

Football in Malta (14)

HOW THE CROWD DID ROAR

Before continuing with the saga of Malta's magnificent debut into the international arena, one goes back a couple of years when an invitation arrived for Malta to send a team to compete in the famous international tournament at San Remo.

With the age limit fixed at nineteen, players like Cini, Buttigieg, Eddie Mizzi, and Sultana, could not be roped in, but the selected squad laboured hard in the heat on the turf at Marsa. Harder still was their mode of travel, on deck of the ferry "Westminster" followed by a racking eighteen hours in a packed train to Rome. After a twenty-hour rest, the team entrained for San Remo at ten at night and arrived at nine in the morning. Next day the team went down one-nil through a penalty goal for an unnecessary penalty against First Vienna — this was going to cost them the qualification into the quarter finals, and two days later a more than creditable one-all draw was achieved against the holders of the tournament the Carlin Boys of San Remo. Tributes were paid to the team, one coming from that star player Meazza who was coaching the Inter boys at the moment.

Back to that grey afternoon in February, 1957, when twenty-five thousand eager spectators crammed into the Stadium at Gżira. To the large majority it was only a question of by how much would the Masters from Central Europe would romp away home. Few realized that the spirit of the Maltese players had never soared so high and their confidence in their ability to put up a high fight was unshakable, even when the Austrians, much against the run of play had led by three goals, one a harmless own goal, the Malta boys stuck to their plan and raised the roars of the crowd to the high heavens as first Sammy Nicholl found the net, then, minutes later Tony Cauchi hit the second. Before the final whistle the same player hit the foot of the post with the Austrian goalie beaten. No wonder that the crowd invaded the field to chair their darlings to the dressing room.

Tributes from all sections of the press followed the next day, the players were given a cap to commemorate the occasion and a special message of congratulations came from the Governor, and even the British Press gave tribute to the Maltese effort.

Space has been allotted to this event because it heralded a new era in the history of the game in Malta. Hitherto our ambitions had always bordered round getting some good results against touring club sides at Christmas, or by beating the Services in the Cassar Cup.

Now new horizons opened up and this match was later followed up with another against Denmark, then touring Israel. When the Danes were soundly beaten three-nil, they said that this was not their full international side but a Copenhagen selection. This was hard to believe seeing that eight of the side had earlier played against England and the other three were also internationals. Coach Van Housens did not mince his words: he said Malta had played better whilst many of his players had shirked the tackle.

For the record the team against Austria deserves to be named as they lined: V. Scerri (S.W.), G. Bonnici (S.W.), L. Debattista (F.), A. Calleja (S.W.), (G. Jones H.S.), J. Cilia (Val.), J. Cini (St. John), L. Borg (F.), S. Schembri (S.W.) Capt., T. Cauchi (F.), S. Nicholl (S.W.) and P. Demanuele (F.), Referee Sig. Orlandini (Italy).

In the match with Denmark a newer and younger element was introduced, Brincat of Floriana replacing Debattista, Jackie Grech of Valletta playing at right-half vice Calleja, and Josie Urpani of Valletta replacing Lolly Borg in the forward line. All these newcomers retained their place when Malta had to face the strong Italian Under-21 — the Primavera — coached by Foni.

The Italians had a strong side many of whom later played for the full international team, like golden boys Virgili, Fogli, Stacchini, Losi, Guarnieri and Mattrel, but they failed to adapt themselves to the conditions and could only produce a one-all draw.

Having mentioned the insertion of three Valletta players in the National side, it was evident that the team from the Capital seemed to be taking the right course in re-building, and besides the three already mentioned they had a clever centre forward in

Signor Orlandini, famous Italian international referee, leads out the Austrian and Maltese teams for the first international to be played at the Stadium

(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)





Sammy Nicholl is smothered by his jubilant team mates after scoring Malta's first goal against Austria

(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

Azzopardi, a stout defender in Charlie Mackay; Frankie Zammit, a strong hard hitting inside left, and bonny Joey Zammit at outside right. These players began to function well as a team and it was hardly surprising when they broke the Floriana–Sliema monopoly to win the League Championship in 1958–59, going one better the next year by winning both League and F.A. Trophy.

Following the good results obtained by Malta in the international arena, an invitation arrived from Tunisia to play a match in Tunis against the Tunisian National Team. This was accepted and it was played at the Stade Municipal on March 8, 1958. Despite the many training difficulties and obstacles put up by our hosts Malta could have scored three clear goals in the first half, but on a sandy surface the team disintegrated in the second and only yeomen service by goalkeeper Cosby, fullback Bonnici, and winghalf Vella James enabled Malta to achieve a goalless draw.

Two years later Malta made full amends in the return at the Stadium when a much improved Tunisia succumbed to a Lolly Borg goal in the first half.

The Tunisian interlude was not yet over as Malta

was drawn with both Tunisia and Morocco, to qualify for the Olympic Games which were to be held in Rome. This time only Amateur players had to be selected, whilst both Malta's opponents fielded their full National teams on the pretext that all their players were amateurs.

The two home matches produced two draws and although the team played well only goalkeeping lapses turned a two goal lead into a draw against Morocco. In the away matches the Maltese found that refereeing abroad was quite a different matter than that enjoyed in Malta, and both matches were lost 2–0 against Tunisia, having a good goal by Theobald disallowed at the flagging of a Tunisian linesman, and in Casablanca the team played its best match but again bad refereeing and a blunder in defence found the Maltese losers by two goals to one.

Thus Tunisia went into the qualifying rounds in Rome, but soon after they took the necessary precautions and engaged a fulltime Yugoslav coach that transformed their side.

The difference made by this coach was evident when the team came to play its return, and although

losing they left more than a good impression. Although qualifying as amateurs, all the players were employed by the State, and reported for training every day. That is why these African and Eastern countries have shown such good form in recent World Cups, because they take the proper and serious view, with excellent coaching and players being allowed off work to train daily with their mentor.

Here in Malta at that time coaching was painfully taking off the ground. At the invitation of the Minister of Education the writer organized two courses for teachers, and out of this move there emerged many good coaches who helped to add lustre to the game. These also helped to give strength and vigour to the newly-born Coaches Association, and many local clubs began to find faith in the local material.

In this quest the Coaches received much help and recognition from the Press and from the then serving Secretary, later to become the President Mr. Eugene Bonello, M.B.E., who formed the Technical Board with the Coaches represented.

It was the Technical Board which organized more Courses notably the one sponsored by F.I.F.A. when Sir Stanley Rous himself came over to open the Course and lecture both coaches and referees, having Harold Hassell of F.I.F.A. and Ken Aston, the international referee, to continue the work with both coaches and referees.

These contacts with the best in coaching and refereeing brought off some good results and contacts were kept with both Hassell and Aston who both later came again to impart much needed technical knowledge and know-how of the game.

Before these courses however another contender had come into the field with Hibernians winning their first championship, after having won the Cassar Cup off Sliema Wanderers. Hibs then had a good combination with the Theobald brothers, Johnny Privitera, Sunny Anastasi, Freddie Mizzi in goal with Leli Sultana and Jimmy Mizzi getting the goals in front.

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(to be continued)



San Remo. A heading duel between Said (in dark jersey) and two First Vienna defenders

(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)