

The legendary Pampalun

Freddie Mizzi made plenty of saves with amazing grace, says **Carmel Baldacchino**.

Freddie Mizzi is considered by many to be the best Maltese goalkeeper of the post-war period. Born in Floriana, he lived most of his life in Sliema and was attracted to the game from a very early age. At 12 years of age he was already keeping goal for St Gregory's Catholic Action in the Sportsmanship Crusade League. A year later, he played for Melita in the Second Division, making his debut on December 11, 1955 against Birzebbuga St Peter's.

In 1956, Freddie was transferred to Floriana with whom he stayed for three seasons. With Floriana, Mizzi won a League Championship and an FA Trophy medal but it was with Hibernians that he became a living legend.

Mizzi was the mainstay of the Paola club's great team of

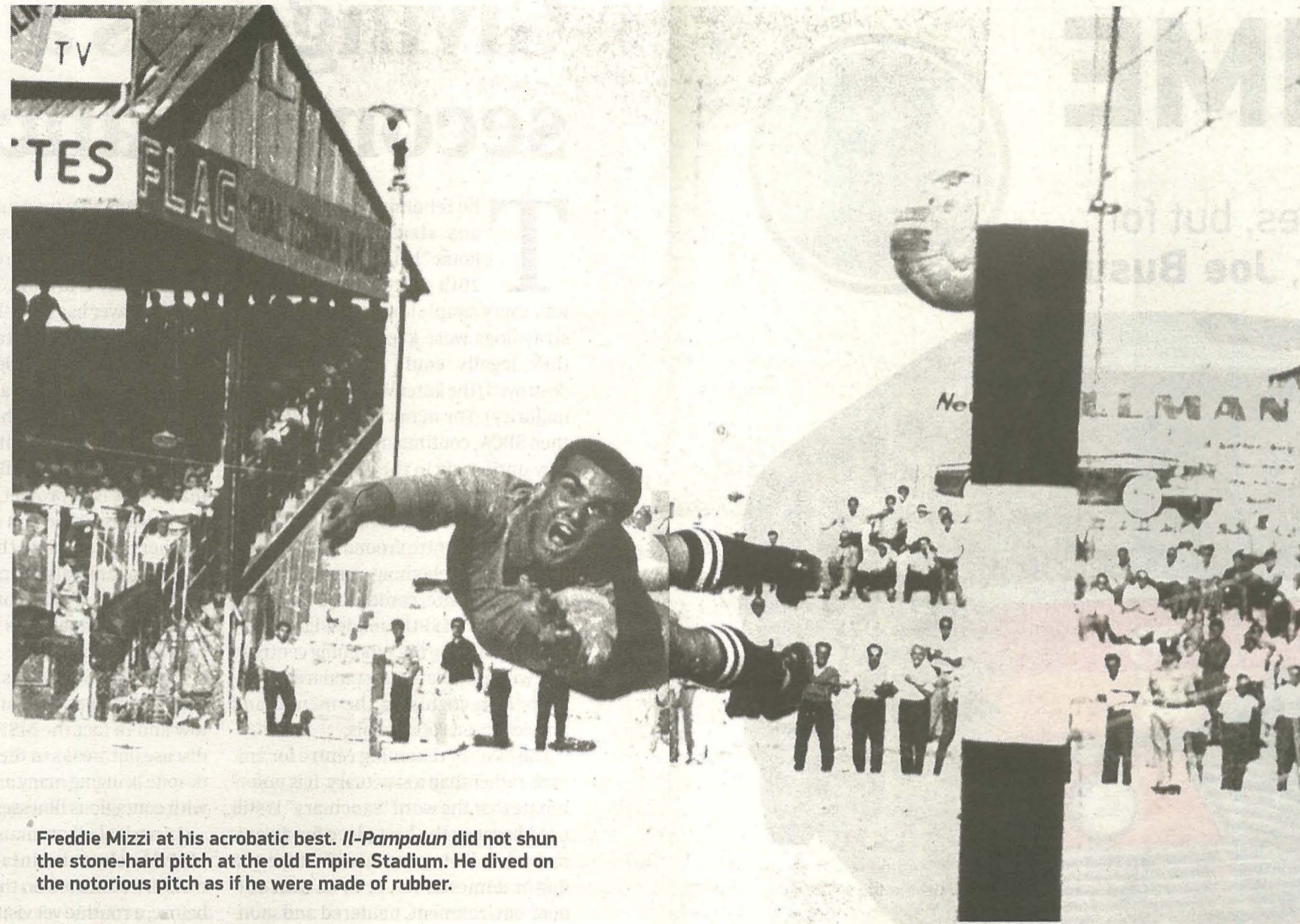
the 1960s. With Hibernians, he won three league championships and established goalkeeping records which have challenged the passing of time. Mizzi was an old hand at breaking records but his best, undoubtedly came in 1971 when he established an unbeaten run between the Hibs' posts of 1,055 minutes, all in competitive matches.

