

Football in Malta (4)

MORE AND MORE STARS IN IN THE FIRMAMENT

Soon after World War One broke out, Malta was turned into a veritable encampment, to play its part as a recuperating centre for the troops involved in the Middle East warfare, with the hospitals at Cottonera and Imtarfa full to capacity.

This influx brought in its wake quite a good number of skilled footballers, many from professional clubs in Britain. Many of these had been grouped, or drafted into the Motor Transport Corps and soon a formidable side began to emerge from their quarters at Ghajn Tuffieħa.

The Mile End Ground too was taken over to house the Army Camps and for the first time in five years no competitive football was played there or anywhere else.

However growing interest in the game was far from stifled by the turn of events, although the ever-expanding ranks of the lovers of the game felt rather disappointed.

This was more so because from the new soccer camps there were emerging more and more players of class, whose names began to ring around the Island.

Mention has already been made of the rise of the Spartans and a young lad named Psayla, whose versatility and his ball skill made him stand out in any position on the field. Another lad attracting great attention was a stripling from the other side of the Harbour, young Carmenu Tabone, picked up by the St. George's trainer when playing with a rubber ball in "Piazza Santa Margherita". Tabone, like Psayla, was a natural, and besides his natural skills: how to shield the ball, how to feint, he also packed a terrific shot from any angle. One of his greatest goals

which old Cospicuan still remember was when the Saints played a challenge match against H.M.S. "Lowestoft", when pouncing on a goal kick from his own keeper in midfield he let fly first time on the volley to smash the ball into the Sailors' net. This match had been played, on the cabled request of the Ship itself, when on recommissioning at Portsmouth, the strength of the St. George's team had been mentioned. Into the Ship's company went some of the Royal Navy's best footballers to beat what was then considered to be one of the best teams in Malta. It is said that the Ship's Captain was so impressed with Tabone that he offered the lad to join one of the clubs in England at the end of hostilities.

The Sailors who had earlier beaten Valletta, went down by two goals to the Saints, the second again from Tabone, and matches like these helped to whet the appetite of Maltese football lovers.

Still on the aspect of the ever growing number of stars, new names began to come to the fore, Cristiano of Valletta, one of the hardest kickers of the ball despite his small stature, and Bartolo, his teammate, who as the best keeper specialised in keeping out penalties. He was presented with a gold medal at the end of his team's best season.

Salvu Tabone, "Tal-Luminata" became the best back after Friggieri, whilst pint-sized Masu Hicks still gambolled around as the best schemer.

Around these players was formed the formidable eleven of the K.O.M.R.M. who met, played and often beat the best the Services could offer in that period. Mention has already been made of the Motor Transport Coy's team, this latter offering the stiffest obstacle that the local soldiers had encountered.

The K.O.M.R.M. known as "Tal-Milizja", led by Ruggieru Friggieri, won a league of sorts when all the major clubs stayed away after failing to come to terms with the Ground Management in season 1918-19, the other competitors being Hamrun United, Army Service Corps, Cospicua Rovers, and Sliema Amateurs, none of which could offer the local soldiers any stiff opposition.

This offered some sort of consolation to the soldiers as sometime before they had lost the Mile End Cup to the professionals of the Motor Transport, led by the Wolves and England centre-forward Davies.

Towards the end of the first ten years of

The powerful K.O.M.R.M. in 1916/17/18. R. Friggieri is standing top right



competitive football, the score was nine league competitions, and four cup ties, nearly all registering squabbles regarding abandoned matches due to crowd interference, due to different interpretations of the rules, and also to some bad and amateurish refereeing. Betting on favourite teams was also much in evidence and this played a big part in upsetting the normal run of a game.

With the approach of the Twenties, Sliema Wanderers began to imprint their class and strength on the local game, with the emergence of such players as the Busuttill brothers, Johnnie Perrin in goal, and the immaculate Archie Caunter who moved into the centre half berth after the departure of Huggins, the Exiles centre half, and one of the finest all-round players then appearing in local soccer. The name of "Exiles" was given to the team fielded by the Easter Telegraph Coy, several players of whom joined and played for the Sliema team with much success.

Aided by the dribbling gifts of Macallister, who joined the Wanderers after giving great service to Hamrun Spartans, the Blues went on to win their first "double" of League and Cup in season 1919-20.

Public attention was also centred around the matches played by the Services, and one match which always aroused great interest was the annual duel between the Royal Navy and Army Selections. Records show that these keen tussles started way back in 1905 when the Sailors won the first match with the Soldiers. In practice, this was rather surprising as the Malta Garrison was well replete with good players, totally accustomed to play on the hard barrack grounds.

Public support was equally divided with the Dockyard people rooting for the Navy, with their home pitch at Kordin, whilst over the other side of the Harbour sympathies were totally with the Soldiers.

Up to 1914, from nine encounters the Navy emerged winners six times, the Army winning once and the other match was a draw.

These encounters were resumed in 1920, again the Royal Navy asserting its supremacy, thanks to some grand players from H.M.S. "Iron Duke", winners of the first ever competition of the United Services, like Fox, Macgregor, Seattle of the "Barham", and Johnson and Fry of the "Centurion". All these players became favourites with local crowds, fans from all over the Island flocked to see them in action, at the then famous venue of Kordin.

The Twenties seemed to herald a new and highly interesting era, but before pulling down the curtain on the first ten years of organised football one must recall with a certain amount of pride, St. George's setting the ball rolling in venturing to Tunisia, to successfully play a couple of matches winning both to



The Royal Navy XI vs Army (2-0) in 1914



The team of HMS Iron Duke, winners of the United Services League 1919/20

the great delight of the large Maltese community. Nor must one forget the "temporary" engagement of Maltese star players like Friggieri, Troisi, the Tabones and Samuels, by Italian clubs to help them in their crucial and final matches. Then of course the game in Italy was not in an organised state as it later became, and the registration of players was a loose matter indeed.

It is also on record how Friggieri was asked to help build a team in Palermo, and how he recruited the first batch of players by picking up youngsters playing ball in public parks. There are still people in the neighbouring Isle who still remember "Il piccolo grande Friggieri".

J.H. Griffiths

(to be continued)