

SPORT



Floriana FC 1908-09: Salvu Samuel, Fredu Vella, (L-Ispagu), Pawlu Borg, Fredu Friggieri (Id-Dreadnought), W. Pisani, RA Naudi, A.V. Camilleri (Secretary), J. Jones (President), Ruġġieru Friggieri (Iż-Zibġa), Jack Holland, Manwel Vella (Il-Bażokk), Ġuži Mallia and Salvu Tabone (Tal-Luminata).



Scene from the Challenge Cup match of Mtarfa between St George's FC and Floriana. The match captured the imagination of the Maltese and on the day of the game a crowd of over 10,000 spectators fought for every inch of space to watch one of the classic matches in the history of Maltese football.

The classic match of Mtarfa

A great game between St George's and Floriana attracted thousands and fired up the Maltese imagination, says **Carmel Baldacchino**.



The classic Mtarfa Cup Trophy which nowadays rests in Floriana. First played for in 1909 when Floriana FC and St George's the game ended in a 1-1 draw. The replay was played three years later in 1912. Floriana won the second encounter 2-0 and the right to keep the trophy.

In December 1907, Joseph Fearné, captain and secretary of St George's FC issued a challenge in the local newspapers to all Maltese civilian teams (*Malta Herald*, December 17, 1907). In January 1908, he issued another challenge, this time to the winners of the Junior Football League. Then, in February of the same year St George's challenged any ship of the fleet to play against them (*Daily Malta Chronicle*, February 13, 1908). The Saints were at the time the undisputed kings of Maltese football and few teams if any, were ready to accept their challenge. However, towards the end of the 1907-08 season a threat to the Saints' domination arose from their old rivals from Floriana. The Greens had never got over the humiliation suffered in 1900 when St George's had defeated them in the Floriana Cup encounter. Slowly but surely, they were building a strong team and by 1908 they

were ready to face the might of St George's. Negotiations were opened between the two clubs to stage another match for a silver cup. The negotiations were long and hard but at last they came to a positive end in February 1909. The parade ground at Mtarfa, situated as far away as possible from both districts was chosen as the neutral venue for this great encounter. The publicity given to the game during the long months of negotiations fired the imagination of the Maltese. Hundreds of bets were placed as February approached and the Mtarfa Cup became the only topic of conversation in Malta. Even housewives going about their shopping made sure to tell their neighbours that it was a sure bet that their favourites would win the trophy. The great day arrived. Crammed trains, swaying cabs and a dense mass of pedestrians made the journey. Mtarfa presented an imposing spectacle of sound and movement as the huge crowd jostled for

position. It is estimated that over 10,000 spectators surrounded the square or took other points of vantage to view the game. Most of them were decidedly against St George's. Nor were they bashful in displaying their sympathies. For them, every one of the Floriana players was a hero, and every Cospicuan a deadly foe. However, despite this charged atmosphere everything was orderly and, although extra police were sent up from Valletta, their services were not required. The game started with St George's taking the initiative. Floriana were more energetic but they were not as accurate in their passing as the team from Cospicua. The first good chance to open the score fell to St George's when they were awarded a penalty, but the ball was kicked high over the ribbon. Ruġġieru Friggieri *Iż-Zibġa* of Floriana and Emmanuel Delia *It-Tiċċ* of St George's opened a personal battle between them on the pitch. They were small men, but they



St George's FC 1908-09: Lawrence Busuttill, Emmanuel Busuttill (Balolu), Salvu Gili, Griffiths (President), P. Mugliett, Josie Fearné, J. Seychell, Ġużè Tagliaferro, Masu Hicks, J. Consiglio, A. Cordina and G. Pisani.

were renowned for the crunch of their tackles. The crowd enjoyed every minute of it. About Friggieri we have already spoken in this series. It is appropriate however, at this point to say something about Emmanuel Delia. 'It-Tiċċ' apparently was quite a character. He was small but tough as nails and he enjoyed an awesome reputation in Cospicua for his toughness and great physical strength.

