

Football in Malta (9)

THE FOREIGN INFLUX AND ITS INFLUENCE

Public interest was at its lowest ebb during the first part of season 1933–34, due to the many squabbles between clubs, players, and due to several strange decisions taken by the Ruling Body. Then came one of those sparks which not only lit up the game from its semi-obscurity, but roused public interest into a blazing bonfire.

Hibernians of Paola – the new team in the arena – entered the Cassar Cup semi-finals and were drawn against the Mediterranean Fleet champions of H.M.S. “Royal Sovereign”. It must be remembered that the Floriana players, free to roam as their club had not entered a team in that season’s competitions, split up, some like Kaneni Cauchi, Salvu Grima, Paul and Vincent Friggieri, joining the Blues, whilst goalkeeper Gejta Azzopardi, Pisani and Agius had signed on for the Hibs.

A packed stadium watched Hibernians and the Sailors of the “Sovereign” battle it out for 300 minutes for the right of entry into the final to meet Sliema Wanderers who had beaten the Cheshire Regiment’s football team in the other semi-final.

Those three great matches woke up the dormant interest, with the result that a record crowd turned up for the Final. Hibs paid the price of their marathon as they had to take the field without their master mind at centre half, Rogantino Pisani injured in the last victorious match against the Sailors.

Now in the ranks of the Blues, ever renowned for their skilful forwards, two players were catching the eye with their strong shooting and goal scoring abilities. Salvu Sammut and Tony Nicholl, were not only a terrible twins tandem, but were also destined to push Sliema high into the honours lists, and inscribe their names into immortality. With the incomparable Cauchi prompting from midfield, the Sammut-Nicholl tandem formed a winning combination, which Hibernians found to their cost as the Blues emerged winners of the tie by two goals to nil, both scored by Tony Nicholl. When Tony hammered Sliema’s equaliser against the visiting side of S.K. Pilsen of Czechoslovakia, on Christmas Day, his star shot high up into the hemisphere to remain there for the next twenty years. Sadly enough Sammut’s career was cut short following a fatal accident during the War. Another great game played by the Blues in that memorable year was at the end of the season when the Hajduks paid their third visit in May 34, beating the Royal Navy 5–2, Hibernians 6–0, drawing three all against the Cheshire Regiment, and losing to Sliema by two goals to nil. Other stars in the ranks of the Blues, were the stylish Paul Friggieri, and that great defender Robbie DeCesare.

During the next five seasons the Civilian Clubs exerted a tight grip on this silver bauble, the Army just breaking the monopoly in 1940, just before World War II started.

During these eventual years much water passed under the bridges, Floriana re-grouped their players, and went on to win the League for the eleventh time, but lost to Sliema in the Cassar Cup by 2–1, and went down heavily to their rivals in Blue in the first-ever final for the much-coveted F.A. Trophy, when the Nicholl star shown brightly to earn a great hat trick, with Sammut getting a fourth to register one of the heaviest defeats in the matches between the two rivals.

The Trophy had come to Malta as a present from the Football Association in England, in recognition of the great support given by a group of Maltese supporters to the England team when the latter played its first international against Pozzo’s Italy, at the Flaminio Stadium in Rome.

From that “Old Firm” final the F.A. trophy competition remained as the official knockout competition of the Malta Football Association, and



Floriana F.C., as remodelled by Drucker (1st on the left) before the victorious encounter with Sliema Wanderers



Svoboda, Floriana's Austrian keeper dives to the foot of Cortis, Sliema wingman, with Tony Nicholl just behind

generally pulled down the curtain at the end of each season.

Floriana took the lesson to heart and after some negotiations, they engaged the services of a foreign player as their player coach. The Greens choice fell on Leo Drucker, an Austrian international centre half, who had put in some superb displays at the Empire Stadium when playing for the Floridsdorfer way back in 1926. Drucker who had been playing for the French Club, F.C. Marseilles, had slowed down a lot but his coaching techniques carried the magic touch, and soon Floriana were playing a most attractive style of football. In this connection the foreign teams that had visited the Island had left a legacy for the preference of the short passing game to the scrappy kick and rush style which had driven spectators away from the Ground.

With the engagement of Drucker by the Greens, Sliema too cast their eyes on Vienna, then the soccer capital par excellence in Europe, but were partly

disappointed when instead of the international Kaburek, his lesser known brother Hans turned up. Hans too was a slow type of player but when he settled down at inside left, he gave Sliema some excellent service especially with his hard shooting.

Before proceeding with the effect the signing of two foreign players had on the local game mention should be made of the visit for the now popular Christmas Tournay of the Czech side S.K. Prostejov. Taking on Floriana in a rainstorm, with the playing pitch under water the Czechs waltzed, or skated to a 12-1 victory. Floriana, incensed at being ordered to play under such conditions, challenged the Czechs to a return which the Greens managed to win by 3 goals to 2.

S.K. Admira, champions of Central Europe, and darlings of Vienna, came next, showing an imposing list of superstars, like the great Peter Platzer in goal, Hummenberger at centre half, Urbanek at right half, the Vogl brothers on the wings with Bican, Stoiber

and Schall getting the goals, forty two in six matches. The Admira's brand of football has hardly ever been equalled except by the Hungarians of the Ferencvaros and the Hungaria, who were practically on the same level.

Great matches were witnessed at the Stadium in those halcyon days, when fans left their families and their Christmas dinners to rush and find a place at the Stadium.

The advent of the Admira introduced another foreigner who left a great name for himself, when Hibernians engaged Alex Svoboda, a goalkeeper from S.K. Simmering. Thrown in to keep goal against his talented compatriots barely twenty four hours after his arrival Svoboda turned on a super show to deny the Viennese a single goal in the first forty-five minutes. Injuring his knee he was replaced by "guest" Harry Edwards, an ex-Hibs player who had gone over to Sliema. Edwards was beaten four times, but later was in the Sliema team that gave the Admira its toughest match losing only by the odd goal in three. In this match Kaburek had shadowed the world famous Bican out of the game, Sammut getting Sliema's goal when he hit the ball into the roof of the net without waiting for the referee's signal, to the dismay and anger of Peter (the Great) Platzer.

Floriana and Drucker parted company, the latter going to organise St. George's, with the Greens deciding to go over to the then modern version of the

'W' plan, as was so ably exploited by the famous Gunners of the Arsenal F.C. With this in mind and to keep a tight grip on Sliema's famous Three Musketeers, Sammut, Nicholl and Brownie, Floriana bought the release from the Army of ex-Gunner Steve Vickers, imported a strong hard hitting centre forward from Millwall, George Bond, and signed on Svoboda from Hibernians. The latter imported a Scottish goalkeeper by the name of Walker to take Svoboda's place, and signed on two Austrian brothers by name of Muster, and a Czech, Sima.

These importations seemed to whet the appetite of the leading clubs in Malta, and St. George's the other great contender, signed on Haggart, a Scotsman in goal, Puschmann an elegant and clever fullback, Sipozsc a Hungarian halfback, and Grenfield and Frisch in the forward line. Valletta had Valenfa at centrehalf, and an attacking tandem of Frohleck and Seveik – all from Austria.

This great influx of foreigners into our local game had an immediate effect, and large crowds crammed the terraces as never before. This indeed heralded the highest peak in the game in Malta, and reached heights never yet attained, both in the quality of the game, in its technique, and fiery rivalry in all the camps concerned.

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(to be continued)



Sliema Wanderers (in stripes) and Hibernians before their historic Cassar Cup Final, that broke the Services monopoly and gave new life to the game