

Football in Malta (8)

A NEW STADIUM AND A NEW LIFE

When the Wiener A.C. left, the game in Malta was at one of its lowest ebbs. Floriana after their three successive championships had once again disintegrated, and some of their players had gone to Sliema, others to Valletta, and later on when the Amateur team from Paola, the Constitutionals, went professional and changed their name to Hibernians, they too recruited some Floriana players.

Club's relations with the Ruling Body were at a very low ebb indeed at the start of the "thirties", with season 1929-30 seeing an incomplete league, after the decider between Sliema Wanderers and Old St. George's had ended in a three-all draw. The replay was left over to the new season, but as Old St. George's had disbanded, the championship was handed on a plate to Sliema Wanderers.

Faced with an ever increasing list of squabbles and total disregard to the Rules, the Council of the M.F.A. decided to resign and on May 16th, 1930 they intimated their resignation to all the Clubs.

The following season Floriana again re-grouped their players and went on to add another laurel by winning the League between only four clubs, which, besides the Greens, included Sliema Wanderers, Valletta United and Hamrun Spartans.

In order to stoke the waning fires amongst the public, efforts were successfully made to bring over to Malta as many foreign teams as possible, and between May 1930 and January 1933, no less than six foreign clubs played in front of the Maltese public.

The most impressive side were without a doubt the Juvoslavs of H.A.S.K. (Hravoaski Akademik Sport Klub) who included in their ranks, a powerful inside right by the name of Hitrec, whose goal scoring is still remembered down the halls of soccer fame in Malta. His great effort to save the game for his tired side against the Queens, who led two-one with only minutes to go, his mazy dribble including the goalkeeper to notch the equaliser, will long be remembered.

H.A.S.K. played five matches winning four and drawing one, scoring twenty-two goals, and conceding ten.

Season 1930-31 saw the league going to Floriana after their players had re-grouped as explained above and then they went on to win the last ever M.F.A. Cup-Tie. This competition was not resumed and three seasons had to pass before another and more

illustrious competition, the F.A. Trophy, took its place and came to stay.

An unconvincing team from Rumania, the T.A.C. followed the H.A.S.K. drawing two matches and losing the third to the Pick of Malta, and after them came the Meteor F.C. from Czechoslovakia who opened their tour with a flourish by beating Valletta 5-1, and then losing all their four remaining matches, against the Royal Navy, the Pick of Malta, Worcester Regiment and Sliema Wanderers.

This was a classic for the Blues who had in their ranks the great little inside forward "Kaneni" Cauchi. The Unione Goulettoise of Tunis playing against both Sliema and Valletta were brushed aside, losing twice, and then came the titanic duel between the Somogy of Hungary and the Kladno of Czechoslovakia, then bitter enemies on the soccer field.

Mention has been made of the Worcester Regiment's football team. This indeed was a powerful combination, and soon after their arrival they won the Garrison Senior League, but lost to the H.M.S. "Revenge" by two goals to one in the Cassar Cup Final.

They came back however the following year when they beat a gallant bid made by Sliema Wanderers to break the Services monopoly in a great match, which found the Soldiers at the end winners by three goals to two. Next season they again reached the final and had to play the 4th Destroyer Flotilla, but for some unknown reason the match was not played and each side kept the Cup for six months. This was the end of the Services grip on the famous Cup, as the next contenders became two Civilian clubs, who by their tenacity and good football raised the game to unprecedented levels.

Before launching into the chapters of this revival, football was also being played at the Mile End Ground at the status given to Second Division clubs, a notable feat being recorded from 1926-27 to 1929-30 by the Tigers - an amateur club from Floriana - which club won the championship in four successive seasons.

During this period, too, the Tigers managed to carry away the Amateur Cup on three different occasions. Many players of this Club helped Floriana even playing two matches on the same day, whilst many others played also in the morning matches of the Malta Sports Association. Both the Amateur Cup



W.A.C. of Vienna (open neck vests) and Old St. George's in former team's opening match won by 8-0. Seated centre is Rudi Hiden, goalkeeper of the famous "Wunderteam"



S.K. Gradjanski (in light coloured shirts) together with the strong team of the Royal Artillery prior to their match which the Gunners won 7-1



S.K. Kladno of Czechoslovakia whose duels with S.K. Somogy of Hungary aroused great public interest. Standing extreme left is Klotz, ace goal scorer

and the M.S.A. were played at the Empire Sports Ground in the mornings.

The Constitutionals of Paola came along to halt the Tigers' big run in 1930–31, but after losing the title the following season to Sliema Rovers they changed their name and status and became the Hibernians F.C.

This change had materialised during a protracted spell of bickering between the Clubs and the Ruling Body, and the latter's solution of having one league for the professionals and the other for the Amateurs found hardly any backing and had to be abandoned.

Applying to the M.F.A. the Hibernians were granted First Division status, and played in the first league housed in the completely renovated stadium. This entailed the building of bigger and higher terraces on the Valletta side, the arena walls were knocked down, and the playing field was encircled by a racing track for greyhounds. In fact greyhound racing by floodlight started in earnest and with a British concern taking over, the venue became known as the Empire Stadium.

Prior to this Valletta had carried away the League championship for the second time during their career, but after drawing one each with Sliema Wanderers in the final of the M.F.A. Cup Tie, no return match was ever played, and the honour went unclaimed. In this match Tony Nicholl, brother of Sliema's custodian Joe, made his debut in senior football playing at outside right.

Rivalry between the new club from Paola and the Wanderers began to grow. It had started when many of the Blues players had played in the Second Division under the name of Sliema Rovers and had crossed swords with the Hibs predecessors, the Constitutionals.

Decisions by the M.F.A., bad timing for postponed matches, made the league competition played that season a mockery, and when Sliema and Hibernians finished both on top with equal points, the decisions and counter-decisions that followed from the Ruling Body lacked the proper approach, finally the match was played, and with Sliema leading by two goals scored by Salvu Sammut, and a penalty by R. DeCesare, a fracas ensued with spectators jumping into the ground with the result that the referee called it a day and whistled an untimely end.

Season 1933–34 found only Sliema Wanderers and Hibernians taking the field with St. George's of Qormi withdrawing after an M.F.A. ruling that P. Friggieri was considered by the Council as a Sliema Wanderers player, and not as claimed by the Qormi club who insisted that the player had originally signed for them.

Before coming to the great revival offered by both Sliema Wanderers and Hibernians, mention should be made of the great interest aroused at a time when the game seemed to lose all interest by the series of matches played by the Somogy of Hungary and the Kladno of Czechoslovakia. Playing against local sides at the same period these teams met each other three times in stiff titanic tussles with no quarter asked or given and with the Maltese public equally divided between the two factions. The first two meetings both ended in a two-all draw, whilst the Kladno players went berserk in the third and final encounter by winning by four goals to one.

J.H. Griffiths

(to be continued)