, but 18 to 25-year-olds have, as I say there, a myriad of other interests, and if you are being asked to train for football at least two nights or two occasions a week, plus another one, and then you are looking at least another night training for cricket and playing on the Saturday, a number of those key players are just deciding it is too much, and they have to make a decision which one goes.

The problem for us as cricket administrators is that we are still essentially an amateur game. Not only that, but players have to pay to play. However, it is now basic to all country football that players get paid, and they expect to get paid, and they are getting paid some pretty good money, so obviously the sport they are getting paid for is taking precedence. We are well aware of at least five former players from the Wangaratta Rovers United Club and at least one player from the Wangaratta Magpies Cricket Club who have given the game away; and not only were they players, they were top players in A grade and country week players, and we are losing them. That is happening in a trend across the state. I do not know what we are going to do about it, but it is something which the VCCL is going to address on a statewide basis.

In the short term we had a problem this year — and I hope it does not repeat itself — but again it was to do with this emphasis on training, where the Murray Bushrangers under-18 team had organised a two-day training camp weekend somewhere along the river at Cobram or Barooga, and there were six players from Wangaratta, Corowa and Rutherglen who were told they were expected to be at that camp. I am now reporting this second hand. I cannot quote the actual words said, but they obviously felt threatened that their position in the Murray Bushrangers squad was under threat if they did not attend that camp. I felt that was a great pity because those boys had played cricket right through the season. Five of them at Wangaratta had played A grade, one of them in A reserve. Not only that, but one of them is one of our absolute stars of the association and one of the top cricketers in the state for his age, and in fact starred in the under-18 Coca Cola Cup at Bairnsdale in February, or was it January, when that competition was held. So I found that very hard, and so did the clubs. There is no doubt that the players' clubs were affected. I am not quite sure again what the answer is, but I feel that organisations like the Murray Bushrangers do have to take into account community attitudes in general and realise that as much as they might want the players to be at their camp, if they do have other commitments to other community organisations, they need to fulfil those commitments.

Can I can reiterate in summary that the WDCA acknowledges the contribution which country football makes to rural communities. We have always been very much aware of that, particularly our own region, and we have

worked wherever it was needed to form partnerships with football bodies, and I am sure that is going to continue. However, times have changed and so some of the social and cultural changes that have occurred are not going to be easy to overcome, and there will be a need for much closer dialogue with football bodies in the future.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Peter. We have heard some similar things in Robinvale as well in regard to the relationship between football clubs and cricket clubs. What suggestions would you make to sporting bodies in general about the best way to go to ensure there is better communication between football and cricket, especially that relationship that you are talking about?

Mr McCUDDEN — I think the channels are there now; it is only a matter of using them. For example, if the Murray Bushrangers, as an example, had approached us prior to the organisation of that training weekend, it might have been that we could arrange it at another time. Even one weekend before would have allowed them to miss that and play in the finals. The fact that it was the finals, it was a pretty hard thing for the clubs to bear. I think the channels of communication are out there now. It is a matter of using them. In the past the communication has not needed to be great because the state legislation which governs the control of venues with the key dates of 1 April for football and 1 October for cricket has worked very well, and I believe that piece of legislation has recently been renewed again. So really we have not had a great clash. There was a slight hiccup a year or so ago when the Ovens and Murray Football League scheduled its first round of matches at the same time as our grand final weekend, and there was at least one clash of grounds in Wangaratta, but we sorted that out. I think the communication links are there now. It may be that we need to show mutual respect for each other and let people know what we intend to do.

Mr WALSH — Where you share grounds with football clubs, could you give us a bit of an outline about how the cost share goes between the football club and the cricket club, please?

Mr McCUDDEN — There is no one pattern. In fact, a number of the grounds, and our association is probably as good an example as any, are on Crown land and council owned, in which case they are covered by that legislation that I mentioned. In this instance the bodies that use the W. J. Findlay Oval in Wangaratta, the Wangaratta Rovers Football Club and the Rovers United Cricket Club, work very closely together and they work closely with the Rural City of Wangaratta, which maintains the grounds. The clubs make the turf pitches but the councils maintain the grounds, and they do it extremely well. We have four turf pitch grounds in Wangaratta; the general surface is maintained by the council and it does an excellent job. They were an absolute picture when the finals came.

Then we have the showgrounds, which have a show society and therefore a special committee of management which answers to somebody — I am not sure which body but the lands department or somebody — in which case there is an equal representation of the various sports that use it. In Wangaratta there are a few of them because the cycling club also uses the cycling track around the grounds and we also have other bodies as well as the show society using the ground during the year.

We then have private grounds such as the Bruck Mill Oval owned by the Bruck textile company, which gives the grounds to the club for nothing, I believe, but does not do anything. The club has to do all the upkeep on it. It varies when you leave Wangaratta. For example, at Corowa it is council owned. In New South Wales they are council owned, and there might be some slightly different rules of local government, but I know that they pay no money for them whatsoever.

One of our biggest problems in cricket is the cost of grounds. In Wangaratta itself we believe that we pay an unfair share of the maintenance cost of grounds compared to other bodies. It varies from one of our cricket clubs paying \$2500 a season for the use of Barr Reserve no. 1, the Bill O'Callaghan Oval, to another sporting club, admittedly a small one, that pays \$250 for the ground next door. We believe that is rather iniquitous. However, we have some work going on at the moment that I believe that the Rural City of Wangaratta is aware of, and we are going to discuss it. The costs vary so much it is hard to generalise. The arrangements for the governance of the control of the grounds also varies a great deal.

Mr WALSH — Is the one where you are paying \$2500 shared by the football club?

Mr McCUDDEN — No, the cricket club has to play pay that lot.

Mr WALSH — So no football is played on that oval?

Mr McCUDDEN — Yes, but it is junior league, and I am not sure if they pay a fee. They probably do pay a fee, but I bet you it is nothing like \$2500.

Mr WALSH — So on the Rovers one you talked about at the start, how much does the cricket club pay and how much does the football club play?

Mr McCUDDEN — I am sorry, I cannot answer that at the moment; I do not know particularly. It is not really my business. I think that case is fairly equitable, but I do not know.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving your submission and time today. You will get a copy the transcript, and you may correct any matters of fact and grammar but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.