

Football in Malta (13)

THE "OLD FIRM'S" BIG RUN

From 1948–49, following the advent of the AJAX, honours were mainly in the grip of both Sliema and Floriana, with the latter holding the major trumps. This despite the fact that teams like Hamrun Spartans, Valletta City and Hibernians were all stocked with good material. Spartans had also in their ranks Willie Mills of Aberdeen and Scotland, but he could not cope with the speed of the game, but before going back home he did plenty of good work with the Spartan's youngsters as a coach. During one season the Greens won all the four league competitions: the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and Minor Divisions, whilst Sliema won the F.A. Trophy, and the three other Knock Out competitions.

Floriana won the Cassar Cup by beating Hamrun Spartans, but the Blues maintained their strong grip on the Scicluna Cup. This Cup was donated by the Owner of the Stadium "is-Sur Memè Scicluna", the gate money was to be distributed to the Clubs, and it first started in 1949/50. It now rests in the Sliema

Wanderers', well stocked with silver, board room, fittingly enough as the club which won it the greater number of times. Incidentally the famous Cousis Shield rests at the Floriana Club, the last winners of the competition, whilst the Cassar Cup rests in Valletta, now the property of the City club.

In May 1951 Floriana were invited to play in the Festival of Britain, together with many famous teams from Europe and South America. Losing all three matches they left a great impression with their pleasing style, playing against Chelsea they lost five nil, but attracted the attention of the press with their pleasing style. Continuing on their travels they lost to Doncaster by the same margin, but put a terrific show at West Bromwich, where they lost by 2–0.

Alamango, the Greens goalkeeper was the lad attracting the most praise whilst fullback Debattista and inside left Lolly Borg were ranked alongside Occwirk of Austria, Wagner of Wacker, Melchior of Austria, Horvat of Dynamo Zagreb, and Haumer of



Players in the Malta squad before a training session under floodlights in the Valletta ditch

(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

Wacker as the best players taking part in the Festival.

Season 56–57 belonged to Sliema Wanderers, with a finely balanced side marshalled by that soccer wizard Salvinu Schembri, with a slower but still deadly with his shooting Tony Nicholl playing at outside right, and the sparkle in the attack being provided by Tony's nephew by the mercurial bursts of the newest of Stars, Sammy Nicholl. Of course the winning of the Quadruple Crown was a major team effort, with goalkeepers Victor Scerri and Raymond Cosby alternating on goalkeeping duties.

During this time the M.F.A. had engaged the writer of these series to coach its representative sides on a professional basis, and with the Christmas Tourney round the corner, when two teams from the continent were again invited, work on fielding a good representative side was started in earnest with training for players attending twice a week, with a full week's training before the tourney started.

These sessions were mainly to get the players to know each other to bury club differences, and build a bond of friendship without which no representative can function as a unit. Based mainly on players from the top clubs this feeling of comradeship was soon achieved.

This happy feeling nearly came to grief on the day of the first match against the visiting Hungarian side the S.K. Kiniszi, the new name of the old Ferencvaros, when officials in the Ruling Body drafted in new faces in the team hours before the kick off. The result in itself was quite good seeing that the team was able to achieve a creditable two-all draw, but strong protests at the right level enabled similar interference to be abolished. Worthy of mention in the way of a flashback was the success of the Malta Youths in a return tournament to that held in Palermo, when Lombardy and Sicily competed with the locals, and where Malta emerged winner of the tournament which was marred by the bad behaviour of some of the Lombardy players.

Back to the Kiniszi visit another match with the M.F.A. XI ended on a no score stalemate, and later the team narrowly lost to the Beogradski from Jugoslavia, by one goal to nil.

The clashes between Hungarians and Jugoslavs ended with honours even each scoring a win by the odd goal and every one was happy, the biggest surprise of this tourney came about when Valletta, then gradually building up a young side scored the finest victory of the tourney when they beat Beograd by four goals to two. Other successes by the M.F.A. XI before the advent of the Kiniszi, were a creditable one-all draw against Wiener A.C., with star defender Rockl showing the Maltese public the way of the classic sweeper, and a three-one win over Rotherham, when the team fielded seven Floriana players, and a three-nil victory over Gothenburg of Sweden.



Kiniszi goalkeeper, Gulyas, rides on the backs of Demanuele and Sammy Nicholl in an attack on Hungarian goalmouth during the match that ended in a goalless draw (Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

Football had by now extended in towns and villages, and teams like Naxxar Lions, later to be disbanded, Birkirkara, Rabat, and St. Andrews were gradually pushing themselves with the top teams, Floriana, Sliema, Valletta and Hibernians.

With a Second Division Reserve League, a Third Division with many Sections to accommodate teams from Tarxien, Vittoriosa, Gudja, Qormi and Żebbuġ, players were rising fast from the many Minor League clubs, all playing at the new Schreiber Sports Ground. Here crowds flocked to see the many 'derby' matches, especially those between St. George's and Hibernians.

All these competitions were producing a large number of players many of whom were showing bright prospects for the future. A scheme was started to coach promising players under the age of twenty with an idea of forming a reserve for the full M.F.A. XI when the stars then performing would be losing much of their lustre.

Meeting twice a week with the National Coach



The Under-20 squad, eight of whom later played for Malta

(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

these lads jumped at the chance and there was keen competition on whom would be called up for these sessions.

'Catching them young' was the theme given to this scheme by the Press and indeed many of them became regular Malta players of the future. Players like Joe Cini, Alfred Mizzi, Freddie Falzon, Lewis Theobald, Robbie Buttigieg, Freddie Borg, Joey Cilia and Johnny Darmanin all made the topmost grade and gave great service to their country.

There was a snag however when somebody in the Ruling Body argued that these lads who were giving such good performances against the topmost clubs should be pitted against the English professional side Leyton Orient when the latter came to Malta in May 1926. The insistence on the Coach's part that these lads were not yet ready to take on such opposition, was over-ruled with the result that they were beaten by seven goals to nil, this despite showing some nice touches.

Joe Cini, impressed the Leyton manager and next season travelled to England to link up with the famous club, played well with the Reserves, and later went over to Queens Park Rangers. Cini came back when the inevitable home sickness caught him in its grip and gave sterling service to Floriana, Hibs and Sliema, and became a must for Malta.

Shortly on his return and with his signature with a club still to be determined there came the news that at last Malta was to play in its first international, and that against the might of Austria, then still tops in Europe.

For Cini to be able to play he was asked to register on amateur forms with a third division club, and thus became eligible to be called for training.

The squad trained hard and well and when the Wiener A.C. came in for the usual tourney, winning the majority of their matches with several players of the national team in its ranks, care was taken to study their game, and when an M.F.A. XI was put down to play they had to take the field without master tactician Salvinu Schembri, and anchor-man in defence Joey Cilia. The plan worked well and although losing by one goal to nil, everyone was satisfied at the team's showing, especially at the way Wagner, the National team's man in the middle had been marked and shadowed. Only brilliant goal-keeping by the Austrian goalkeeper allowed the Austrians to hold on to their meagre lead.

J.H. Griffiths

(to be continued)