Expanding social inclusion in community sports organizations: evidence from rural Australian Football clubs

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Abstract
Australian Football clubs have traditionally been seen as contributing social benefits to the rural communities in which they are embedded. Declining numbers of participants, both players and volunteers, suggest that this role may not be as strong today. Critical explorations of the extent to which football has driven social inclusion and exclusion in such environments emphasise a historic 'masculine' culture of drinking and violence that segregates and marginalises women and children. Less is known about the contemporary strategic efforts of clubs to use social capital to support their activities, and whether the resources they generate have positive impacts on social inclusion in the wider community. We use evidence from the Parliament of Victoria’s Inquiry into Country Football (2004) to explore the current focus of rural Australian Football clubs regarding social inclusion, in the light of changes occurring in society in general and in rural towns in particular in the 21st century.

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Introduction

Australia’s indigenous code of football – commonly known as Australian Football or ‘Aussie Rules’ – is one of the world’s oldest organized sports. It is a fast-moving sport, played between teams of 18 players on large arenas that are used in the summer for cricket. After its rules were codified in 1859 by members of the Melbourne Cricket Club, the game spread throughout Victoria, the Riverina region of southern New South Wales and to South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. Amateur football clubs were formed in towns throughout the pastoral, agricultural and mining regions, where more than 60 per cent of Australians lived in 1911 (Vamplew, 1987). These clubs were the product of an era where people in small towns consumed leisure in nearby public places, with the entertainment “likely to be supplied by enthusiastic local amateurs” (Putnam, 2000: 216). In a largely secular society, sports clubs complemented churches and other community groups and were the focus of community life. They assisted in the formation of social networks that influenced information flows and were inclusive of new arrivals and minority groups. At the elite level today, the Australian Football League (AFL) is the largest and most popular professional sports competition in Australia (Stewart, 2007). Most AFL clubs began as amateur clubs with strong links to the urban communities that they were located in, but over the last 150 years have evolved into commercial entities that operate in national rather than regional markets. By contrast, rural football clubs are voluntary organizations that continue to rely on local participation and support.

The notable geographical feature of Melbourne’s hinterland is the Great Dividing Range, part of a mountain range that extends over 2,000 miles from northeast Queensland to western Victoria. South of the Divide, the once heavily-timbered Gippsland region extending east of Melbourne is productive dairying and agricultural country. The port city of Geelong, approximately 40 miles southwest of Melbourne, serves a rich pastoral and dairying area
known as the Western District that extends to the South Australian border. Victoria’s goldfields are scattered throughout the Great Dividing Range, with the former boomtowns of Ballarat and Bendigo today each having around 100,000 inhabitants. To the north, pastoral estates, wheat-sheep farms and areas of small-scale irrigated agriculture were established on the drier plains of the Murray Darling Basin from the 1870s onwards. As early twentieth-century farmers could only travel short distances by horse and cart, a dense network of small towns was created to meet the simple, frequently occurring service and supply needs of rural producers. Outside Melbourne and the major provincial cities, most Victorian towns generally had no more than around a thousand inhabitants. Virtually every small town fielded a football club, while larger towns supported several, with these being organised into local leagues. Around a thousand football clubs were operating in country Victoria in the 1930s (Sandercock & Turner, 1981).

During the latter twentieth century, the structure of rural Australia changed. In regions where a high level of dependence on resource-based economic activity persisted, vulnerability to exogenous changes was maintained by income inequalities and a lack of transferrable skills (Tonts, Plummer & Lawrie, 2012). Losses in rural employment due to technological change, rising costs of farming and increases in the size and capital-intensity of farms reduced job opportunities in the towns that serviced rural areas (Stayner, 2005). Financial problems associated with narrow margins on agricultural output and shocks such as drought and flood, uncertainty over water regulations and the ageing and shrinking of farm populations and rural communities created a range of stressors. Sunk, immobile and fixed capital costs in farming reduced the mobility of farming families. From the mid-1970s, state support structures and services to rural communities gave way to a neoliberal policy focus on free markets, ‘user pays’ and ‘self-help’ in the allocation of resources and the relocation of public infrastructure such as sporting facilities away from smaller communities to larger
population centres (Gray & Lawrence, 2001). By 2011, almost 90 per cent of Australians lived where job opportunities and amenities were concentrated: in the capital cities, coastal regions, or within convenient driving distance of provincial cities. Outside these regions, the New South Wales, Victorian and South Australian population grew negatively between 2001 and 2011, reflecting the continuing demographic decline of extensive wheat-sheep farming in those states (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). This population decline was reflected in a significant reduction in the number of towns that could support a football team, with the number of clubs falling to 464 by the early twenty-first century (Frost & Halabi, 2008).

Many of Australia’s rural communities are associated with socio-economic disadvantage. On average, the physical and emotional health of rural Australians is below that of their metropolitan counterparts. Suicide is the leading cause of death for rural men aged 15-29, with rates double those of urban Australians (Wainer & Chesters, 2008; Judd, Cooper, Fraser & Davis, 2006). When poverty, long-term unemployment, incomplete education, a reliance on disability and sickness support, risky and antisocial behaviour, teenage pregnancy and similar problems become entrenched, a disabling social climate may develop, the effects of which exceed the sum of individual disadvantage within the community (Vinson, 2007). Disadvantageous conditions are interrelated – for example, alcohol abuse may trigger domestic violence – and may be passed from one generation to the next. The links between such problems and the disproportionate risk that some groups face of withdrawing from society due to their effects are encompassed by the broad term of social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). The ill-effects of social exclusion may be reduced when residents belong to and interact within local groups and organisations. A key outcome of such activity may be the development of collective efficacy – a sense of confidence that a diverse group is capable of working together to solve specific problems (Sampson, Morenoff & Earls, 1999; Gibson, 1999; Sampson, 2006; Tasa, Taggar & Seijs, 2007). Such
Social inclusion in community sport

communities may mobilise human potential by promoting social inclusion – the breaking down of the barriers that prevent disadvantaged people from accessing jobs, schooling and health services (Atkinson, Marlier, & Nolan, 2004; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Sport is widely regarded as a core component of inclusion in Australian communities through its ability to provide “an excellent ‘hook’ for engaging people who may be suffering from disadvantage and…a supportive environment to encourage and assist those individuals in their social development, learning and in making a connection through related programs and services” (Skinner, Zakus & Cowell, 2008: 271).

