

Football in Malta (6)

THE ROARING TWENTIES (Part two)

The moving of senior competitive football from the Mile End venue to the new Sports Ground at Gzira, combined with the ever growing rivalry between the Floriana and Sliema soccer camps, seemed to infuse the game with a new lease of life.

Called the Empire Sports Ground and built with the terracing on a ten-foot high wall to offset crowd interference in the game, the venue was the pet child of the late Mr. Carmel Scicluna, M.B.E., known to all sportsmen as "Is-Sur Memè".

The Old Firm's growth completely put in the shadow the then still prevailing rivalry between the Saints of Cospicua and Floriana, but one major attraction which was born at the Mile End and grew to gigantic proportions at Gzira was that provided by the Cassar Cup Competition.

With the two best Civilian sides to come in contention with the two best teams in the Services, the winner of this trophy would automatically become considered as the ruling champion of football in the Island.

The first final at the Mile End had seen the supremacy of the Civilian game when Floriana had beaten the team of the Royal Garrison Artillery by a Tabona goal. The Greens had earlier beaten the Essex Regiment, whilst Valletta had gone under to the Gunners in the semi finals.

This competition was not held in 1921-22, but the following season the Greens once again won the Cup at the expense of Sliema Wanderers, the latter making it two in a row the following seasons, beating the Gordon Highlanders 3-1 and the 4th Destroyer Flotilla by one goal to nil.

Strangely enough one finds that public interest began to wane at this stage, and it was no surprise when season 1925-26 found two Service teams

contesting the final, with the team of the Dorset Regiment beating that of H.M.S. 'Coventry' by three goals to two. This breaking of the Civilian grip on the Cup occasioned no surprise seeing that the Services were in this period replete with many teams of class.

It was no surprise during this time to see crowds at Kordin and on Service pitches outnumbering those attending the competitive matches at the Gzira Ground.

Even unto the present day there are many who clearly remember the titanic struggles between the Barham and the Malaya on the historic Naval Ground at Kordin, when the shouts of goal would ring around Cottonera.

The year following the Dorsets' success saw another all-Services final when H.M.S. 'Malaya', the Mediterranean League Winners met the Army Garrison Champions in the final, after the Sailors had beaten Sliema Wanderers in the semi-final with the Gunners just outpointing St. George's by four goals to three in the other. The Gunners with such players as Pleant, Rye and Ninness in their ranks beat the Sailors by four goals to two, the Navy goals being scored by one of the finest Service players ever seen on the Island, "Gypsy" Freddie Searle.

During this time Floriana, who had opted out of this competition as League Champions had been performing in Tunis, winning their first match by three clear goals against the Pick of Tunis, and later scoring twice against *Unione Sportive Tunnisienne*, both these matches being played in Tunisia.

Whilst the see-saw struggles for the championship between Sliema and Floriana went on, with the latter winning six titles up to 1930, with Sliema getting the other four, public interest began to flag and stutter. Transportation to and from Gzira was still a problem, many fans walking long distances, others using "dghajsas" from San Maison, and the Marsamxett ferries.

These problems were brushed aside when a new and pleasing feature was introduced to the local game, when after the visit of the Melita F.C. from Tunisia - the latter helped by three ex-St. George's stars, Hicks, Tabone and Sant, losing all their three matches, Mr. Joe Gasan introduced to the Maltese public the famous Hajduk, a Yugoslav team from Spalato.



The famous Hajduks (white shirts) in their opening match with Sliema Wanderers, 1-1

Hajduk. F. Y. vs. Sliema Wanderers. F. C. 1925. Malta.



The Viennese "Floridsdorfer" (in squares) before their game with St. George's, 1-1. Seated in the centre of the picture, holding palm wreath, is Leo Drucker. Behind him is Mr. Joe Gasan, the tour promoter

The Hajduks were a revelation, playing a close passing game, based mainly on attack, they simply ran rings round the local opposition, and had it not been for some poor finishing, they would have left with a bagful of goals. Immediately after their first match against Sliema Wanderers, which miraculously the locals managed to draw, and a great match the following day against a strong Royal Navy side, which they lost by three goals to two, the Hajduks became the toast of the day.

They drew their match with Floriana 0-0, and again drew with the Army two all, with the final match drawing one of the biggest crowds ever when they met the Pick of Malta. This was indeed a great day for Maltese football, as although outplayed technically, the Maltese players won the game by three goals to one. Salvu Tabone (Floriana) opening the score from the penalty spot, then the magical Dr. F. Busuttill of Sliema, ending a great run and dribble with another goal, with Galdes (Valletta) adding a third before halftime. It was practically all Hajduks in the second half but "Gejtu" Azzopardi was unbeatable in goal, succumbing only once, and that was to a kick from the penalty spot.

Although they did not win one single game the Hajduks went back winning the admiration of all the Maltese and all the Servicemen who had turned up in their thousands to see them.

These matches with the Hajduks had taken place in between March and April 1925, and with the fires of enthusiasm the clever Slavs had enkindled still burning brightly, another foreign side turned up in May of the same year.

This was the French club De Cette, but although losing narrowly by the odd goal to both Floriana and Sliema, and then sharing the honours with the Pick of Malta team three all, they failed to attain that high standard which the Hajduks had so cleverly demonstrated.

In January and February of the following year the first of the great Austrians, the Floridsdorfer, arrived

to show how the Viennese game had then progressed on the same high techniques as that shown by the Slavs before them. The difference was however that whilst the Hajduks preferred possession for long stretches the Austrians whilst clinging to the short inter-passing game, had also the power to push their attacks home.

They lost their opening match with Floriana by two goals to one, drew with the strong Army side by two goals each, drew with a renovated side of St. George's, and on the next day, a Sunday, they drew a bumper crowd and rose to great heights against the Royal Navy. As Leo Drucker, their great centre half was apt to remark when he returned to Malta some nine years later to play and coach for Floriana, this match against the Navy was the finest they had played in. They lost one nil, but went on to reap sweet revenge when they beat the Mediterranean Fleet Champions, H.M.S. "Malaya", by one goal to nil before their departure.

A year later a disappointment was in store for local fans when the Yugoslav club the Cronogoroc F.C. arrived to collect ten goals in their first three matches without reply, 0-5 against Sliema Wanderers, 0-2 against the Royal Navy and 0-3 with the Army. They ended their tour on a triumphant note however when they scored their only goal against the Pick of Malta whom they beat by that solitary score.

In seasons 1926-27-28, Floriana had built another strong side and they twice won the Championship, with two players playing out on both wings attracting much attention, Salvu Grima on the right and C. Cauchi "Kaneni" on the left, the latter destined to become one of the greatest inside forwards ever produced by the local game.

This period also heralded the arrival of the Tigers from Floriana in winning the Second Division (Amateur League) in four successive seasons.

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(to be continued)