

GREAT GREENS

Carmel Baldacchino recalls the great Floriana team of the 1909-14 era.

The first big team in the history of Maltese football was the 1909-1913 edition of Floriana FC. Between October 1909 when Floriana drew 1-1 with the Somersetshire Light Infantry and May 1913 when they drew 0-0 against the Rest of the League XI, Floriana had played against all kinds of opposition, civilian or Service. During this period the Greens swept aside all challengers and only lost a couple of matches against Service teams.

Floriana won three successive championships without dropping a single point and conceded only one goal. This came in the abandoned match against Valletta United, a match which was later annulled by the Association. The 'Irish' also won two cup-tie competitions and several other trophies from charity matches played against the best service teams of that era.

This was the first big period in the history of the club from Floriana. Between 1908 and 1913 the Greens played 106 matches, losing only five. It was a record to be proud of which helped to enhance the reputation of the club not only locally but also among the British Service personnel stationed around the four corners of the world.

Floriana's fame was so widespread in those days that before a Service team came to Malta it recruited the best football players available in the regiment or in the navy so that it could compete with the Maltese champions.

Floriana owed their success to their formidable defence. Many times, they were put under pressure by their opponents, but their defence never let them down. Time after time the Greens left the field victorious and with their goal intact. Their supporters boasted that Floriana did not need a goalkeeper because their defence was

unbeatable. Their frustrated opponents however, claimed that Floriana kept winning because they were lucky and that they had St Publius between the posts.

And as if to confirm these claims, many of Floriana's successes were obtained during the week leading to the feast of their patron saint which is usually held on April 13, that is towards the end of the local football season.

After a time even the Floriana supporters began to believe that their patron saint was protecting their team. Tom Hedley when writing in *Il-Hajja* on the occasion of Floriana's 75th Anniversary relates how in 1911-12 when the league match against St George's was abandoned in favour of Floriana, the Saints' supporters on their way home stopped in front of a street corner statue of St Publius at Marsa and started pelting it with stones.

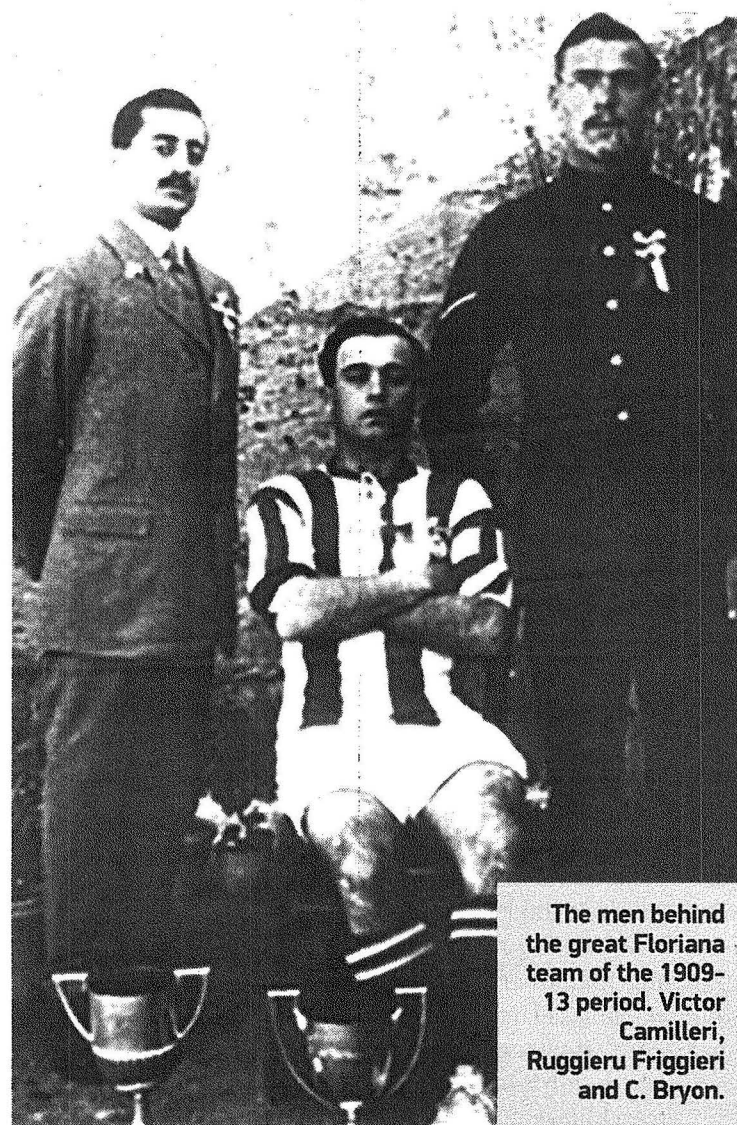
This blasphemy did not go down well with the people of Floriana and when the football committee heard about this incident, they approached the committee of the De Vilhena Band Club and together the two clubs decided to celebrate the coming feast in style.