The concepts of community capacity and resilience relate to the development of the skills and levels of engagement that are needed for people to take responsibility for identifying and meeting their own needs (Stone, 2001; Defilippis, Fisher & Shragge, 2006). Resilient communities are able to draw on stocks of social capital – the social relationships and their associated norms of trust and reciprocity that facilitate collective action – in making positive adaptations to adversity, through which people are able to ‘get by’ in the face of stressful circumstances. Social capital may be defined as common resources that are used by group members to facilitate and promote collective action for their mutual benefit (Krishna, 2004). Groups that operate on the basis of exclusivity use social capital to reinforce existing social and ethnic divisions. This ‘dark side’ of social capital may reinforce malignant behaviour and benefit those who ‘bond’ in groups to the detriment of society (Putnam, 2000; Numerato & Baglioni, 2012). ‘Bridging’ social capital that encourages broad, inclusive interaction is innate within small rural towns, due to high levels of trust and participation within culturally and socially homogenous communities (Ville, 2005; Onyx & Bullen, 2000). A ‘sense of place’ created in familiar settings may build community identity and make towns feel secure to their residents (Tuan, 1977; Stedman, 2003; Winterton & Warburton, 2012). Organisations and facilities such as sporting groups, clubs and schools that rely on volunteer
labour for working bees, canteen duties and other activities provide important social roles and forums (Maybery, Pope, Hodgins, Hitchenor & Shepherd, 2009). The social capital that is embedded in these normative structures may be converted into economic assets that expand social inclusion by expediting information flows and reducing transactions costs (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Winter, 2000). The denser a social network is in terms of the number of participants and the number of repeated connections between them, the more firmly norms of trust and reciprocity will be held (Granovetter, 2005). Within communities, people may act as natural agents of change by pursuing strategies, consciously or unconsciously, which establish or reproduce social exchanges. Sustaining connectedness is an independent variable that generates resources and competencies and adds value to community life through positive effects on social inclusion (Stone, 2001; Landau, 2007).

In this article we explore the ways in which rural football clubs are evolving their on-field and off-field practices to create social benefits by responding to the changing nature of the communities in which they are located. In particular we examine the efforts of football clubs to be inclusive and whether these have changed over time. To consider how the historic roles of football clubs, combined with social and economic changes that impact on rural Australian communities affect the delivery of social inclusion strategies by clubs today, we pose two research questions:

1. Do contemporary rural football clubs continue to facilitate social inclusion in rural communities and if so, how?

2. Are the traditional structures of football continuing to make a material contribution to social inclusion within rural communities and if so, how?
In the following section we review the literature that considers the means by which sports clubs might strengthen community capacity and resilience through the creation of social capital. In section 3 we review the history of Australian rural football clubs and the extent to which they have been socially inclusive in the past. We consider the current social changes impacting on rural communities and thus question whether and how football clubs may be facilitating social inclusion within today’s rural communities. In section 4, we utilise the extensive body of submissions to the Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into Country Football (Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee, 2004) (hereafter referred to as ‘The Inquiry’) to consider these questions and find that in order to maintain their place as a key component of their communities, rural football clubs are pursuing strategies based on broadening their appeal to women and families. We also find that some of the more traditional aspects of the game, particularly the times and locations of training (practice sessions), matches and after match ‘get togethers’ continue to have significant social benefits, particularly for rural men, that are likely to expand social inclusion.

2. Literature review

In times of adversity, a range of personal, social and contextual variables may assist people in rural communities by moderating the relationship between stress and adaptation. Farm life intimately connects workplace and residence and issues of farm work, income and expenditure may destabilise family life (Gray & Lawrence, 2001). The characteristics of rural communities – small and slow growing (if at all) populations and geographical isolation – are conducive to frequent interaction (Dempsey, 1990). Communities that are inclusive and ‘family-friendly’ may reduce conflict through social networks and norms of formal and informal assistance that improve productivity and well-being by helping parents to maintain healthy family lives while also meeting work demands (Mannon & Brooks, 2006). Dense and
Social inclusion in community sport

cohesive social networks sustain the flow and quality of information and ideas through ‘weak ties’ that link large numbers of people who are acquaintances, rather than close friends (Granovetter, 2005). These networks draw on past contacts and behaviours amongst their members to build trust, improve the flow and quality of information and ideas, and socially sanction ‘free-riders’ who consume resources without sharing in the costs of producing them (Berry & Rodgers, 2003; Granovetter, 2005).

A recent study of regional New South Wales found that residents of small towns rated shared values and trust built through ties associated with community centres such as sports clubs and churches as the most important source of community resilience (Maybery et al., 2009). Regaining a sense of connectedness and re-establishing routines are key themes in disaster recovery (Landau, 2007). In semi-structured interviews with 80 South Australian farming families, Greenhill, King, Lane & MacDougall (2009) found that community participation was an asset that helped people to ‘get by’ in the face of stress. Civic engagement provides avenues for farmers to listen to what other farmers were doing and for farm women to develop their own interests and strategies for self-care. Maintaining a range of farm and non-farm ties in the ‘outside world’ helps people to ‘look out’ for each other. People who perform valued roles as community leaders and volunteers benefited from improved self-esteem by seeing themselves as ‘more than farmers’. Taking ‘time out’ to get off the property and disengage mentally from it is identified as a key strength that allows farmers to make effective judgements for themselves, their families and their communities.

