

**MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF COUNTRY FOOTBALL CLUBS****Lionel Frost\* & Abdel K Halabi†****ABSTRACT**

Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, non-metropolitan Australian Rules football clubs prospered as volunteer organisations, operating in regions that were protected by distance from clubs in larger, competing leagues. They acted as places that people valued and were important components of social capital in their communities, and in turn, received subsidies from other community groups that reduced operating costs. Clubs appear to have measured success in terms of their ability to attract the talent needed to build a winning team that would boost the prestige of both the club and its local community. The Victorian Football League's regulations about player payment and mobility gave country football clubs the opportunity to offer attractive terms to League players, and this prevented the game's most powerful league, from crowding out its rivals. The circumstances that were favourable to country football clubs have changed with the formation of a major league, the Australian Football League. The televising of matches nationwide allowed people in even remote regions to watch AFL games. Economic and demographic decline in country areas, greater mobility and the lure of metropolitan jobs has made it difficult for clubs to retain players. In this challenging economic environment, many country football clubs have been unable to survive in their own right. This paper reports on a survey of administrators of Victorian country football clubs as to their perceptions of what constitutes 'success' in this new environment. It provides information about how individual clubs are responding to broad changes that are beyond their control, and offers evidence about the ability of local football clubs to continue to play their traditional role as places of importance and generators of social capital in regional communities.

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### INTRODUCTION

Tommy Hafey is a legendary figure of Australian Rules football, who retains an enthusiasm for sport in general and its power to exert a positive influence over peoples' lives. Almost forty years after coaching Richmond to the first of four premierships, he travels extensively to schools and football clubs throughout Victoria, taking training sessions and encouraging people to play an active role in organised sporting groups. Hafey tells how he once visited a small town in the Mallee and met a man who had moved there from Melbourne and bought a cheap house in the district. 'I've never been a football person', the man told Hafey, 'but I am now'. At the local football club, 'I've got fifty new mates'.<sup>1</sup>

This anecdote encapsulates the value of local football clubs as inclusive places that help new arrivals to country communities 'break in' to existing social groups. Few barriers to personal involvement in a local football club exist. A healthy football club may contribute to the development of a 'sense of place' that can make country towns familiar and attractive to their residents. Like the streets, schoolyards, and swimming holes that kids play in as they are growing up, country football grounds are sources of security and identity for individuals and groups. The memory of the sights and smells, the 'atmosphere' of such places, and the rituals and myths that are associated with them, can help to build a sense of loyalty in people towards their communities.<sup>2</sup> Strong communities may develop mechanisms for creating and maintaining a sense of place through activities such as volunteer work, donations and sponsorship.<sup>3</sup> A sense of place may create a secure and stable environment that benefits all members of a community, even if they have not invested directly in its creation or maintenance.

Australian Rules is one of the world's oldest organised sports, with rules that were codified in 1859. For most of the subsequent period football clubs at both the elite and local level have been places of importance with strong links to their local communities. With only a few exceptions, Australian Rules football clubs have been 'owned' by members who pay an annual subscription fee. At the end of each season, membership lapses and people need to pay a further subscription the following season to retain their share of the ownership of their club. Members are the 'custodians' of the club and their ownership does not create an asset that may generate capital gains when ownership is transferred. This close association between the owners of clubs and the communities within which clubs are located, and the ease with which clubs could be established, limits the opportunities for clubs and their owners to make high levels of profit. Football clubs compete with each other and with other community groups for participants and resources, and in suburban and

country areas the limited size of the market restricts the revenue that local football clubs can generate. The day-to-day running of clubs is normally in the hands of volunteers, who forgo time that could be spent at work or at home with their families. 'Free-rider' problems mean that the benefits created by football clubs can not be restricted to those who paid a membership fee, and clubs do not receive revenue from all of the people who benefit from their activities.

At the same time, the strong allegiance of communities to their football team has been to the advantage of local clubs. Clubs needed few resources to get started, but over time, clubs came to depend on subsidies, donations and goodwill from local governments and other community groups to keep operating costs down by reducing the need for direct investment in grounds and facilities. Clubs usually had no trouble finding an adequate supply of local players. The limits to transport technology restricted people's ability to travel to consume leisure activities, and created a dense network of small towns that were close to primary producing areas and home to railway workers, labourers, schoolteachers, and other young workers. Little information is available about the effects these factors had on the accounts of country football clubs – such information is not usually provided in club histories<sup>4</sup> – but it seems likely that even highly ambitious clubs operated on small cash flows, with the benefit of considerable subsidies and distance protection, and sought to do little more than balance their books. A local club that made a substantial annual profit would most likely be seen by its membership as one that was not spending enough on recruits and player payments.