Mizzi's great run started on January 24, 1971 in the first-round league match against Floriana. He was unbeaten for the entire second half of the match which ended 2-1 and through all the rest of the league matches against Sliema, Qormi, Gżira, Valletta, Marsa and Floriana. Then he missed the second-round tie with Sliema which Hibs lost 0-2 but played in all the FA Trophy matches against Rabat, twice against Valletta, and Birkirkara.

Then came the FA Trophy final and Mizzi's record was still intact. Sliema, already champions, were making a determined bid to add the trophy to their title. Hibs on their part were also determined to keep a firm grip on the trophy they won the previous season. It was an interesting situation and to add spice to it there was Mizzi's record. However, with both teams more interested in not losing, it was not surprising that defences dominated. Both Mizzi and Albert Pearson had a comparatively easy time, and with each side being cautious it was not surprising that the end was a stalemate, even when extra time had been given.

Both goals came more or less at the same time but in different halves. Hibs took the lead after 32 minutes from a well-rehearsed free-kick taken by Eddie Theobald. Freddie Delia nipped in to flick the ball into the far corner of the net. Hibs' lead was very much according to the run of the play.

Then, in the second half, Sliema increased the tempo. Mizzi brought off a fine save



Freddie Mizzi at his acrobatic best. *Il-Pampalun* did not shun the stone-hard pitch at the old Empire Stadium. He dived on the notorious pitch as if he were made of rubber.

after 20 minutes when Vassallo passed to Ronnie Cocks who, coming in at the gallop fired a fine left footer which Mizzi saved with difficulty. However, Mizzi had no chance a few minutes later when Cocks netted the equaliser. Eddie Darmanin started the move, placing Cocks in an ideal position to hit home an unstoppable first-timer.

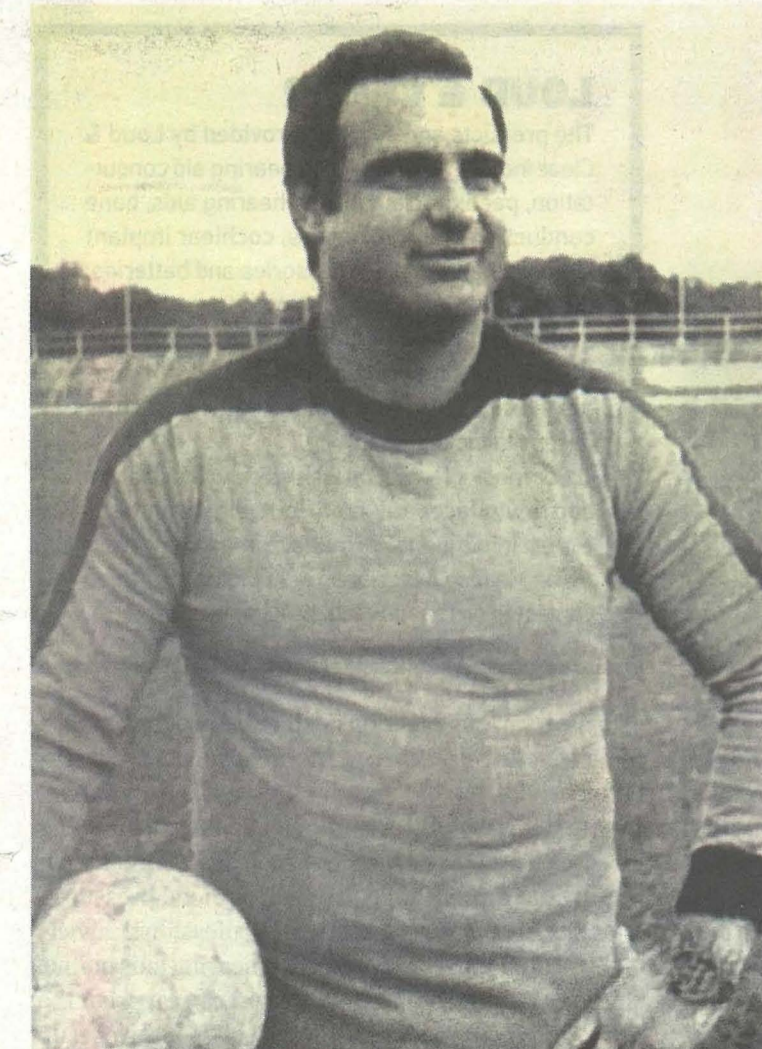
It was the end of Mizzi's fine run but not Hibs' cup run. Five days later Hibs beat Sliema 2-0 in the replay to take home the FA Trophy.