The results of a survey of general medical practitioners in eastern Victoria showed a link between ties to inclusive communities and the ability of rural people to live active, productive lives and recover from illness (Wainer & Chesters, 2008). In a community where people can put a name to a face people are likely to feel accepted and have an identity, whether as a farmer or as a doctor, teacher, police officer, or local club president. “There is
Social inclusion in community sport

more work to be done in a rural community than there are workers”, observed one doctor, “so everyone can make a contribution if they want to” (quoted by Wainer & Chesters, 2008: 145). Working to a common goal within voluntary organizations may produce social capital effects through the creation of communicative structures and feelings of belonging, empowerment, trust and reciprocity (Seippel, 2006).

Like other community groups and associations, local sports organizations mobilise social capital within their memberships and wider community to support their functions and activities (Doherty & Misener, 2008). Hoye & Nicholson (2012) found that Australian country horse racing clubs develop social capital by providing opportunities for community members to gather at race meetings and for racing industry workers to meet when horses are being trained or exercised. Clubs also generate community interaction by hiring out function rooms for weddings or other gathering and donating the use of infrastructure for community events. Country racing clubs that recognised the value in building and extending social networks were able to establish goodwill in the community and benefit from reciprocity with local service clubs and charities. Community development strategies can assist clubs to develop collective efficacy through partnerships that allow pooling of resources and political lobbying (Frisby & Millar, 2002).

The effects of physical activity and pride in the local community on levels of subjective well-being are contingent on people being able to afford to use or travel to recreation facilities (Huang & Humphreys, 2011; Mowbray, Woolley, Grogan-Kaylor, Gant, Gilster & Shanks, 2007; Macintyre, Ellaway & Cummins, 2002). Several studies have found that rates of volunteering and participation in sport are positively correlated with incomes and personal investment in human capital (Glaeser, Laibson & Sacerdote, 2002). However, sport may not be a valued activity amongst low-income groups and immigrant and indigenous groups may experience cultural barriers to participation. In diverse communities, sports clubs
may increase opportunities for intercultural understanding and reduced racism, but only if appropriate mechanisms are in place to prevent bullying and further exclusion (Frisby, 2011). Power imbalances may result if some people are unable to take advantage of sporting involvement and the costs and benefits of participating are shared disproportionately amongst the community (Entwistle, Bristow, Hines, Donaldson & Martin, 2007). Community organisations are not uniform bodies – established ones may be closed to new ways of doing things and norms and networks may ‘bond’ people into exclusionary and divisive small social groups – and the relationship between them and the wider community is never static. People may find themselves socially excluded from such groups if they wish to participate but are unable to do so due to prolonged social isolation and deprivation (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud, 1999).

3. Rural football clubs and social inclusion

This section provides a brief history of the role of rural football clubs in facilitating social inclusion in Australian communities. By the mid-1870s, legislation in Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales allowed settlers to purchase up to one square mile (640 acres/ 259 hectares) of Crown Land on credit to establish farms. The new settlers had, or would eventually have large families and took up what by modern standards were very small farms – most wheat-sheep farms today are more than twice that size (Frost, 2008). Members of new communities established churches, schools, agricultural societies, mechanics institutes, social groups, town bands and sporting clubs. Although an expanding railway network allowed football 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 and supporters from the surrounding community. Clubs usually had no trouble finding an adequate supply of local players. 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 Saturday half-holidays and ended in time for dairy farmers to return home for the evening milking.

Australian Football is an easy game to play because equipment costs are low and the rules are simple. When fifty men assembled in a paddock after the first meeting of the Mildura Football Club in 1888 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’. (Anon, 1888: 1)

When country football clubs were formed, they needed only basic facilities. 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. When the facilities at grounds used by football clubs were improved, it was often as a result of work with other organizations to ensure reciprocal benefits for multiple groups within a community. For example, Maryborough Football Club used an oval that was secured and laid out by the town’s Highland Society and Agricultural Society, with a 600-seat grandstand, built by the local council in 1895 (Osborne, 1995). The many football clubs that were based at showgrounds benefited when the local agricultural society improved facilities for spectators. In return, football clubs assisted their landlords through usage fees and maintenance of the grounds.
With only a few exceptions at the elite level, Australian Football clubs have been ‘owned’ by members. Any club supporter can become a member by paying an annual subscription fee, which provides free entry to games and lapses at the end of each season. For rural football clubs in particular, memberships were affordable for most workers. Camperdown Football Club’s annual fees in 1920 were five shillings for men – a mere 6 per cent of the weekly Basic Wage, Australia’s centrally determined minimum wage for unskilled workers – and half that for women (Anon., 1920; Vamplew, 1987: 156). The crowds attending matches were a spectrum of rural society. When Castlemaine hosted South Bendigo in 1925, a reporter noted that “the grandstand filled with the town’s prominent families, while around the boundary children snapped up good viewing spots, and the women, sporting their team’s black and white colours in ribbons and rosettes, were offered prime positions behind the fence” (quoted by Lewis, Jefferies & Holt, 2009: 29). The close association between the owners of clubs and the communities within which clubs are located and the ease which clubs could be established limited the size of markets and opportunities for clubs to make high levels of profit. Although businesspeople, professionals and other middle-class interests tended to dominate the running of clubs, few towns were large enough to support institutions that could operate without working-class players and volunteers.

