

Football in Malta (7)

THE GREAT UPHEAVAL

Midway through the 'twenties' a great upheaval occurred in the Laws of the Game, which was destined to change the accepted approach, to change styles and tactics, and to bring in its wake new formulas, and a new type of defender.

This came about when the alteration was made to the existing Law governing "Offside". Prior to the alteration three players had to be in front of the last attacker between him and the goal. Because of the misuse of this law by many defenders, chief of whom mention is made of a certain McCracken, who, when playing at back for Newcastle United adopted the trap of putting opponents offside by rushing up when a pass was made leaving only two defenders in front of the attacker. This style became known as the "One Back Game", and so frustrated and annoying it became that the legislators decided that the game as a spectacle was becoming more and more a farce. Goals were at a premium and crowds groaned when the game was held up so frequently with the defence having the last word over the attack.

When the change came with only two players, including the goalkeeper, much of the approach changed, and swift attackers began to come into their own.

This change in the Laws of the Game had its immediate effect on the game in Malta, and the big, bulky type of defender, bereft of his strong weapon – the one back game – began to disappear from the local soccer theatre.

Together with this change, tactics began to creep into the game, and after Sliema Wanderers had surprised Floriana by bringing over Dr. Frankie Busuttill over from his studies in Palermo to crown a dramatic visit with a great and memorable hat trick, the Greens moved back from the forward line their speed merchant, George West to mark the fast doctor out of the game. St. George's did the same using Johnnie Fearnie for the job of shadowing the "Doc" out of the game, shortly after, and it is safe to assume this made "Frankie" to leave the game for good.

Charging the goalkeeper was also offering a



Sliema Wanderers, Season 1923/24 – Triple Crown winners: League, Cassar Cup and Cousin Shield. R. Frigieri is seated third from left. Dr. Frankie Busuttill is seated third from right



Floriana in before their return match with Hajduks (stripes) in the latter's second visit. Hajduks won the game by three goals to one

channel of abuse when attacking moves by certain teams included a high ball into the goal area for the outcoming keeper to be bundled into the net ball and on. The introduction of continental football began to broaden the views of many, and referees started to give more and more protection to the goalkeeper. A match which had to be abandoned because in the opinion of the players of the visiting Croat side the Gradjanski of Jugoslavia, their goalkeeper had been fouled when the Gunners of the R.G.A. had scored a goal. The score had stood at 1-1, in a return match played at the insistent request of the Visitors, who had earlier been hammered 7-1, by the then holders of the Cassar Cup. The Yugoslavs, a strong team with Babic at back an outstanding figure, had beaten Sliema Wanderers 4-1, and Valletta 2-0, plus a 1-1 draw with the Champions Floriana and an exhilarating 3-3 with St. George's. This latter match had seen the great Carmenu Tabone playing his final match in Malta before emigrating to Tunis, and making an unforgettable bow to the public with a great game crowned by a brilliant hat trick. In this period the Services ascendancy in the Cassar Cup competition continued, although not without strong challenges coming from Floriana, which team, in two successive seasons went down by the odd goal in three, to the teams from H.M.S. "Queen Elizabeth", and H.M.S. "Barham" respectively in the final. This latter match will long live in the memory of those

who were present, when the Greens looked certain winners leading by one goal and with only a few minutes left, when the Sailors led by a magnificent centre half by the name of Beats, managed to turn the tables scoring two goals in as many minutes to literally snatch the Cup away from the Greens' eager hands.

During this period as well after the usual quibbling between Clubs and the M.F.A., a new Council had taken over and came out with the innovation of playing two leagues, one on Saturday and one on Sunday.

In the former Valletta United, Marsa F.C., Hamrun Spartans, Sliema Rangers, and Cottonera, had taken part, with Marsa emerging the winners, whilst the Sunday League included Sliema Wanderers, Floriana, Valletta Rovers, and St. George's. This League was won by Floriana.

At this stage came the first ever Christmas tourney, and aptly enough the team invited over was that of the Hajduks, who had created such a great impression with their finesse in their first visit to the Island two years earlier.

Adding plenty of power to their technique with the ball being pushed on the ground with both arrogance and elegance, the Slavs drew their first two matches against the Royal Navy and Sliema Wanderers, beat the Royal Artillery and Floriana, by 4-1 and 3-1 respectively, and drew again 1-1 with the Pick of

Malta. A week later they overwhelmed St. George's by five goals to nil, and in a return match requested by Floriana they repeated their earlier result with a 3-1 win.

In April of the same year Mr. C. Scicluna, the Ground proprietor, managed to invite to Malta a French league side, the Grenoble F.C. This team was not in the class of the Hajduks, and although they started off with a 3-1 win over St. George's they lost heavily, 1-4 to Valletta, beat Sliema Wanderers 2-1, lost to Floriana by the odd goal in three, and then succumbed to the Pick of Malta by five goals to one.

New faces were now catching the eye, as many of the oldtimers were calling it a day, and bright players like Victor Bonello (Floriana), P. Scicluna (Floriana), Formosa (St. George's), Kaneni Cauchi and Salvu Grima, both Floriana, Pisani, Mattocks, DeCesare all of Sliema, with slightly older players like Mifsud (Wanderers), Harry Samuel (Floriana), Johnny Fearne and Sevasta of St. George's, were all making the headlines.

Towards the end of season 1928-29 which saw Floriana repeating their old record of three championships in three seasons and also becoming winners of the M.F.A. Cup Tie, came the first English professional team from London, the famous Tottenham Hotspur. Public interest ran high and large crowds turned up in all the Spurs' six matches, the Londoners winning them all.

Although starting on a high note against Sliema Wanderers whom they beat by 7-1, the Spurs found tough opposition the next day against Valletta whom they managed to beat by the odd goal in three. They next beat the Army by five goals to nil, but again they had to go all out to beat a Royal Navy side ably marshalled by Beats of the Barham, with a goal

scored towards the end of the game. The following day they played Floriana, with the latter rising to the occasion, and when trailing two nil they, the Greens, scored a great goal from the tiny foot of outside right Salvu Grima. In this game a sixteen year old youngster by name of Pawlu Friggieri, made an auspicious debut, and was destined to become one of the finest footballers the Island had ever turned out. No wonder, he was the son of the great Ruggieri Friggieri.

Spurs ended their tour on a top note and retained their unbeaten record with a smashing five goals to one win over the Pick of Malta.

Following their withdrawal in the Cup tie final with Floriana, because of a last minute change in the official controlling the match, St. George's were suspended for two years, but after their application for clemency had been turned down, they were accepted back as Old St. George's, and under this title they are asked to face another Austrian side in January of 1930. This was a great side with several players like goalkeeper Hiden, fullback Sezta, and forwards Muller and Hiltl, members of the famous Wunderteam.

They beat the Saints by eight goals to nil, the Navy were scuttled by nine goals to two, and Sliema Wanderers went down by five goals to one. The Wiener Athletic Club, as this team was known, then nearly met their waterloo at the hands of the Queen's Regiment, managing to score in the final minutes of a great match in a thrilling three-all draw. The Queens had that season won the Cassar Cup beating the 1st Destroyer Flotilla in the final by 3-0.

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(to be continued)



Floriana - Sliema league match - the kick-off. Floriana won the match 1-0. Note the packed terraces on that 22nd day of March, 1925