

Football in Malta

1 WHEN THE BALL STARTED BOUNCING

Being amongst those who have seen and followed with so much passion and ardour the game in its infancy, one is amazed at the popularity this football game has now attracted. A following, universal in its concept, from East to West, from North to South, there is hardly a country where the pull of soccer is not acknowledged. The lure of the ball that gleams, that bounces, that glides so expertly from skilful feet, is so great that the whole world seems to stop when the World Cup matches are being played.

It has been estimated that over two billion people watched the last series, gathered round the television boxes, or, the most favoured few who packed the stadia absorbed into the atmosphere of frenzy, tension and passion which this game generates, leaving in its wake the dejected loser, the triumphant winner, and the great many others who love the skill, endeavour and the various twists of the game for the game's own sake.

What a far cry when one kicked a rag ball in a ditch, or on a deserted patch of ground, with a sound beating at the return home for time wasted and for the costs of mending torn shoes. It is about all this growth from a tiny tot-size to the present giant that this series will follow, with as much detail as possible, recalling much of the past, of how and when the ball started bouncing on the hard grounds of our tiny Isle, and of the men who played, and who organised what today is the acknowledged national game, both in Malta and throughout the whole world.

In passing let one spare a kind thought to those early pioneers who bravely, and so tenaciously, in sowing the seeds did not live to reap the harvest, to see the small plant flourishing into the giant tree it is today.

WHEN, HOW, AND WHERE IT STARTED

Following the game's real coming of age in Britain in 1863, its lures and attractions began to spread not only in the British Isles but, as one writer once expressed himself, it became Britain's best and biggest export, when sailors, soldiers and businessmen began to kick a leather ball in various countries in Europe and in South America, with the result that it caught on from a tiny spark into a veritable forest fire. Even unto the present time one finds English names

gracing foreign clubs, showing their place of origin in the distant past. One finds Everton F.C. and Liverpool F.C. playing in Chile, Newells Old Boys and Boca Juniors in Argentina, the country which played organised league football the first ever after Britain; and last but not least the Milan and Genoa clubs in Italy in memory of the pioneers who started the game in these two great Italian cities.

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Here in Malta the real missionaries of the game were the soldiers

in the Malta Garrison and the sailors of the Royal Navy. These lads in uniform with much time at their disposal and with their inherent love of sport, soon had the ball bouncing merrily up and down on the hard barrack grounds. Soon teams began to be formed and Leagues and Cup-ties became a major attraction, not only amongst the Garrison families or the ships' crews, but happily enough amongst the male part of the local population.

These competitions did not however really start before the start of the century when the Garrison Senior League was formed





St. George's F.C. winners of the Floriana Cup 13th May 1900

gained a reputation amongst the Service teams then on the Island, these decided that they too could form a team. Playing a series of friendly matches against various Service sides and sporting a red and green outfit, the dream of challenging the Great St. George's for a prestige match became a reality. Long and protracted negotiations finally resulted with both teams facing each other on one of the grounds at the Marsa. The date was May the thirteenth of the year 1900 amidst great excitement and partisan spirit which erupted towards the end and the game had to be abandoned when the Saints were leading by three goals to one. As each player had forked out ten shillings as a side stake, the Saints appropriated the money with which they bought a silver cup which they named the "Floriana Cup".

Thus ended, on a rather ignominious note, the first of a series of encounters which sparked off a rivalry, heated and protracted for the next twenty years or more.

Both teams played against the same Service sides, comparing the results and keeping the hot fires of partisanship merrily burning. During this period of soccer ascendancy St. George's had a fine record of wins against famous Service sides.

The organisation of the game in the administrative sense was also being developed and it is on record how the first ever competition under a local body, later to be known as the Malta Football Association, was played in season 1909-1910, this being won by the team from Floriana, with the newly-formed Sliema Wanderers as the runners-up.

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with the first edition being won by the 2/Loyal North Lancashire Regiment. Prior to this, however, in the daily matches going full swing on the parade grounds the first to be attracted were a group of youths from Cospicua, who flocked to the parade ground at the Verdala Barracks off Santa Margerita hill. It is reliably stated that these youths vied with one another to fetch and kick that ball when it ran out of play.

Fired by their enthusiasm and their evident natural skill in kicking the ball, one of the officers, decided to give them a ball for them to kick about and frolic.

That ball became a treasured possession and soon these lads decided to form a team to play matches with their sponsors and patrons at the Verdala barracks. Aptly enough, the team was given the name of St. Andrews, and one finds pictures of these early kickers of the ball as far back as 1895. It is also on record how these early stalwarts used to carry their own goalposts, two bars with a ribbon for a crossbar, on their broad shoulders to play their games on nearby open spaces around Cospicua. With other teams like St. Margerita

forming in the district, it was decided to form one good team to play against the strong military sides in the neighbouring barracks.

When the amalgamation of these clubs took place one searched for a name, it being finally decided that with the Englishman George Cochrane, a centre forward of much skill, playing a prominent part in the reorganisation, the name of St. George's came into being. Amongst the early founders one finds the names of the brothers Joseph and Johnnie Born, Wenzu Busuttil (Garaga), Hall, Paris, Seychell, and another Englishman with the name of Briggs. With a pub in that part of the town called Santa Margerita, as their meeting place, friendlies with the nearby teams at Verdala became regular fixtures, and soon the pupil became to be as good as his master, and the name of St. George's soon became a household word where the game was played and admired.

Not much later across the harbour on the Floriana Parade Ground, another group of young enthusiasts became involved in the game, again prompted by regimental sides in action against each other on that ground.

Inspired by the feats of the Cospicuan, who by then had

First available picture of Cospicua St. Andrew's Club 1895 (picture left), which later amalgamated with Sta. Margherita (picture right)