A survey of Victorian country towns in the 1940s found that local football “creates what is perhaps the strongest common interest running through the town and its district” (McIntyre & McIntyre, 1944: 210). Aided by external subsidies and low cost structures, community-owned football clubs had by that time become firmly established as institutions that defined the identity of small towns. The positive outcomes of drawing people from diverse backgrounds with individual patterns of participation into networks of reciprocal social relations sustained a tradition of the local football ground as a community hub. This ‘locked in’ Saturday afternoons at the football in a path-dependent way, making it difficult
Social inclusion in community sport

for other sports and pastimes to compete and become widely popular (Rast, 2012). Activities based around sport provided settings for single men and women to meet (Hunter, 2004). Country football clubs were inclusive places that encouraged people to socialise away from their homes, which in the 1940s typically had poor kitchen facilities and hot water services, unreliable telephones and, in one in every two case, no mains electricity (Holt, 1947; Davison, 2003). The pursuit of common goals in inclusive places built bridging networks between people and groups that might otherwise have moved in different circles:

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’ (McIntyre & McIntyre, 1944: 216).

Football was a Saturday outing that involved whole families – with fathers and sons playing and drinking afterwards, fathers working on the committee and mothers and daughters running the club canteen and working on sub-committees that provided catering for functions. These roles were segregated according to the social standards of the time, with women shouldering of a disproportionate share of fundraising, preparing and cooking food, cleaning, domestic duties and child care. For Dempsey (1990), this placed women in a subordinate position, but Hunter (2004) sees the relationship in terms of men and women
occupying different niches within social activities. Men occupied positions of status in football clubs, but “women kept the structure in working order” (Senyard, 1995: 87).

Although country towns prospered in the 1950s due to booming wool and wheat prices, technological and global forces were already at work that would weaken the link between farm output and economic activity in local communities. These towns were the product of an era when farm labour requirements and land transport costs were high. Now, cars, trucks and improved roads gave consumers greater choice as to where they could shop, obtain healthcare and other services, and spend their leisure time. Rural restructuring presented a crisis which had the potential to disrupt the path-dependent role of local football clubs in every small town, as new opportunities for change and innovation became available (Rast, 2012). The slower growth of country towns and the consequent decrease in the number of volunteers and the ease of finding sponsorship, combined with the inflation of the 1970s, disrupted the traditional low cost structure of local football clubs. During the 1990s, a winding back of regulations on gambling increased the number of electronic gaming machines (poker machines) in rural communities, which impacted on traditional methods of fundraising by community groups (Marshall, 1998). Increased costs of insurance, ground maintenance, coaching accreditation, and compliance with the Goods and Services Tax and food handling and alcohol services regulations increased the burden on club finances and volunteers and some rural clubs themselves installed poker machines to make ends meet (Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee, 2004). The changing nature of rural employment also impacted on the number of local residents available to play or volunteer for the clubs, as greater numbers were employed as shift workers in manufacturing and retail firms that required their employees to undertake evening and weekend work as part of their normal rosters. Women in rural communities increasingly took paid employment, reflecting both a general trend in Australian society for women to be economically self-
sufficient and to hold prominent employment positions within their communities, and a rural trend for women to ‘have to work’ in order to ‘make ends meet’ within their households.

Geographers who have considered the impact of these changes on community cohesion have focussed on tensions between social groups that are inherent in volunteer sports clubs. Clubs rely on volunteers and need large numbers of players to field teams and so are likely to welcome newcomers. This creates networks that bridge social barriers and opens opportunities for participation by groups other than traditional white men, such as Aboriginals and immigrants (Tonts, 2005). But the idyll of harmonious rural communities overlooks a ‘darker side’ where local clubs fracture along status and gender lines due to a prevailing middle-class, white, masculine hegemony which acts to subordinate women and their activities and promote the tough, independent male who drinks beer and accepts violence (Dempsey, 1992). The use of sports facilities and interpretation of community in small towns is contested, with unequal power relations, income inequality and social exclusion used to ignore the perspectives of marginalised ‘others’ (Tonts & Atherley, 2010).

As economic activity – workers and capital – moved from small towns to larger ones, local social organization displayed more continuity, with place identity and primary social contact patterns being subject to greater inertia (Smailes, 1995). Football clubs reacted to rural restructuring by reorganizing the geography of the sport, with small clubs folding and those in larger towns merging with former rivals from neighbouring towns (Tonts & Atherley, 2005). Between 1990 and 2003, 66 Victorian clubs merged and a further 36 shut down altogether (Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee, 2004: 76).

In this geography literature, changes in club strategies are viewed from the perspective of how they affect the social geography of the community, as spatial adaptation allowed members of surviving clubs to maintain their masculine hegemony though personal interactions in familiar place settings (Atherley, 2006; Smailes, 2000). Mergers created
opportunities for club members to develop ties with people in other towns, but reproduced existing social inequalities and stereotypes (Spaaïj, 2009). The focus in these studies is on the response of clubs to external challenges, drawn on case studies of regions in the Western Australian wheat belt where the population of all towns is numbered in the hundreds and has declined from the 1990s (Tonts, 2005; Atherley, 2006). Little attention has been paid to how clubs may have reorganised themselves internally in a proactive way, drawing on the assets of family participation – a latent resource that had been long present at football grounds, but in the background – or whether attempts to do so varied across regions where there was a greater diversity of town size.

4. Method

To explore how rural football clubs might be facilitating social inclusion in their contemporary communities, and whether these have changed over time, we utilised the extensive body of evidence presented to the Parliament of Victoria Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee’s 2004 Inquiry into Country Football. The Terms of Reference of this Inquiry required the Committee to examine the “impact on life in rural and regional Victoria of Australian Rules Football”. Submissions were called for from state and local government agencies, individuals, and clubs affiliated with the Victorian Country Football League (VCFL), with 67 written submissions being received. Public hearings were then held across rural and regional Victoria with representatives of the Victorian Country Football League, the regional football leagues, individual football and netball clubs, umpires, area and regional managers, local government sport and recreation officers, regional sporting assemblies, and other peak sporting bodies and clubs with 160 witnesses giving evidence. Respondents were invited to make comment on the role and impact of football clubs in rural communities, factors affecting the operation and viability of clubs and actions that peak
sporting bodies could take to support country football clubs. The majority of the evidence presented to the Inquiry has been made available in electronic form by the Victorian Parliament at its website (http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/rrc/inquiries/inquiry/110). The electronic copies of 42 of the 67 submissions and the complete typed transcripts of all 160 of the individual witnesses who presented evidence at the regional hearings that are available on the website form the basis of the evidence considered in this article. References to the submissions and hearings are given in square brackets, and such documents can be located at the Inquiry’s website above.

