

Football in Malta (12)

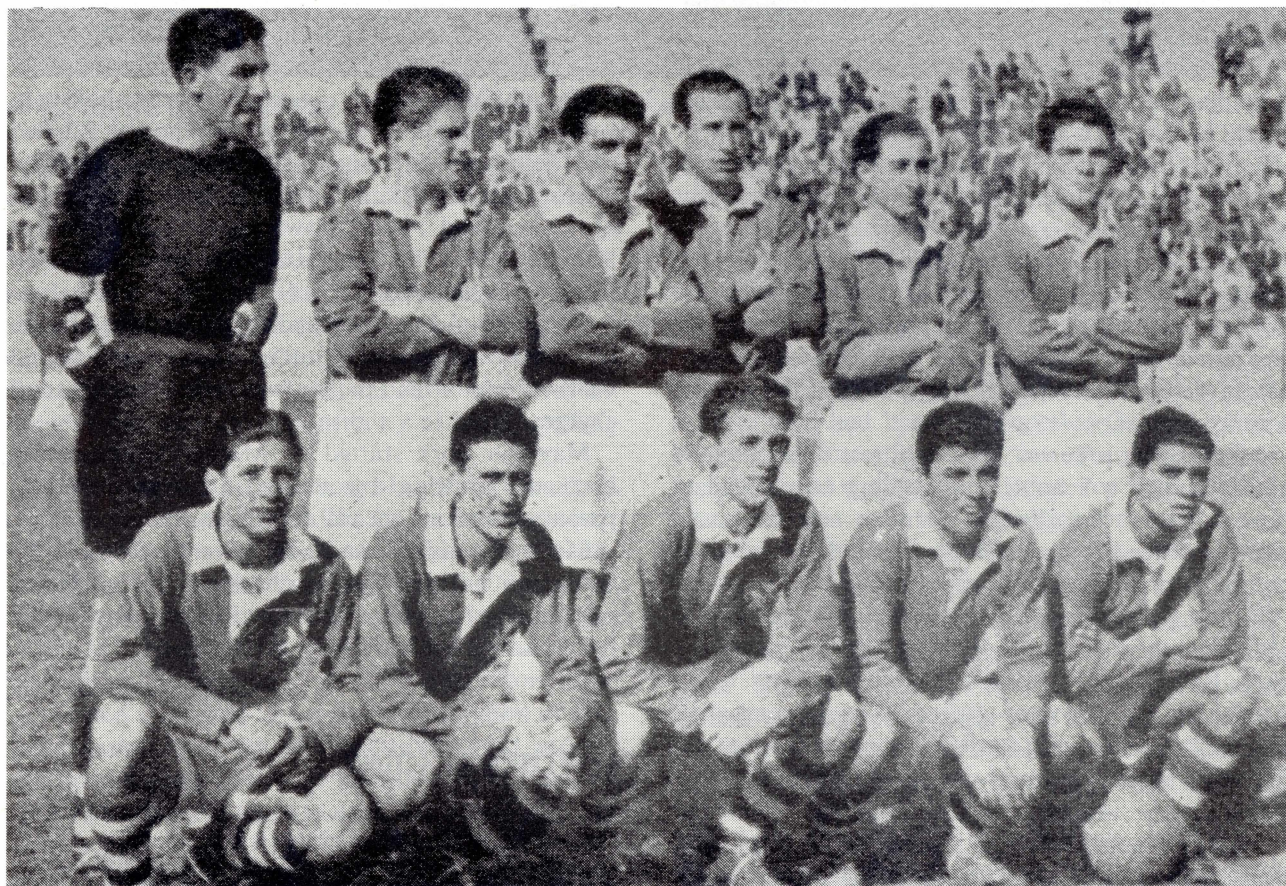
THE ABSURDITY OF THE COMBINATION

The returns from the S.K. Austria tour seemed to have encouraged the promoters to do a repeat, and barely five months later the S.K. Vasas of Hungary turned up to play another series of matches practically all against combinations. Playing a strong third back formation and including players of such class that then began to make Hungary a world power in soccer, Vasas chalked up fifty three goals, including twelve against a poor M.F.A. XI. The best match was that against a combined Sliema/Valletta/Melita side, the Visitors winning four-two after a great match by the locals and a fabulous goal by Schembri.