Since the 1970s, many aspects of the favourable environment for country football clubs have been eroded. 'People prosperity' policies that have been designed to improve the ability of the Australian economy to compete in deregulated, global markets have tended to weaken the sense of place that country football clubs embody. The emergence of the Australian Football League as the game's major league, with matches broadcast nationally, has made it possible for people to watch football without visiting, or establishing a connection with their local football ground. The costs of running clubs has increased, while the supporter and fundraising base of towns has tended to decline. Councils continue to subsidise football clubs, but there is a wider range of sports and leisure activities competing for funding. Clubs have to work harder and turn over more revenue to survive than they did in the past. The disbanding and merging of clubs has roughly halved the number of country clubs over the past three quarters of a century: in 1932, it was estimated that around a thousand football clubs were operating in country Victoria;<sup>5</sup> currently the Victorian Country Football League (VCFL) has only 464 affiliated senior clubs. Between 1990 and 2003, 66 clubs in the VCFL merged and a further 36 folded altogether.<sup>6</sup> If the trend is to be reversed, there is a pressing need for information about how clubs that continue to operate have been able to adapt to changing circumstances, and even turn these to their advantage.

The aim of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, it will identify the conditions that nurtured the development of country football clubs as significant institutions that contributed to social capital and a sense of place in local communities. The paper will then examine the difficulties that country football clubs have had in continuing to play this role since the 1970s. Secondly, the paper will assess how country football clubs have responded to these changing circumstances by reporting on criteria that administrators use to judge whether clubs are successful. The survey results suggest that clubs continue to see a strong role for themselves as places of importance and providers of social capital in their local communities.

### **THE GOLDEN AGE OF COUNTRY FOOTBALL**

Tens of thousands of young people spent time in Melbourne during the 1850s, but when those who wanted to get together to kick a ball gathered in the parklands, there was no single variety of football was sufficiently well established to be their natural game of choice. As people moved from Melbourne to pursue fortunes and business opportunities in the city's hinterland - the Victorian goldfields and the farming and pastoral regions of the Murray-Darling basin – many of them they took with them an enthusiasm for 'Melbourne Rules', as the game was then called. Simple rules made the game easy to play, even for those who were more familiar with other football codes. Thus when fifty men assembled in a paddock after the first meeting of the Mildura Football Club and picked two teams for a game, a reporter observed that:

Scratch match it was called, and so it proved. It was also a bite, kick-and-wrestle match. Many of the players being new arrivals from the old country and accustomed to the Rugby rules, did not conform very readily to our more gentle Australian practices and there was consequently some rough play. However, everything was taken in good part, and no ill-feeling was engendered by the numerous "spills".<sup>7</sup>

After the Selection Act of 1869 made areas of Crown Land available on credit, settlers established new farms on the plains north of the Great Dividing Range and in the Wimmera, and in the forests of Gippsland. Most new settlers had, or would eventually have, large families, and took up what by modern standards were very small farms. As farmers could travel only short distances by horse and cart, the expansion of the margin of settlement created a dense network of small towns and villages that served the simple, frequently occurring service and supply needs of primary producers.<sup>8</sup> Members of new communities soon established churches, agricultural societies, social groups, and sporting clubs. For people making farms and establishing businesses in often unfamiliar bush surroundings, participation in these activities was, as Paul Daffey has written of watching and playing football, 'a weekly tonic against loneliness and isolation'.<sup>9</sup>

Football suited the routine of farming communities because it was played in the months between the busy sowing and harvesting seasons. Games were played in the late afternoon, on Wednesdays and Saturday half-holidays, and ended in time for dairy farmers to return home for the evening milking. Although an expanding railway network allowed clubs and their supporters to travel to play matches in other towns, few people travelled to watch or play with a team located far from where they lived, and clubs drew their members from the surrounding community. In sport, and in other activities, people took their leisure in public places, with the entertainment 'likely to be supplied by enthusiastic local amateurs'.<sup>10</sup> Like the other services provided by country towns, leisure activities were consumed on the spot, at the same time and location as they were produced. Local football clubs were therefore protected from import competition, and benefited from 'captive' markets of players and supporters. As a result, virtually every small town fielded a club, while the larger towns supported several, with these being organized into local leagues. A survey of Victorian country towns in the 1940s found that 'sport is by far the most common form of organised recreation, and, for most people, is the main theme of life over the week-end, if not during the week also'.<sup>11</sup>