The content of each of the submissions and the transcripts of evidence were read by the authors to identify the material that related to the focus of this study. This material was then coded into themes or nodes that reflected the groups with whom the clubs were either deliberately or incidentally fostering social relationships within their local communities. Themes were identified based on “recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher[s] see as relevant to the research question” (King & Horrocks, 2010: 150). Examples of themes included enabling participation by players, involving women, involving families, and engaging/supporting volunteers, as well as those addressing more general engagement with the local community such as supporting mental health, providing economic benefits to local businesses, and supporting the community more generally. The material coded to each theme was then re-read and further analysed to determine the nature of the interaction sought by clubs with the particular community group and how the clubs were attempting to integrate (or not integrate) members of that group within the environment of the clubs. The content was coded using NVivo. The most significant themes, in terms of both the frequency of appearance and the emphasis given to the themes in the documents, are presented in the next section.
A potential limitation of the data source for this study is the tendency for many of the submissions to be biased due to an underlying passion for rural football. This is moderated by two factors. First, the contributors included not only representatives of football clubs and club supporters, but also representatives of other sporting clubs, many of which were in direct competition with the football clubs for members, players and community resources with the football clubs, and ‘independent’ bodies such as local governments. Second, the Committee Members who conducted the public hearings challenged those presenting evidence to critically evaluate and justify their claims regarding the benefits of local football clubs with specific examples. This ensured that the evidence provided objective insights into how clubs may or may not be supporting their local communities.

5. Results and discussion

Any club will do

The Inquiry reinforced the contemporary significance of the place of football as a core focus of life within many small rural communities of Victoria, albeit at the same time noting its lesser, although still significant, influence where there were competing alternative community activities available for residents. Evidence did emerge that clubs continue to proactively contribute both directly and indirectly to building or maintaining important relationships within their communities. In the majority of submissions and evidence, claims were made about the significance of football and clubs to local communities. While this was to be expected, given the nature of the people most likely to respond to this Inquiry, most provided little evidence to back up their often quite passionate claims. There was also limited evidence that football clubs, in the manner of a service organization such as Red Cross or the Country Fire Association, provide services or social support to people who are not directly involved in club activities. Rather, their focus appears to be on providing opportunities for
Social inclusion in community sport

people to engage in sporting, administrative, or social activities within the auspices of the football club itself. Other locally-based sporting clubs, community organisations (such as Landcare) and secular service groups (such as Lions Clubs) were mentioned as drivers of social cohesion in rural communities.

Football Clubs are not…critical to the identity and health of a community - they are only one element of it. [Warrnambool] Council has approximately three hundred entries on its clubs and organisations database, and most of them are sport and recreation clubs. They provide a range of sporting and recreational opportunities for Warrnambool residents, and all contribute to the social capital and wellbeing of the community [Warrnambool City Council submission].

The importance of football clubs to community strengthening appears to be indirectly linked to town size and the range of alternative activities available. In the Glenelg Shire Council submission it was noted that when Portland Football Netball Club went through a barren period on the field the town population (10,000 in 2001) “virtually ignored the club and found other interests”. Nearby smaller township clubs such as Casterton (population 1700) and Heywood (population 1200) “enjoy community support no matter how the team performs on the field”. Tyrendarra, a minor league team, is based in a farming area of a couple of hundred inhabitants, where a close-knit community revolves around the recreation reserve and its football, netball, tennis and cricket activities. In small towns, the football club is often the primary, or in a few cases the only, secular community organization and is important to the social wellbeing of the local community. The influence of such clubs on their communities extends beyond the sport itself, as clubrooms and ground facilities often provide the largest or only meeting
point for civic, emergency or social purposes. The wider significance of football clubs to small communities is most keenly evident where the club had ‘folded’ or been amalgamated with the club of another town:

When you have little communities fighting to keep a football team on the ground…they are doing it because they want to keep their little community. They have lost their schools; they have lost their post offices; they have lost their little corner shops. The only thing holding the community together is their football and netball on a Saturday during the winter and perhaps their tennis or cricket in the summer [D Trickey, Colac & District Football Netball League 09-03-04].

More than a ‘men’s club’ - including women, families and youth

Any role that sport plays in building social capital and promoting social inclusion depends on opportunities being available for people to participate in activities or assist in voluntary roles (Atherley, 2006; Donnelly & Coakley, 2002). Historically, while the structure of football clubs facilitated access for a broad socio-economic cross section of the community, the aim of clubs was to win games. Teams of athletic young men were selected by committees that were largely made up of former players. The atmosphere within the football clubs reflected the stereotypical Australian masculine culture of drinking. The Director of a large regional club noted that when he came to the club two decades ago, it was “very much a men’s club, and alcohol was the top end of it; there was football first and then alcohol” [P Doig, Swan Hill Football-Netball Club, 24-03-04]. The Inquiry revealed that clubs are now more likely to take a broader view of their activities by providing a welcoming environment for women, families and young people. Some aspects of these changes have been driven by external factors, but many have been the result of proactive community
building strategies by the clubs that have identified and responded to the changing social needs of their communities.