Before the game with Floriana he boasted and bragged that he would kick the hell out of Friggieri. 'Iż-Zibġa' was no novice in these tactics. He was also renowned for his extraordinary physical strength. He did not fear anybody, and he made it known that he would rattle the bones out of Delia's body. Before the game reports arrived daily in both camps bearing comments and mes-

sages from both warring parties. This pique which developed between these two great characters of Maltese football added fuel to an already explosive situation. It seems that Delia got the worse of the exchanges because during the game he had to leave the pitch twice to attend to his injuries. Midway through the first half, Masu Hicks sold Friggieri the dummy before shooting in the first goal. A great

commotion erupted from the crowd. Knives, knuckle-dusters and other implements of war appeared in the hands of some of the best-known trouble makers. It must have been a horrendous situation for a player finding himself in the crowd after a furious tackle especially if he happened to belong to the other team. Punches, scratches and spitting were all in order in those brief seconds that he spent in the enemy's camp (A Survey of Maltese Soccer II, *Daily Malta Chronicle*, April 27, 1928). It was not long however, before Robbie Naudi equalised for the Irish. Naudi scored with a tremendous kick which nearly broke the rigging. When the game was restarted Floriana won several corners, but they were badly taken. The minutes ticked by and the Saints' goalkeeper Neriku Camilleri was kept busy by the Greens' forwards, but he did his job splendidly.

On the half-hour, St George's pressed forward in a desperate charge on the Irish fort but Pawlu Borg in goal was equal to the occasion and averted disaster for his team. It was now the Irish turn to attack and once more Camilleri was tested with two straight shots at his goal but once again he was not found wanting. At 4.45 p.m. Sgt. Hicks whistled for the end of the game with the score still level at 1-1. A hurried consultation was held, and it was agreed to play another quarter of an hour each way. At the end of this period however the score remained the same, therefore the referee declared a draw (*Daily Malta Chronicle*, February 16, 1909).

After the match St George's accused Floriana of having broken the pre-match contract. The Saints complained that Floriana FC was really a 'picked team' from all over the island. In those days when the registration of players was unheard of, there was an unwritten agreement among teams representing a district that all the players had to come from the place they represented. Floriana did not abide by this rule and therefore St George's felt cheated. St George's also claimed that in the incident which led to Floriana's equalizer the ball was over the line before Mifsud centred to Pisani and that the referee should have

headed the linesman's signals for a goal-kick. To draw a conclusion, it is probable that the Saints were a shade better than Floriana on the day, but it is certain that they were surprised by the improvement shown by the Greens who showed that they were on the threshold of great things. In fact, in the next few years they were to dominate Maltese football with perhaps the greatest team of the pre-World War One era. The teams on that historic occasion were: St George's: Neriku Camilleri, Lawrence Busuttill, T. Camilleri, John Born, Josie Fearné, Emmanuel Busuttill, Ġużè Tagliaferro, Masu Hicks, Emmanuel Delia and P. Theuma, G. Cordina; and for Floriana FC: Pawlu Borg, Ruġġieru Friggieri, Fredu Friggieri, Salvu Tabone, Ġuži Mallia, Emmanuel Vella, F. Mifsud, W. Pisani, Ġuži Vella, Salvu Samuel and Robbie Naudi.

“Naudi scored with a tremendous kick which nearly broke the rigging

The arguments were long and widespread and there was a huge outcry for the game to be replayed but it took the two parties nearly three years before they reached an agreement and the issue was decided. The game was finally replayed on Saturday, February 24, 1912 behind closed doors in the newly-opened Mile End Sports Ground. Floriana won the game 1-0 to win the coveted trophy. That, however, is another story. This contest so fired the imagination of the Maltese that the following season some Maltese gentlemen stepped forward and set about to organize Maltese football by setting up the Civilian Football League. There is no doubt that 1908-09 was the turning point in the history of football in Malta. The spark which was ignited by students of St Ignatius College and the pioneers of Cospicua had by now become a raging bonfire. •