When they were formed, clubs needed only basic facilities, and over time, the importance that communities placed on sports reduced the expenses that clubs had to meet to maintain and improve their home grounds. Many ovals were laid on land loaned by local farmers. Changing rooms for the players and umpires were often sheds made of corrugated iron, with dirt floors and no showers. As late as the 1940s, players at Koo-Wee-Rup changed in the bushland surrounding the oval.<sup>12</sup> When the facilities at grounds used by football clubs were improved, it was often as a result of the work of other organisations. Maryborough Football Club, for example, used an oval that was secured and laid out by the town's Highland Society and Agricultural Society. The Society's New Year's Day Gatherings attracted crowds of up to 14,000 before World War I, but during the winter months the Football Club had use of the oval and its magnificent 600-seat grandstand, built by the local council in 1895.<sup>13</sup> After World War I, around a quarter of the Australian communities that built monuments chose functional memorials, such as halls, hospitals, and sports reserves.<sup>14</sup> Port Fairy's Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Pavilion, and 200-seat grandstand, was built in 1923 by the Returned Soldiers League. Warracknabeal's RSL built an entire sporting and recreation complex in the town as a memorial to fallen comrades. With the assistance of the Red Cross, the RSL raised funds to transform an area of waste ground into a football and cricket oval with tennis courts, landscaped gardens, a kiosk and dining room, athletics facilities, and a grandstand with soldier's club rooms underneath.<sup>15</sup> The many football clubs that were based at showgrounds benefited when the local agricultural society improved facilities for spectators. At Wangaratta, for example, the football club had its own clubrooms at the

showgrounds, but also had the use of turnstile buildings and other amenities, and a grandstand with 648 seats built by the agricultural society.<sup>16</sup>

In small towns, the existence of football clubs encouraged people to socialise away from their homes and workplaces and develop a sense of identity with community that transcended class divisions. Although businesspeople, professionals and other middle-class interests tended to dominate the running of clubs, few communities were large enough to support institutions that could operate without working-class participants. Country football clubs were therefore places where people mixed freely regardless of class.<sup>17</sup> Clubs helped to build networks of reciprocal social relations that enhanced the stock of social capital in local communities:

In most towns the football club runs dances and card parties throughout the winter, and in the smaller towns is the only, or the main, organisation doing so. These are sometimes run for the benefit of the club itself, for example, to raise money for new equipment, but more frequently the proceeds go to a “good cause”, such as the hospital or infant welfare centre. The women interested in the football, and particularly the relatives and friends of players, are enthusiastic in helping to run these activities, and when the club itself needs money many organisations are anxious to come to its aid with “functions” and “efforts”.<sup>18</sup>

Dempsey argues that country towns and their football clubs tended to segregate men and women, in ways that were to the advantage of the mostly male members who were involved in running clubs.<sup>19</sup> Women appear to have enjoyed being involved actively in their families’ lives, however, and the sub-committees that ran club canteens and provided catering for functions in the district generated revenue that the club committee was able to spend on paying players in an ‘all out drive for the premiership’.<sup>20</sup> By shouldering of a disproportionate share of domestic duties and child care, wives, mothers and sisters reduced the costs those club members who were involved in committee work.

Paradoxically, country football clubs were also subsidised by the regulations of their main rival for players and resources, the Victorian Football League (VFL). Metropolitan zoning, introduced in 1915, meant that for VFL clubs, the only footballers in Victoria who were free agents were those who lived outside Melbourne. For clubs outside the VFL, *all* players were free agents. A country club with money to spend and with the support of local

business interests that could offer employment or housing could often afford to pay one high quality player, usually a coach, who could stimulate recruiting and develop young players. When Ballarat Imperials won the premiership in 1922, its club president attributed the result to the 'outstanding personality' of its captain-coach, former Richmond player Bernie Herbert.<sup>21</sup> Collingwood lost its captain, Tom Drummond, who was aged only 25, and 22-year old Bill Twomey in 1923 when they took coaching jobs at Benalla and Stawell.<sup>22</sup> Bob McCaskill was aged 29 when he left Richmond in 1925, to lead Sandhurst to nine premierships in fourteen years as a playing, then non-playing coach. During that time, McCaskill was opposed as a coach by ex-VFL players at five of the other seven clubs in the Bendigo Football League.<sup>23</sup>

