

## Football in Malta (5)

# THE ROARING TWENTIES

The early "Twenties" seemed to herald in a new and more entertaining approach to the game, and it is on record how eleven clubs entered for the M.F.A. League competition for season 1920-21.

This "return" to normalcy was also evident in the ranks of the Services, who, up to the end of 1919, had suspended all their official league and cup competitions.

This was also destined to see the start of that long, and highly glamorous series of the Cassar Cup, and also the institution of the United Services Cup. This latter competition was played between the best teams from both the Navy and the Army, and great duels are still remembered between the teams of the "Iron Duke", the Royal Garrison Artillery, the Gordon Highlanders, the "Benbow", and many others of the same ilk. The two top teams were then drawn against the two top Civilian Clubs for the right to contest the Cassar Cup, donated by Mr. Cassar Torregiani, and the proceeds to go to the various charitable institutions.

With protests and abandonments still the order of the day in the M.F.A. League, both Sliema Wanderers and St. George's being suspended to the end of the season for walking out of the field in protest to the referee's decision, public interest reacted with great fervour to the great tussles between what were regarded as the giants of the game.



Floriana in Tunis before the match with Racing Club of Tunis. Floriana won 1-0

At that time Floriana had recalled all its prodigal sons, reformed its team, and went on to win the League for that season, and qualify to play in the first-ever Cassar Cup Final, and against the strong side of the R.G.A.

The Greens, who had one of the best formations ever, did not disappoint the local fans and the crowd present at the Mile End, one of the biggest attendances for the season, literally went wild when a great shot from forty yards out by Joe Tabone, the Greens' youthful centre forward, hummed into the net, to give the Greens the trophy.

The following season was destined to be the last at the old Mile End Ground, as building of a new venue had already been initiated at Gzira, in the old area housing the balloon site during the War.

The winner of the Cassar Cup, however, was regarded as winning the title of an All-Malta Championship.

The construction of the new ground at Gzira in itself made it highly impossible for crowd interference in competitive matches as had been the case at the Mile End.

The Ground was declared open by Lord Plumer, then Governor of Malta, followed by a friendly match between the team of H.M.S. "Ajax" and an M.F.A Selection, the game ending in a two-all draw, with West of Floriana and Xerri of Vittoriosa having the honour of being the first Maltese players to score at the new venue.

Soon after, another friendly drew a large crowd at the new venue when Floriana, then League Champions, had met the challenge of H.M.S. "Malaya", the Atlantic Fleet Champions. The game had been highly enjoyable and had ended on a parity of one goal each. Later, much later, when these two teams met again to settle the argument, Floriana had in their side again the Old Maestro, Friggieri, this being his last match, as soon after he died in hospital following a short illness.

Before proceeding with competitive soccer at the new venue it is apt to record that in June 1921 and May 1922 Floriana twice went to Tunis playing two matches on each occasion and winning all four to enhance the reputation Maltese teams enjoyed in North Africa. These visits had their sequel when a year later a team from Tunis, the F.C. Melita, became the first in a long and illustrious list of foreign teams visiting the Island. In the Tunisian side militated three ex-St. George's players, namely



Carmenu Tabone, Masu Hicks and Sant (Ta' Jonos), but the side lost all three matches played going under 1-0 against Floriana, 2-0 against Sliema Wanderers, and hammered seven goals to two by the Combined Services.

In the meantime, the great challenge by the Blues of Sliema to Floriana's soccer supremacy was rapidly developing, after three consecutive one-all draws at the Mile End, one in the League and two in the Cousis Shield Cup Tie. As the season was well advanced the M.F.A. decided that the final between these two sides would be played next season, but, the match would be played at the Mile End, and not at the new venue at Gzira, and that Friggieri who joined the Blues at the end of the season was not eligible to play in the final. Under these conditions the Blues called it a day and the Shield went to Floriana for the first time since its inception in 1914 - 15.

