

Football in Malta (15)

THE GATES ARE THROWN WIDE OPEN

Although Malta's connections with European football dated far back to the "Twenties", it was not until forty years later that official recognition from the World and European soccer bodies was acquired.

Because of its Colonial status Malta had always been affiliated to the Football Association, London, but following insistent lobbying by Mr Eugene Bonello, and the helping hand of Sir Stanley Rous, Malta finally found itself member of both the F.I.F.A. and later U.E.F.A. These affiliations enabled Malta to enter and compete in both the European Cup of Nations, the various European competitions, and for the qualifying rounds of the World Cup itself.

Thus when Hibernians won their League championship in season 1960-61, they entered for the Champions Cup to be drawn with Servette of Switzerland, to whom they lost five-nil away and one-two at home. Having won the F.A. Trophy in the same season Floriana too tried their luck in the Cup Winners Cup facing the crack Hungarians of Ujpest

Dosza, losing two-five at the Stadium and crashing in Budapest to the tune of ten goals to two.

These were certainly results far from being of the heart warming type but they had helped to open the doors wide, and later on when U.E.F.A. substituted its own competition, the UEFA Cup for the old Fair Cities Cup, Maltese teams were also admitted.

It was not long however when the Maltese public, this time squeezed into the small arena at the Manoel Island, found reason to cheer when Sliema Wanderers, playing for the second time in the Champions Cup against the Greeks of Panathinaikos avenged their four to one defeat in Athens, by rising to the occasion and beating the Greeks by one goal to nil after playing for the major part of the game with 10 men, having a man sent off by the famous Italian referee Lobello, Leli Micallef being the scorer.

Mention of the Manoel Island Ground brings to the mind when the Clubs failed to agree with the Stadium Management regarding their share of the gate. They asked the National Sports Board for help and a titanic race against time followed to get the venue



The Malta team on Danish soil, when playing in the first leg of the U.E.F.A. Nations Cup competition. *Standing:* Privitera, Falzon, Debattista, Cilia, Zammit, Mizzi; *Squatting:* Urpani, Theobald, Cauchi, Borg, Demanuele

(Photo Credit: J.H. Griffiths)

ready in time to take on the European Cup matches in the offing. There were stands to be created, gates and boundary walls to be erected and all this in two months' time. Workmen from the Drydocks did manfully enough and one still remembers that barely two hours before the kick off, with crowds queueing up for tickets, welders from the Drydocks were still working on the iron gates. That was when Floriana played against Borussia Dortmund.

In the ten years between 1960 and 1970, honours were more evenly distributed, although the Old Firm still held the upper hand; Sliema winning a fine hat trick of League titles between 1963 and 1966, four times the F.A. Trophy, two Christmas Cups, with their rivals of Floriana bagging four League titles, and three F.A. Trophies. Hibernians came next with two successes in the League, and two F.A. Trophies, whilst Valetta bagged a title in the League and an F.A. Trophy.

During this same period Hibernians won the Cassar Cup three times, Floriana chalked one of the highest scores when beating Sliema by six goals to nil, in this competition.

In 1965-66 Valetta won their third success in this competition beating Sliema Wanderers by three goals to one in the final, after the Cup had not been played for in the past two seasons. Sliema Wanderers won it back the following season beating Hibernians by one goal to nil, but they, the Wanderers, conceded defeat the following season to Valetta when they went down to the Citizens by two goals to one.

Mainly because of a long and tiring season, and also because of interruptions in fixtures due to international commitments, the famous Charity Trophy was no longer played for and now rests in the Valetta City boardroom as the last winners.

In all Sliema Wanderers won the Cassar Cup eleven times, Floriana come next with ten wins, Valetta won it four times, Hibernians three times, with Hamrun Spartans winning the Cup once in 1948-49 by beating the Royal Navy by five goals to one.

In all the Cup was played for forty times, the Civilian Clubs netting twenty-nine wins, with the Services getting eleven.

In the international field, since that auspicious debut in February of 1957, against Austria, Malta in all had played in nineteen more international matches up to the end of December of 1970, when the team just went down to Switzerland by the odd goal in three at the Stadium in the European Cup of Nations. In that period Malta had beaten Tunisia and Libya twice home and away and two creditable draws against Luxemburg in a friendly, and a one-all draw against Greece in the European Nations Cup match. There was another one all draw against Norway at home but the Norsemen beat Malta five-

nil when playing the return in Norway. Prior to this Malta had met Denmark twice in the U.E.F.A. Cup of Nations losing away 6-1, and losing at home by three goals to one, in a thrilling encounter, the Malta team's attacking tactics bringing forth the entire press's approval.

Another friendly worthy of mention was against Austria, when defensive errors gave the Austrians a three-one victory, which was considered to be quite a flattering margin.

Regarding the affiliation to F.I.F.A., when Malta was admitted to play in the Qualifying Round for the Rome Olympics, this could not have been possible had it not been for the helping hand of several Officials including Sir Stanley Rous, who allowed Malta's entry on a "provisional" basis.

The matches played with the best in Europe had practically evaporated all interest in the Christmas Tournee matches. Besides, the quotations by foreign clubs invited to play in Malta had made the scheme highly unprofitable, and two of the last teams to come during the Yuletide were the Jugoslavs of Sarajevo and Rijeka, both of whom lost their records at the hands of Sliema Wanderers fully living up to their good reputation against visiting sides. Another Czech side, the Spartak Motorlet came on later to be beaten by Floriana by three goals to two. Other teams like Portsmouth, Manchester City and Manchester United paid occasional visits, the latter playing in a match the proceeds of which went into a Coaching Fund, opposition being afforded by a League Selection, with Irishman Tommy Taylor in goal and ten local players. The game was highly interesting until Lewis Theobald's injury made the local side re-shuffle and lose its rhythm, the Mancunians winning by two goals to nil. Later Arsenal F.C. and Tottenham Hotspurs toured Malta in May, the latter losing to the Malta Selection in a match which served the men in charge of the National Team as a dress rehearsal for the Big Match which was still to come when England came to Malta.

Despite the generally adverse results obtained in the European Competitions, there were instances

Alfred Debono, Sliema's young keeper, punches clear off an attack by Sarajevo forwards (in white). (Photo Credit: J.H. Griffiths)





Joe Cini jumps with joy after Malta had equalized against the Italy Under-23 Primavera, with Mattrel looking on

(Photo Credit: J.H. Griffiths)

when the Stadium at Gżira went wild, such one occasion being the visit of Manchester United to play Hibernians in the second leg of their European Cup encounter. At Old Trafford, Hibs put up a stout resistance and lost only by four goals to nil, but in Malta a great surprise awaited the United when they took on Hibernians for the second leg at the Stadium crammed to full capacity.

Hibernians put up a five star performance and besides defending skilfully against the wiles of such stars as Bobby Charlton and George Best, they also had their attacking moments especially in the closing minutes of the game when only a super save by Stepney, the United keeper, off the unmarked Scerri

denied Hibs a great victory. Manchester went on to win the Competition.

Another feather in the Maltese Soccer Hat was recorded when Sliema Wanderers met the Swedish club Norkopping, in September '69 in the second leg of their Cup of Cup Winners fixture. With the first leg ending on a 5-1 margin for the Swedes the latter elected more to defend than expand their lead, but Sliema played doggedly on to earn a hard-earned win, their second in Europe, when with only minutes to go, substitute Tony Griffiths rammed in a great winner.

(to be continued)

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