The VFL's Coulter Law, introduced in 1930 to help stabilise the financial position of League clubs, made it easier for country clubs to recruit VFL players. League clubs were not allowed to pay signing-on fees or other inducements to recruits, and match payments and payments to injured or unemployed players were set at a maximum level. During the 1930s, most VFL clubs paid their players substantially less than the maximum wage and few clubs could afford extra payments to players who were out of a job.<sup>24</sup> This meant that clubs outside the VFL that could afford to pay more than the maximum wage were highly competitive in the labour market for players. For example, in 1935 Eaglehawk recruited Eric Fleming, a former Geelong player who had been coaching in the VFA, by paying him five times more than the £3 per week he might have earned in the VFL.<sup>25</sup>

Not all country clubs could afford to pay such sums. Ex-VFL players rarely took coaching jobs in minor leagues.<sup>26</sup> In some small towns, however, a well-coached team was seen as crucial if the local club was to remain competitive with long-established rivals from larger and wealthier nearby towns.<sup>27</sup> Many of the larger country towns grew strongly after World War II as the price of wool and other commodities rose, and as manufacturing firms sought areas of cheap land outside metropolitan areas. For example, when Bruck Mills opened a new factory at Wangaratta in 1947 around one thousand new jobs were created and the city's population rose from 5,700 in 1945 to 13,800 in 1961.<sup>28</sup> In 1956, the town's two major clubs were both captain-coached by former Collingwood players: Wangaratta by Mac Holten and Wangaratta Rovers by Bob Rose. Holten was only 27 when he left the VFL at the end of 1949; Rose was the same age when he played his last VFL game in 1955. At the time, the VFL's player allowance was set at £5 per match, which was around

70 per cent of the basic wage.<sup>29</sup> Rose was offered £35 per week for 24 weeks, plus housing and assistance with setting up a business.<sup>30</sup> In the late 1950s, ex-VFL players aged in their mid- to late-twenties were coaching at each of the clubs in Ovens and Murray Football League. As Tommy Hafey, who himself left Richmond to take a coaching job at Shepparton recalled, 'All these fellas were young enough to still be playing League football, but they couldn't get up to the country quick enough, because that's where the big money was'.<sup>31</sup>

The golden age of country football reached its peak during the 1950s and 1960s. Crowds of 18-20,000 attended Ovens and Murray League grand finals at Albury during the 1950s. An inter-league match between the Bendigo and Wimmera leagues at Horsham in 1962 attracted 13,000.<sup>32</sup> In Melbourne, jobs for most workers were plentiful, but housing was in short supply, the provision of infrastructure lagged behind population growth, and problems of traffic congestion were becoming increasingly severe. When Carlton's Jim Clark turned his back on VFL football at the age of 26 to become captain-coach of Echuca in 1951, it was 'the prospect of a decent-sized home, a large backyard and a country environment in which he could bring up his kids' that he found most attractive about the job.<sup>33</sup>

## **CHANGING TIMES**

By the early 1960s, all but two VFL clubs – Melbourne and Collingwood – were flouting the Coulter Law by making surreptitious cash payments to prospective recruits from country and interstate clubs. In an attempt to reduce the rising costs of recruiting, in 1967 the VFL divided the country leagues of Victoria and the Riverina into twelve zones, each allocated at random to one League club. Players from other states remained free to choose which VFL club they played for. The Coulter Law was abolished in 1970 and competition between VFL clubs for interstate stars and for players who were out of contract at VFL clubs increased. Player payments increased faster than revenue during the 1970s and this weakened the financial position of nearly every VFL club. By the mid-1980s, legal challenges to transfer rules had reduced restrictions on the movement of players further, and half of the VFL clubs were effectively bankrupt.<sup>34</sup> The League's response was to restructure its competition by admitting new teams from outside Victoria and replacing recruiting zones with a player draft. The draft and a salary cap restricted the ability of

players to move from club to club in search of higher salaries, but the restructured competition, which was renamed the Australian Football League in 1990, became a high-value, national product and revenue from television rights funded substantial increases in players' wages and improvements in their working conditions. Players could now secure their future in a national market, rather than a regional one.