Thousands of supporters wearing green and white scarves and ribbons in their hats marched behind the band singing and chanting slogans. The crowd included supporters from towns and villages which did not yet have a football team and who adopted the Floriana club as their own.

The cups and trophies won by Floriana were exhibited at the band club and many people paid a visit to the club to see and count the cups and exchange memories with other enthusiasts. This was the start of a long association between the two Floriana clubs which last for many years and has only been broken quite



Floriana FC 1909-13 with the trophies won by the club during that glorious period in the club's history. Carmelo Psaila, C.J. Bryant (coach), Fredu Friggieri, Ruggieru Friggieri, Emmanuel Vella, Guzi Mallia, Salvu Tabone, Alex Semini, Salvu Samuel, Jack Holland, Jack Herbert and Guzi Samuel.



The men behind the great Floriana team of the 1909-13 period. Victor Camilleri, Ruggieru Friggieri and C. Bryon.

recently when the Greens inaugurated their own club.

During the period in question, Floriana had a formidable team with a 'star' footballer in every position. Goalkeeper Carmelo Psaila had the safest pair of hands on the island. He was not

a spectacular goalkeeper like his contemporary Johnnie Perrin of Msida Rangers and Sliema Wanderers, but he relied more on his accurate anticipation of the ball.

Fredu Friggieri (the Dreadnought) at right back could

put fear into the heart of any opponent and his partnership with his brother Ruggieru, (*Iz-Zibga*) was the reason why the Greens' defence did not concede a single goal in the league during that period.

Emmanuel Vella (*Il-Bazok*) and Salvu Tabone (*Tal-Luminata*) were two of the best half-backs of that era, while Guzi Mallia (*In-Nippi*) played the centre-half role to perfection.

Floriana's attack in those days usually consisted of Alex Semini at outside-right, partnered by the great Salvu Samuel at inside-right. Samuel was a prolific goal-scorer and in seasons 1909-10 and 1911-12 he finished as the league's top scorer. Many of the goals he scored came from perfect passes from his brother Guzi at outside left.

Guzi was usually partnered by another great goal-scorer, Jack Herbert (*Ta' Sosa*). In his day Herbert was one of the most feared forwards in Maltese football. Some years ago, while we were researching the book, *Maltese Biographies of the Twentieth Century*, the editor, Michael Schiavone found a note written near Jack Herbert's name in the Public Registry, stating that he was the illegitimate offspring, of one of the sons of Queen Victoria who was serving in Malta with the Navy. Whatever the story,



Jack Holland was the only English man in the great Floriana side of the 1909-13 period. A great goal-scorer, Holland was the perfect centre-forward who could shoot and head the ball from all angles. He married in Malta and still has relatives here.

behind this bit of information Herbert was certainly a prince amongst goal-scorers.

The driving force behind this great team was, however, the club's secretary Victor Camilleri, the team's coach C. Bryon of the Royal Artillery and team captain, Ruggieru Friggieri. These three aided of course by St Publius, built one of the greatest teams in the history of Maltese football. •