Mizzi played for the first time for the national team at the age of 15 against Queen's Park of Scotland. During his long and colourful career, he played 19 full international matches. His most memorable was undoubtedly that against England in the European Nations Cup in 1971. That was a game to remember. Mizzi was only beaten once that day by the World champions.

Nominated five times for the Footballer of the Year award, he was passed over each time.



Freddie Mizzi with the rest of the Malta squad before the famous game against England in 1971.



In 1980, at the age of 40, Mizzi came back from retirement to help his old club Hibs beat Waterford of Ireland 1-0. He celebrated the occasion with a brilliant penalty-save.

Hibs dominated the game against Waterford but they failed to turn their dominance into goals. It seemed that Hibs would pay dearly for their misses when in the 51st minute Consiglio tripped Murray in the penalty area. The Hibs supporters were speechless, but the returning veteran Mizzi received a huge round of applause as he dived sideways to save Jackson's low shot. There was no doubt that Mizzi had saved the day for Hibernians.

Inspired by this heaven-sent gift, the Paolites roared back into action, and finally broke the deadlock in the 62nd minute. Consiglio crossed for Spiteri Gonzi to nod down for Paul Xuereb to hit the ball home.

Hibs increased their efforts, but to no avail. Alas, they had neither the energy nor the time to achieve their purpose. At least they went home with a precious 1-0 victory, thanks mainly to a generous effort by their legendary hero, Mizzi.

At the end of his career, Mizzi took up coaching. Between 1979 and 1991 he coached Siggiewi, Mqabba, St Venera, San Ġwann, Lija, Qormi and Qrendi mostly in the lower divisions but he also spent a short time with his former club Hibernians in the Premier Division. •

This was, by his own admission, the biggest disappointment of his football career. In all, Mizzi played 247 league games, 215 for Hibernians and 32 for Floriana. He also played 44 games in the FA Trophy and 50 times in other competitions. Apart from that he played 20 times in European club competitions for Hibernians which included prestigious 0-0 draws against Manchester United and Real Madrid.

As the years went by Mizzi seemed to go on for ever but everything has an end and Mizzi played his last game for Hibernians on March 12, 1977 against Floriana. It was the end of a career which spanned more than 23 seasons. However, it was not the end of Mizzi.

Skill, honesty and loyalty are all important parts of a great footballer. The first ingredient is quite common in football. Honesty is rare, but complete loyalty to a club is rarer still. Mizzi had honesty and skills in abundance and in 1980 he had

the opportunity to prove his loyalty to his former club.

In 1980-81 Hibernians were drawn to meet Waterford of Ireland in the first round of the Cup of Cup Winners.

Hibs made no attempt to hide their ambition of passing through to the second round at the expense of the Irish part-timers.

Hibs had a strong side brimming with confidence, but they were in a spot. Their regular goalkeeper, Raymond Caruana was too young and inexperienced to be entrusted with such an important encounter. There was nothing left to do but to recall their veteran goalkeeper Mizzi from retirement to fill the void.

Mizzi was at the time 40 years old and had been absent from the game for a number of years. Yet his loyalty for his club and his love of the game knew no bounds, and during the week before the game, hundreds of Hibs supporters gathered at Pace-Grasso Football Ground to see their one-time hero training.



Freddie Mizzi with the Johnnie Walker Cup after helping Hibernians win their first championship in 1960-61.



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