Country communities themselves were being affected by government policies that aimed to deregulate the economy and reduce levels of tariff protection. Capital, labour and information could now move more freely between regions and nations and firms had a greater choice of potentially cost-effective locations. Locations that offered well-developed clusters and economies of agglomeration, and efficient access to external markets, were valued highly by firms. As a result, a growing proportion of new jobs were created in metropolitan areas, especially Sydney and Brisbane. Technological change was also to the disadvantage of most country towns, as it weakened the link between farm production and local employment, and allowed people to drive to shop, obtain services, and consume leisure in larger, more distant towns. The reduced importance that Baby Boomers and subsequent generations placed on civic engagement, and the rise of activities that encouraged civic *disengagement*, such as heavy TV watching and computer use, weakened the sense of place and the level of interaction in social groups in country communities that might have discouraged young people from abandoning declining country towns.<sup>35</sup> Larger, more capital-intensive farms reduced local demand for labour and made it hard for country towns to create jobs for young people. The dense network of small towns that had developed when rural areas were protected by distance was now contracting. In the Mallee and Wimmera, for example, the population of Buloke, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack shires fell by 30 per cent between 1976 and 2000. During the same period, the national population increased by 37 per cent. Most of the population decrease in country areas was the result of out-migration of people in the 0-24 and 55 and over age groups.<sup>36</sup>

Country football clubs were inevitably affected by these changes because they could no longer rely on captive markets and high levels of distance protection. Increased costs of insurance, ground maintenance, coaching accreditation, and compliance with the GST and food handling and alcohol service regulations increased the burden on club finances and volunteers.<sup>37</sup> Clubs located close to the expanding outer fringe of Melbourne, and in many

coastal areas, benefited from growing populations and the number of young people wanting to play football. Poker machines and fully licensed social clubs gave some clubs the revenue to recruit players from other country and suburban leagues, although the possibility that any country club could afford to secure an AFL star at the peak of his career, as Wangaratta Rovers did with Bob Rose, is now remote. The VCFL experimented with a salary cap in an attempt to control the costs of player payments, but this was discontinued in 2005.<sup>38</sup> The standard of play in country football was affected by the Victoria-wide Under-18 competition, which took the most promising young players away from local clubs. Not all of these players returned to their local club, and some gave the game away altogether, if they were not drafted by an AFL club. Country clubs and leagues continued to be subsidised by local councils and the state government, however, and some reaped the benefit of new pavilions, social clubs and ground lighting, such as those at Pakenham and Stawell.<sup>39</sup> At most country grounds glassed viewing areas and social rooms were added to the clubrooms that were built in the 1960s and 1970s. Football clubs have also benefited from the formation of interdependent relationships with netball clubs.

## **SURVEY METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

A questionnaire was developed to gauge the views of the administrators of country clubs on what they regard as the most important measure of “success”. Respondents were asked whether they regard certain criteria as more indicative of success. This question was answered on a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being *not a strong measure of success* to 5 being *a very strong measure of success*. A further question invited respondents to identify and comment on any other factors that they or their committees look for when evaluating their club’s performance.

The questionnaire was mailed to all 464 senior country football clubs affiliated with the VCFL. In all, 175 useable surveys, 38 per cent of those mailed, were returned. Of these, 75 were from major league clubs, which are generally based in large provincial towns, such as the Bendigo Football League, or close to the Melbourne metropolitan area, such as the Mornington Peninsula-Nepean Football League. The other 100 responses were from district clubs, which play in leagues with member clubs based in smaller towns, such as the Ellinbank Football League, or clubs from larger towns that play in minor leagues, such as the Maryborough Castlemaine Football League. Few of the clubs surveyed – only

7 per cent - have been formed in the past two decades. The majority of the clubs - 71 per cent - are over fifty years old and 33 per cent of them were formed over a century ago.

The mean values and standard deviations as well as the total number of respondents are provided in Table 1 below. These show that clubs generally place a higher value on having a large membership, supporter and sponsorship base than they place on winning senior premierships or recording profits. Junior and netball premierships were judged to be less significant as measures of club success.

**Table 1: Mean values and standard deviations for measures of success by all senior clubs**

Success measure	N	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Money in Bank	166	3.9	0.9
Senior Premierships	165	4.0	0.9
Junior Premierships	152	3.5	0.9
Netball Premierships	155	3.4	1.0
Large Membership	166	4.4	0.7
Large Sponsorship	164	4.2	0.8
Large Supporter base	165	4.4	0.8

*Source:* See text

The results varied only slightly between the clubs that play in major leagues and district leagues. The major league clubs regarded sponsorship as slightly more important and junior and netball premierships slightly less important than their district counterparts. The district clubs attached the highest value to having a large supporter base. Given that district clubs might be expected to find it harder than major league clubs to make ends meet, it is somewhat surprising that district clubs place a slightly lower importance on having money in the bank.