While women are still a minority in football club management, the number of women on football club committees is growing. In recent years, state football and netball associations have encouraged the formal merger of local football and netball clubs to form ‘Football and Netball Clubs’ (FNCs). At the time of the Inquiry, nearly all football leagues had both football and netball components and were now known as ‘Football Netball Leagues’. A major requirement for clubs to be affiliated with Football Netball Leagues is to have co-located football and netball facilities. The Bendigo Football League – one of the strongest in country Victoria – began encouraging its clubs to enter teams in a netball competition in 1991 “to cater to the girlfriends, wives, sisters and mothers of players; it was hoped that offering a sport for women would help bring numbers back to the football and re-establish local clubs as a focus for family sport and social activities” (Lewis, Jefferies & Holt, 2009: 129). While the Inquiry did not delve into the processes by which the mergers had occurred, many submissions reported that the footballers saw considerable benefits from the mergers in terms of greater numbers of players, volunteers, paying spectators and participants in social events. The merger with netball clubs, while driven by various pressures, has contributed to the building of potential for social inclusion. Prior to formal mergers, most football and netball associations coordinated their game schedules so mum, dad and kids all played in the same general location on the same day, although not necessarily at the same venues. The formal mergers appear to be driving some additional social benefits, formalising, in many cases, a greater role for women in the management and organisation of the football clubs. A survey conducted by Netball Victoria in 2001 revealed that while women were still a minority on FNC committees and some committees still treated women as less than full participants in decision making, a greater proportion of clubs saw women as equal contributors to club
Social inclusion in community sport

management. Forty-five per cent of FNCs had joint football/netball committees, with a further 40 per cent having ‘netball representatives’ on the football club committee. While 55 per cent of netball respondents felt that decisions regarding funding distribution were made by jointly by all committee members, 35 per cent reported that such decisions were still made entirely by the Football Club committee. However, three out of four survey respondents, and a large number of those giving evidence at the Inquiry, thought that the needs of netballers were given the same priority as those of footballers.

It was also evident from the Inquiry that clubs see family participation in FNCs as a way of bringing family members together, in the face of the decline of the nuclear family and the demands of shift work. Clubs spoke of the changes they had made to their social amenities and functions to create a safer and more inclusive environment for women and children:

The football and netball club work in conjunction to ensure that they maintain a family-orientated atmosphere. The clubs share a social room and host functions together. The social rooms are smoke free with a sit down and kids play area. The clubs also provide a family day where families can enjoy a day at the beach or a picnic in the park [T Hinton, Orbost FNC, in the Netball Victoria submission].

Clubs also reported a focus on controlling alcohol consumption and associated undesirable behaviours within their facilities in order to “promot[e] a family friendly environment within a club, rather than the boys-only booze bar picture” of previous decades [P Doig, Swan Hill Football Netball Club, 24-03-04]. Good Sports, an initiative of the Australia Drug Foundation has since 2000 set three levels of accreditation criteria that define alcohol management standards for sports clubs that serve and consume alcohol. These require clubs to have all bar
staff complete Responsible Service of Alcohol courses, not host social functions that encourage drinking or offer free drinks and to introduce safe transport policies, such as free soft drinks for designated non-drinking drivers. Accreditation brings no direct financial benefit to clubs, but does generate desirable outcomes such as reduced rates of drink-driving and increased revenue from family-friendly social functions (Rowland, Toumbourou & Allen, 2012). Victoria’s Tobacco ( Amendment) Act of 2000 banned smoking inside club and social rooms and gave clubs the option of declaring outdoor spaces smoke free. This protected people who were vulnerable to second-hand smoke and helped offer positive role models for young people.

While the Inquiry heard many complaints about the declining number of senior football players, many clubs presented evidence that they had experienced significant growth in the number of younger players. Data from the VCFL showed a 73 per cent rise in the number of players aged 5-12 years between 1990 and 2002, slower growth of players aged 12-15 and a slight reduction in the number of adult participants. In regions where the population had grown, clubs reported not having enough places available in their under-18 squads for all the boys who want to play [see for example, N Whitley, Geelong & District Football League 09-03-04]. This growth in participation had occurred despite several reports that parents are reluctant to enrol their children in ‘dangerous’ contact sports, such as football and do not have the time or interest to take their children to sporting activities. Club strategies to engage young children and their families with football in general have been delivered chiefly through the promotion of Auskick, a national junior football coaching program that began in 1998. The program is supported and marketed by the AFL – current players attend clinics regularly and an Auskick participant has opportunities to play display matches at half-time during AFL games – but relies on local clubs to liaise with schools and parents and provide administrative and coaching volunteers. Twice-weekly clinics introduce
Social inclusion in community sport

basic football skills to children who may not have been taught to play the game by their fathers and older brothers.

Clubs also recognised that some parents themselves may be disinterested in football or are reluctant to enter an unfamiliar club environment. Some clubs provided services such as transporting young players to games that would normally be the job of parents:

We have had to establish reasons for parents to bring their children to our club. We have had to establish a Thursday-night-type of environment so that the kids are fed and not late home for tea with mum saying, “Where are they, Dad?” Dad also has a pleasant environment to stand around and have a bit of a chat with a few blokes. We have established a bus service, which we pay for, so that the kids can be ferried to games as far away as Ararat or Stawell, and then brought home. They are looked after, chaperoned and then dropped off at the ground here so that their parents can pick them up again. It does not actually establish them as volunteers or active participants in our club, but it gives them an outlet and lets the kid play footy [B Hartigan, Horsham Football & Netball Club 11-03-04].