This lesson was finally taken to heart and the promoters listened well to the criticism levelled, and when S.K. Rapid came for the next Christmas tourney, only Club teams, plus the Services XI and and M.F.A. XI were fielded.

Much technical advice had been given to Clubs and to many ex-players during a three month stay of the Football Association Coach George Duke. The latter not only held the first ever Coaching Course, under the auspices of the Malta F.A., but also visited and lectured at Club level. This, the first venture of its kind, laid the roots of what was to come later, thanks to the efforts of people with plenty of public spirit and vision like Tom Hedley, Eugene Bonello, later to become both Secretary and President of the Malta F.A., and also the writer of this series who always believed in the values of coaching.

With Rapid once again came 'Bimbo' Binder, who though much slower still kept his shooting boots on, and when in the programme the usual match against the local selection was included, the M.F.A. invited Messrs. Frank Tabone and Joe Griffiths, to assemble and train a squad of players in preparation for this



The Malta Youth XI before their match with A.S. Palermo, then in Serie 'A' at the Favorita Stadio in Palermo

(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

match. This was a far departure from that prevailing in the past, when players selected to play for Malta, were invited to report at the dressing room half an hour before the kick off, given a jersey and only a rousing cheer to set them off against the terrific odds of playing well against well-drilled professional sides. This move paid good dividends, the M.F.A. side put up a great fight against the Austrians, were level at halftime, and only when the Austrians started putting their weight into the tackle that the local lads succumbed. Final result was three-one to the Rapid, but the experiment was more than a success, and which, some years later induced the Ruling Body to engage a fulltime coach for its representative sides.

Both Tabone and Griffiths had the advice of the English international, George Shaw, then coaching Floriana, in this venture, which received approbation from every angle.

George Shaw, who had won a Cup medal with West Bromwich Albion, played for England against Scotland at Wembley, and had come to Malta when the Floriana Club, tired of languishing in the shadows, took the big step of drafting the young AJAX side into the First Division.

Shaw was brought over to stiffen a defence, helped by goalkeeper Busuttill, left back Leli Zammit, and to give the young players a first hand knowledge of the 'Third Back' game.

Shaw found a fertile field and soon Floriana were back on the road to soccer glory.

Sliema Wanderers won the league in 1948 - 1949, but Floriana won a prestigious five goals to one victory in the F.A. Trophy final against their old rivals the Blues of Sliema.

Thus opened one of the finest pages in the history of the Greens which team celebrated the Club's Golden Jubilee by winning the League, Cassar Cup and F.A. Trophy, to notch a memorable Triple Crown, the following season.

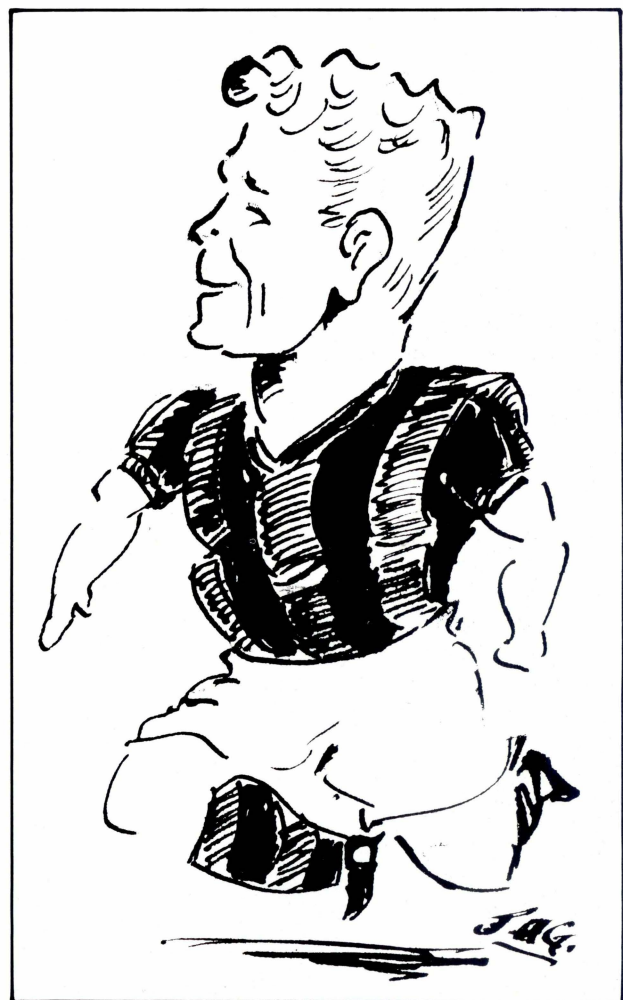
During this time both Sliema Wanderers and Valletta imported two British coaches, ex-Sunderland and fullback Alec Hall going to Sliema, whilst Tedder went to Valletta.