**Table 2: Mean values and standard deviations for measures of success by major clubs**

Success measure	N	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Money in Bank	74	4.0	0.8
Senior Premierships	74	4.0	0.9
Junior Premierships	69	3.4	0.9
Netball Premierships	69	3.3	1.1
Large Membership	74	4.4	0.7
Large Sponsorship	74	4.4	0.8
Large Supporter base	74	4.3	0.8

*Source:* See text

**Table 3: Mean values and standard deviations for measures of success by district clubs**

Success measure	N	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Money in Bank	92	3.8	0.9
Senior Premierships	91	4.0	0.9
Junior Premierships	83	3.5	0.9
Netball Premierships	86	3.5	0.9
Large Membership	92	4.4	0.7
Large Sponsorship	90	4.1	0.9
Large Supporter base	91	4.5	0.7

*Source:* See text

The survey results would seem to indicate that clubs are responding to the more competitive, less protected and subsidised environment that they now face by attempting to secure and enhance their revenue streams. Club membership, gate receipts and sponsorship are regarded by country clubs at all levels as being the most important measures of success. This does not mean that the traditional role of country football clubs as significant places and contributors to social capital has been abandoned, however. Healthy finances and a strong sense of community are not mutually exclusive. Many of the respondents stressed the importance of their club as a contributor to the welfare of their community. 'The football club in a small community becomes the focus of the town', wrote one club secretary. 'Our aim is to provide the best possible service in this area and to provide an opportunity for our juniors and seniors to participate in a sport in their own community'. 'Our reputation and standing in the community as a responsible organisation providing a fit and healthy environment for the young people of the community by providing football and netball' was identified as another key measure of success. 'Providing sport and recreation, plus community involvement for district' was another response. 'Club becomes the meeting place for residents. Very important in small rural areas with limited town business'. For another club, success was indicated by 'general community involvement, providing good culture and environment for all types of community to be part of. Giving community a quality recreational and social outlet'.

Relatively fewer respondents identified specifically financial measures of success, such as 'bar and gaming turnover, gate receipts, membership, member/supporter attendance at games and functions'. One club committee declared that it would consider itself to be successful if each season it could 'maintain a profitable operation to provide quality facilities for player numbers and visitors and also ensure that player, members and sponsors have confidence in the management of the club', but such views were rare.

Some respondents noted the complementary nature of community strength and financial success. Situations of 'harmony within the club, active committee, social functions being well supported' and 'happy members who are prepared to give up their time to help out the club' are conducive to both active community engagement and financial stability. Clubs that are inclusive, responsible members of communities are also likely to attract the supporter and playing base needed to field teams and pay the bills. Our survey indicates that clubs value these characteristics more than they do winning senior premierships or making profits. 'We generally aim for a break even scenario in regards to finances', wrote one respondent. As another club secretary put it, success was measured by a club being 'successful financially, player numbers (able to fill all sides) and ground performance (all sides win games) club is well recognised and run (club is social centre of town)'.

## **CONCLUSION**

Country football clubs have traditionally provided opportunities for people to form close associations with particular places and to express a sense of unity with, and enthusiasm for, their local community. A strong sense of allegiance to local football clubs in rural communities has been the result of the low cost of, and lack of social barriers to, participation in the sport. Communities that valued their local football grounds have been prepared to support football clubs through subsidies and volunteer work. This loyalty to places could be transported as people moved to new locations, and new football clubs were created as towns emerged to support new areas of settlement. A dense network of country towns, established by simple transport and communications technologies supported by a high level of distance protection, supported a similarly dense network of football clubs. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, country football clubs have become less able to tap the captive markets that they once took for granted. Technological change has individualised the activities that people once consumed in public places. As the network of country towns has become rationalised, the number of country football clubs in operation has been reduced.

As survey of the administrators of country football clubs suggests that clubs have responded to these changes by attempting to strengthen their links with local communities and preserving their playing and social facilities as inclusive places where families can feel welcome and safe. Local football grounds remain the most intensively used areas of public

space and community facilities in country towns. Providing adequate facilities for netball teams and building family-friendly social rooms are examples of activities that help football clubs retain the playing members, supporters and sponsors they need to survive and prosper. Such activities are indicators of success that most country clubs regard as more important than winning senior football premierships or building their bank balance.

## ENDNOTES

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