Clubs also found it important to reach out to actively support the involvement of low socioeconomic status families in ethnically diverse communities. In Robinvale, a low socioeconomic status community:

Our underage and juniors players are often seen, we believe — and it is the same right throughout the whole state for all sports — as babysitting services. Parents will just drop off kids to play footy, or else if it is a home game the kids will walk to footy. The volunteers, coaches and the other parents will look after them for the day. Often underprivileged kids are supplied with their uniform, a pair of footy boots or
whatever. They do not have their own but they want to play, so the club helps out in that regard [G Shawcross, Robinvale Football & Netball Club 24-03-04].

Clubs were generally conscious that the cost of football, while low compared to other sports and activities in rural towns had increased in recent years, due to, for example, higher insurance fees for clubs and rising costs of uniforms. Many argued that keeping participation costs low for everyone was important to the facilitation of social inclusion of all families, regardless of income. One club’s major sponsor preferred money to go into junior rather than senior sport [Cr Gersh, Shire of Hindmarsh 11-03-04].

The Inquiry revealed a strong focus by football clubs on reaching out to not only the most mature and highly skilled players, but also the teenage members of the community who might not otherwise be involved in either organized sports or broader community activities. The submissions noted the high drop-out rate of players once they turn 16, but there was an acknowledgement of the importance of providing young people with a sound and healthy foundation within their local community, regardless of whether they remained involved in football. Some clubs also spoke of their efforts to support the older youth in their club who did not have parents involved in the club, outside of the usual training and games themselves. There was a desire to not only help fill the gap created by the decline of two-parent families and male schoolteachers in providing male role models to these youth, but to also provide a safe and inclusive environment where they could feel part of the broader ‘family’ of the local community:

We reckon there are a few younger guys in our club for whom being involved in our football club might make the difference between whether they become solid citizens or finish up in jail because they have very few role models at home and
they come down to the footy club and see the coaches and other players in the club, they mix with committee people, and they actually get some different role models. They get to be part of a team structure and start to rely on each other and understand some of those things. We think it is a very important role — particularly coaches of the younger teams have a very, very important role [G Squires, Orbost Snowy Rovers Football Club 06-04-04].

Sports clubs offer potential resources for promoting healthier, more resilient communities through activities that are inclusive of families as a whole – a concept that has received little attention in the literature. Studies of environmental risk factors that fall disproportionately on low income families tend to focus on issues such as parenting, childcare and early child development (Mowbray et al, 2007). An awareness of the importance of contextual or place factors in promoting (or damaging) health has helped to identify safe recreational environments as a key factor in personal development (Macintyre, Ellaway & Cummins, 2002). To be fully involved in communities, young people need to be able to develop trust and feel appreciated. Studies have highlighted the need for adult supervisors and mentors to have characteristics that can facilitate positive relationships – fairness, credibility, respect and consistency (Sandford, Duncombe & Armour, 2008).

Interviews with a sample of 16- to 20-year olds in a New South Wales rural community revealed that most did not have effective strategies for discussing personal issues and stressors with their parents. Boys in particular were likely to deal with a problem by “ignoring it” (Bourke, 2002). Non-metropolitan males aged 18-29 are far less likely to seek help for psychological distress and reduced satisfaction with life (Fraser, Jackson, Judd, Komiti, Robins, Murray, Humphreys, Pattison & Hodgins, 2005). The development of integrated strategies to increase participation through local community leadership and
ownership has been advocated, but concrete plans for bringing this about are lacking (Elling, De Knop & Knoppers, 2001).

**Bonding adults together – particularly men – and building a resilient community**

Respondents noted that the changing nature of employment in rural areas impacted on the availability of players once they reached 16 years old, as well as adult players and the parents that younger players rely on to transport them to training and games. The introduction of weekend shopping and increasing presence of fast food chains was seen as taking youth away from weekend sport as they filled alternative roles as consumers and part-time workers. Adults now have less flexibility in their working hours and working parents may wish to keep their weekend free [Victorian Country Tennis Association submission].

Unlike many other sports, Australian Football offers limited ‘social’ options for those who wish to merely participate in a one-night-a-week, non-competitive version of the game. Masters Australian Football, or ‘Superules’ competitions, with modified rules to reduce the risk of injury, are available to men aged 35 and over, but there are only 15 country teams and players have to travel widely across Victoria to get to games. Senior football requires players to train twice a week and play a full length game on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon at a designated location which varies from week to week. While there are obviously different fitness levels amongst players, particularly in the ‘reserves’, the more sedentary nature of most contemporary employment means players do need to attend training regularly if they are to minimise the risk of injury during games. Participation as a spectator in country football requires attendance at the games, as matches are not broadcast. Nevertheless, several submissions indicated that while the time demanded of football was high and inflexible, there were significant social, physical and mental benefits for those who did participate:
The benefits of socialising through football were seen to contribute to both building relationships across the community between different groups and to strengthening relationships within specific groups. People can become very isolated in rural communities. Football brings those isolated people together to the extent that it plays a major part in connecting the community and brings people together from neighbouring communities [Loddon Shire Council submission].

Football clubs provide a sense of belonging to the local community for thousands of people as they provide a place to gather and interact with others. This brings people from all walks of life together in supporting a local community activity which might not happen in any other form. Doctors, farmers, local businesses, tradesmen, police, school teachers, might all belong to the local football club. We see this as an excellent medium for improving people's physical and mental health [Dr R Moodie, VicHealth, 10-05-04].

