

Football in Malta (3)

THE TURBULENT YEARS OF PEACE AND WAR

When the volunteer-administrators sallied forth to give the game some semblance of order and a measure of discipline, they soon found that teething problems were many and varied, and were soon holding a rather undisciplined baby in their arms.

However, patiently and with much tact they soon found that a formula based on common sense and a measure of compromise, would help them decide in the many instances of "abandoned matches" — when crowds stormed on to the pitch, when referees, all recruited from the Services, gave the wrong decision; the hibernation of clubs, plus the free movement of players from one club to another. That the game not only survived, but grew in stature, was mainly due to this policy of semi-tolerance, with the result that more and more people became attracted to the game, and despite the fact that many decisions taken by the M.F.A. were not always popular, bigger and bigger crowds, averaging some six thousand for every important match, began to be registered.

During this initial period of competitive soccer, Floriana without the incubus of competing against their eternal rivals of St. George's, won three consecutive championships without conceding a single goal.

In the first cup-tie competition

Hamrun Spartans fielded their first official side and to their surprise and that of everyone else they found themselves leading the famous Greens by three goals to two. With only a couple of minutes to go Floriana were able to salvage some of their lost pride when they were awarded a penalty which was converted by the usual Friggieri. So elated were the Spartans that when the referee signalled for extra time they packed their bags and went jubilantly home.

Crowd trouble, when supporters came to blows and surged on to the pitch, was the cause of another abandonment when Floriana met St. George's in the League for which Hamrun Spartans and Valletta United also competed. This game was played at the Athletic Ground, and Floriana were again awarded the game, and no punishment was meted out to the Saints. Later, during the season Floriana and Hamrun did not enter for the Cup tie competition which was won by St. George's.

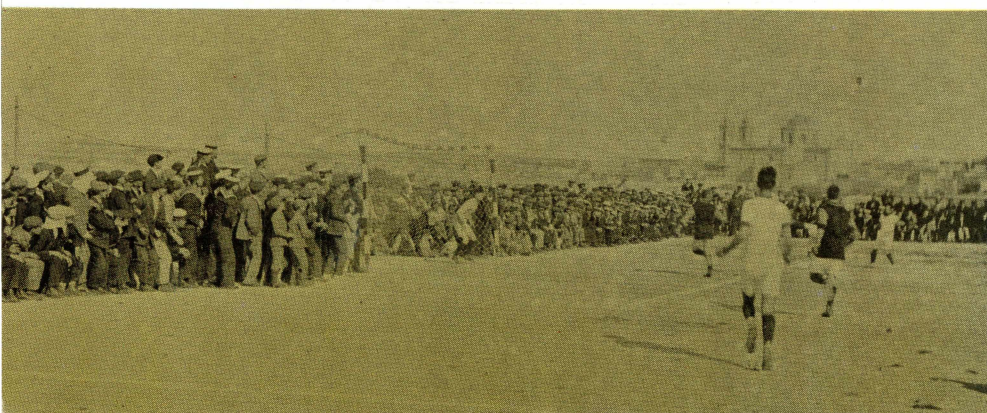
Another incident worthy of record was the one when Floriana were playing Valletta United in the League and were leading by two goals, when Valletta scored a goal against the Greens. As these latter had for the past three years kept their net intact, this goal was so much appreciated by the Citizens that their supporters

entered the field of play and carried off their players shoulder high to Valletta, without troubling to complete the remaining time of play. This time punishment was meted out, and the points were rightly awarded to Floriana, but nothing could take away the Citizens' joy that they were the first club to score a league goal against Floriana, whose defence marshalled by the great Friggieri had held out against all-comers in League warfare. The club was also suspended till the end of the season.

It is relevant to point out that the excellence of the individual in all phases of the skills of the game, was one of the main attractions, especially at a time when no "tactics" spoilt the easy flow of attractive football. It was not much the work of the team as a whole that pulled the crowds, but the game's showmen were definitely the main attractions.

That is why the Saints of Cospicua attracted so many admirers, as outstanding players like Josie Fearne at centre-half, Consiglio a great winghalf, and the wiles of Masu Hicks dovetailing so well with the scoring abilities of Tagliaferro, were able to form the basis of a great side.

There were many others emerging in the different camps — of these one harps over in another time, but at this stage one player emerged head and shoulder above all others, and that was Floriana's mighty atom, Ruggiero Friggieri. His ability to kick and volley perfectly with both feet, and his uncanny way of anticipation, made him not



Crowds surge over the boundaries of the pitch during a match. Crowd trouble and "abandoned" matches were the obvious result



The great St. George's, winners of the "Duncan Challenge Cup"

only the outstanding personality of the period, but he also became a legendary figure. "Iż-Zibġa", as he was called, was found to be practically unbeatable, and this opinion was also shared by the many skilful players then abounding in the Services.

He was a must in the many Pick Malta sides that played against the Services, he was the general in the Maltese Army team, the King's Own Malta Regiment, and he became a star of great magnitude when he played for the United Services later in Egypt.

After Floriana had won their third successive victory, they settled all arguments about the "Imtarfa Incident", by winning the replay at the Mile End Ground, by an early goal scored by their outside right Semini.

Although this match was ordered to be played behind "closed doors" – digressing somewhat, even now 70 years later, when UEFA the highest authority in football in Europe is meting out this kind of punishment to clubs' unruly supporters – yet it is estimated that thousands watched the match after clambering over the unprotected walls of the Mile End Ground, to the dismay of the Saints' officials who had faithfully stuck to the hundred tickets allowed them by the Association.

When the war clouds began to

A typical picture of the period ... Vittoriosa Rovers soon after the club's change from Melita F.C.

gather the League title was for the first and last time decided on goal average, when the newly launched Hamrun Spartans and St. George's ended on equal points with the former's table showing twelve goals for and one against, whilst the Saints had fifteen goals for and two against. It is said that Floriana, who finished fourth, fielded their strongest side against St. George's whom they beat by two goals to nil, whilst against Hamrun they fielded a side so weak as to lose by 11 goals to nil.

After this, the once invincible Greens side, then known as "Ta' l-Irish", began to disintegrate and star players began to flock and play elsewhere, with Herbert and Holland going over to Valletta whilst Salvu Tabone, Friggieri's great partner at full-back, together with Mallia, joined Hamrun Spartans. The latter were then earning a great reputation, with such fine players as Lewis, Wimshurst – whose son later played for the Constitutionals of Paola –

McAllister, and another star in the making, the great Gejtu Psaila ("Il-Haċċa"), then vying for the post of centre-half in the Malta Eleven with Busuttill ("Balolu") of St. George's. Both were great headers of the ball, and whilst the Saints' pivot showed more mobility and strength in the tackle, Psaila was a more refined type of player. His skill with the ball flowered and flourished when after playing for the Malta Police, he left the Force to join Floriana as the first full professional.

The following season 1914 – 15 saw Valletta's star shine brightly above all others, and with Floriana and St. George's not competing, they won the fourth League championship dropping only one point in a goalless draw with Cottonera, the team fielded by the Cospicuan in the absence of St. George's. Other teams then in action included Sliema Wanderers, which club was always represented since its inception, Msida Rangers, Melita F.C. of Vittoriosa and Hamrun Spartans.

For the Cup-tie competition, Melita F.C. took on the name of Vittoriosa Rovers, whilst a cigarette firm, Messrs A.G. Cousis, decided to present a shield for winners to inscribe their name on. With the wind in their sails, Valletta United went on to win a memorable double by beating Sliema Wanderers by a penalty goal in the final.

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(to be continued)