This squabble helped to fan the ever growing fires of rivalry to a red hot intensity, and everyone attending the Empire Sports Ground to watch the league matches for the season 1922 - 23, waited for the Big Day when these two rivals would meet. On January 28th, 1923, the Ground at Gzira was fit to burst when the two teams came out to do battle, and all eyes were on the ex-Green player Friggieri, now in the famous blue and light blue jersey.

Not since the far-off days of the Imtarfa, when the St. George's - Floriana feud was at its hottest, was the rivalry so keen and temperatures soared so high. It is said that one Floriana player elected to stay away from the ritual photograph before the kick-off. If the crowd paid for excitement they had not long to wait, as barely seven minutes had gone when Johnnie Tabone, the Greens' leftback went in to trap a high soaring ball in his area, when up ran Frankie Busuttil, Sliema's doctor in medicine and top goal scorer, to shoot the ball into the net from underneath the Greens' defender's foot.

The Sliema faction went literally wild, and, although the Greens went all out to equalise they found the Sliema defence, with Johnny Perrin in goal, ably defended by a great Friggieri and leftback Fearné, practically impregnable.

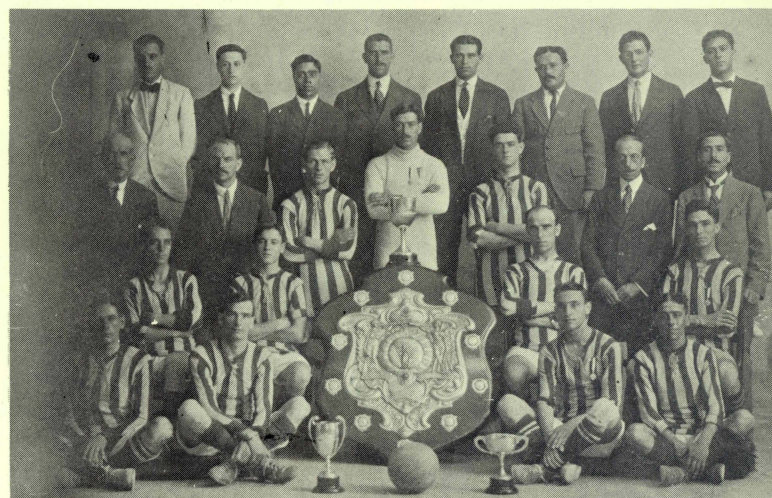
Thus Sliema shook off the Greens' hoodoo, and went on to win the big Cup presented by Messrs. Aitken Ltd., still known unto this day as "It-Tazza l-Kbira".

This soccer feud between Floriana and the Wanderers of Sliema was then likened to that pertaining in Scotland between Rangers and Celtic and from then on it became the match of the 'Old Firm', pushing aside for some time, that still existing between Floriana and St. George's.

Floriana had then introduced a young goalkeeper, E. Azzopardi, "Il-Gejta", whose acrobatic style endeared him to many sections of the crowd, whilst



The first Cassar Cup Final. Floriana in stripes. Sitting extreme left is Joe Tabone, scorer of the winning goal.



Sliema Wanderers - league champions and Cousis Shield winners 1919 - 1920

at the other end (Sliema) when Johnny Perrin left, another youngster, by the name of Joe Nicholl, took his place after having had first class experience with the other Sliema team, the Rangers. Nicholl's style was totally different from that of Azzopardi; Nicholl basing his game on taking up the right position and also studying closely his opponents, but both formed a formidable pair and were the forerunners of other great keepers which the local game turned out. Both had a great respect for each other, and both spoke highly of the other's ability on their retirement. Joe is also the proud possessor of a record of being the first goalkeeper to score from a goal kick in a friendly against a Naval side, when the wind was blowing a gale from one pole to the other.

That same season Floriana salvaged much of their lost pride by winning the Cassar Cup and the Cousis Shield, when they twice beat Sliema in the finals of these competitions by one goal on both occasions.

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*(to be continued)*