The Inquiry revealed that there is now a greater acknowledgement in rural communities of the potential mental health benefits of participation in organized sports, particularly for people who might otherwise live and work in relative isolation from other community members:

[W]ith country football we’re fundamentally interested in increasing levels of participation … for two purposes: the physical activity benefits from competing and being involved in sport regularly, but also from the emotional and mental health benefits to kids and adults who are involved, who have a valued social role, who are involved in a sense to improve, they tend to do much better than those who are isolated.
So in the long run we’re really seeing community sport – whether that’s community football or community netball or whatever – as major community assets. [Dr R Moodie, VicHealth 10-05-04]

Much of the rising male suicide rate in rural Australia has been attributed to social isolation and depression. Football clubs are traditionally important places in which men of all ages may feel comfortable to talk and socialise:

In rural and remote areas the male suicide rate is significantly higher than anywhere else in the community. The contributing factors are listed there for you, but think about it: loss of identity, social isolation, connectedness to the community — all related to the football club. Then they say, “How do we prevent suicide?”: connectedness, social contact, role models, relationship building, feeling valued and participation. They are all directly related to our football community and the impact that football communities have particularly in the small, isolated areas of the state [B Ryan, former member of the Victorian Country Football League 11-03-04].

While much discussion of the potential mental health benefits of football clubs addressed younger men, the importance for older men was also evident in the details of the submissions. Many noted in particular that the changing nature of farming in rural Victoria meant that farmers were increasingly isolated in their work, as they were now less likely to employ farmhands and were often geographically separated from their neighbours by the increasing size of farms. Weekly games of football and perhaps monthly committee meetings are important gathering place for men. Tommy Hafey, a former elite-level coach and tireless
champion of grassroots football, observed that in small towns football matches might be the only regular social event on offer and are thus a vital events to reduce isolation:

I was doing a sportsmen’s night down at Portland … An old fellow said to me, “Tommy, since our little football-netball club at Yambuk closed down” — which was five or six years back at that stage — “I have not seen my next-door neighbour. I see his car whizzing down the highway”. The football-netball used to bring everybody out. People do not understand that [T Hafey 31-05-04].

Following up from this anecdote, Dr Moodie from VicHealth noted that in the absence of football games “there was no forum for them to actually get together and in a sense bond or share with each other”. Others noted that the social and emotional benefits of gathering together with a common focus were becoming increasingly important given the challenges affecting many rural communities:

Football also provides the actual opportunity for people to meet and to share these memories [of the glorious old days of football] and to focus on a positive in their lives, where there may be many negatives. We have already heard about drought and the rural economy and water and all those sorts of things. Most clubs host social functions before and after the game. Sometimes that is the only social connection or activity for the local population to engage in [D Trotter, Wimmera Regional Sports 11-03-04].

Off the field the club continues to prosper with another strong financial result, in a year where the drought was expected to adversely impact on our fundraising efforts. I believe this underlines the importance of clubs as a place in the community at large,
where they can gather to support each other in tough times as well as enjoying football and netball [Councillor den Houting, Golden Rivers Football League 23-03-04].

Of course, the ability of football to give people an excuse to ‘get out’ is not restricted to men.

I can remember a few years ago a Final here where I walked back to my car and there was a lady sitting in my car talking to my wife [who] went to the football every Saturday. She did not have a clue who was playing and did not really care, but that was her social contact. Many people in country Victoria do that. So we do need footy in these areas, and they do not have to be just football or netball- orientated people [C Brown, Underbool Football Club 24-03-04].

Conclusion

Rural Australian Football clubs have traditionally contributed to social inclusion by providing opportunities for country people to form close associations with particular places and to express a sense of unity with, and enthusiasm for, their local community. In light of the changes that have occurred in rural communities in recent decades, this article seeks to determine whether contemporary rural football clubs continue to facilitate social inclusion in rural communities, and whether the enduring structures of football continue to make a material contribution to social inclusion. The extensive evidence heard by the Inquiry into Country Football conducted by the Parliament of Victoria, reveals that while rural Australian football clubs continue to reflect aspects of a stereotypical Australian masculine culture, they have also adapted their strategic focus and internal organisational practices to become more socially inclusive through proactive community building strategies. Such strategies have had a particular impact on the greater inclusion of women and families within clubs.
Country football clubs have come to rely on the presence of junior footballers and junior netball players to maintain the critical mass of members, volunteers, spectators and sponsors that they need to remain financially viable. Growing numbers of women serve on the committees of rural football clubs. Most community football clubs have merged operations with netball clubs. More so than in the past, women are increasingly viewed as ‘active participants’ in the sport rather than their more traditional role as passive ‘supporters’, which parallels the changing role of women in both rural communities and society generally. Today’s rural football clubs are making more of an effort to bring families together through Auskick clinics and a change in emphasis within the social activities of the clubs away from the traditional male beer-drinking culture. Contemporary football clubs also seek to include children and youths independently of their parents or fathers, and can take on part of the role of ‘parents’ for the youth in the community in terms of role modelling and mentoring, as well as providing a safe and healthy social environment in which younger members of the community can build social skills and build greater networks of trust within their local town.

Through these proactive strategies, rural football clubs are nurturing resources that promote healthier, more resilient communities through expanded social inclusion. Dense social networks, made of members who are acquaintances rather than close friends and who interact frequently, develop clear and firmly held norms that emphasise reciprocity and trust (Granovetter, 2005). These facilitate flows of useful information and the development of collective efficacy – the sense that people are able to work together through collective action and achieve more as a group than they could individually. The key resource for this resilience is social capital, which is most effective if the connections bridge classes and other traditional divides. Rural football clubs were founded and evolved in an era when local communities included large numbers of farmers, farm laborers and other male workers. Public roles in these clubs were predominantly held by men and the focus was on providing social capital in
Social inclusion in community sport

a largely male dominated culture. The responses of football clubs today to the changing environment in which they function have encouraged the formation of more ‘thickened’ local networks across a broader range of community participants. The male dominance of clubs has receded, but they remain places where men of all ages can gather and benefit from social contact. Thus while the evidence from the Inquiry does not suggest that creating social capital is a main goal of football clubs in itself, clubs that are taking advantage of opportunities to make social networks more dense appear to be continuing to provide considerable social benefits by building and sustaining connectedness within their local communities.
References


Social inclusion in community sport


Social inclusion in community sport


Social inclusion in community sport