All three left after agreeing to sever their services with their respective clubs, but all left a good taste behind them. Hall was later succeeded by Jimmy MacCormack, ex-Tottenham Hotspurs, a genial stocky inside left, who worked wonders with a Sliema side in transition stage. He will always be remembered for his great game for Sliema against the Yugoslavs of the Red Star.

Before proceeding further with this rather brief account of the chief happenings in the game since it took such a hold on the Maltese public, it is well to record that the fashion of having only British referees officiating in the local game, was done away with when a group of Maltese Knights of the Whistle



The Malta Youth squad in a training session at the Favorita in Palermo (Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)



Cartoon. Jimmy MacCormack, Sliema Wanderers player-coach, ex-Spurs (Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

started handling all kinds of matches with much skill and foresight. Previously, tact and a firm hand from referees like Major Dix, Captain Sandy, Lt. Poe, and C.P.O. White of the Royal Navy, together with Sergt. Power of the R.A.F., had ably controlled the many 'derby' type matches. The game owes a lot to these gentlemen.

After the War several Maltese referees began to appear on the soccer scene, foremost amongst whom one remembers Willie Izzo, Walter Gatt, Dwardu Pisani and Bill Mock.

As time went on and with more referees required to handle the many competitions under the M.F.A.'s jurisdiction others came forward with Joe Cassar Naudi jumping into prominence after a tough apprenticeship at the Schreiber Sports Ground. Joe able to keep up with the game with his phenomenal speed, soon arrived in the front ranks and was prominent in founding, with others, the Malta Referees Football Association.

The M.F.R.A. grew in stature, and in fighting for its rights came in conflict with the Ruling Body to an extent of ordering its members to strike. The Council replied by bringing over from Scotland, the famous international referee Peter Craigmyle. Peter became a firm favourite with the crowds and officiated in all the big matches until outstanding matters were smoothed out and referees went back to work.

A team from nearby Sicily, A.S. Messina, played two matches during a weekend, losing 1-2 to Hamrun Spartans and drawing one-all with Sliema. These were followed by the visit of the English side Chelsea, who overcame a Combined Services side 6-1 and a Sliema/Hamrun combination by 6-2, but were given a scare when the M.F.A. XI went under by the odd goal in five when Nicholl, Schembri, Lolly Borg and Demanuele put up a grand finale which threatened to swamp the Pensioners.

Demanuele, Ajax and Malta star in action

Next day a Youths team left for a tournament in Palermo, where they found they had to face the crack Serie A side in a friendly barely twenty four hours before the tourney match against Lombardy. Against the latter team which included Bearzot, the present manager of the Italian team, at centre half, a tired Maltese eleven succumbed by five goals to one, but two days later gave a fine exhibition by beating the Sicilian Selection by three goals to two to earn a second place.

For the still popular Christmas tournee the promoters once again went for a 'double', inviting the Austrians of the F.C. Wien, and the crack Yugoslav side Red Star.

The latter seemed to be the stronger side but in their match with Wien they could only draw with no goals being scored. Earlier Red Star had scored twenty nine goals against one, the M.F.A. and Spartans being beaten by ten and fourteen goals respectively. One of the best games of this series was that played by Valletta against Wien the latter getting a doubtful verdict by the odd goal in three, Valletta's inside trio of Bennetti, Schembri and Vassallo putting up a five star show.

After the War Hibernians were once again admitted amongst the elite, and in season 1947-1948 they drew with Sliema in the F.A. Trophy final but lost the replay by two goals to nil.

Four years later there was a repeat when they twice drew with Sliema Wanderers in the same competition, but had to succumb at the third time of asking to a Nicholl goal in the final of finals.

It was a great effort by Hibs, but once again as in the Cassar Cup final of twenty years back, they found the Blues hoodoo dogging their footsteps.

J.H. Griffiths

(to be continued)

(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

