

Football in Malta (16)

TOWARDS A CENTURY

Before embarking on the last lap of this rather curtailed effort of bringing to the public some of the highlights of ninety years of football (1895 – 1982), it is apposite to recall the fact that the Clubs after one lucrative season (from the financial angle) at the Manoel Island returned to the Gżira venue the following season 1966 – 1967. It was agreed that the structure of the Ground itself had contributed to three abandonments, and to much inconvenience on cold, wet and windy winter afternoons.

The innovation of playing an M.F.A. League on a one-round basis and a National League, both won by Sliema Wanderers, was eventually dropped when the Clubs went back to Gżira.

From the beginning of 1971 to the end of season 1982, Malta had played 54 international encounters, some in the European Cup of Nations, others in the World Cup qualifying rounds, and some of a friendly character.

The first of the biggest started off with a great bang heard all over Europe when Malta met England in the European Cup of Nations, in the first leg, at the Stadium in February, 1971.

For this match preparations had started as early as in September of 1970, when Roy Small, the Scottish international coach, was brought over by the M.F.A. for short seminar for Coaches. This was accomplished by including the whole Malta squad for special training, in order to demonstrate new training methods. Intensive training followed with two good results against Greece (1 – 1) and the Swiss (1 – 2) in the same competition.

Before the game with England the team was given intensive preparation in the physical and tactical approach for two whole weeks before the match, with an intensive study of the England team's way of playing as the basis.

It is history how some thirty thousand people turned up for the match, and how England just scraped through with a Peters goal, and how Banks made the save of the match to thwart Cini in netting a deserved equaliser, in the closing stages.

Another glittering page was written, and perhaps gave the greatest satisfaction was Malta's first victory in the European Cup of Nations in February of 1975, when Greece was beaten by two great goals in the second half of the match. Going through the list of these international encounters another fine result stands out, one which had a direct bearing on the final qualifications of a team for the World Cup finals in Munich.



The first Malta team to record a win at the Stadium in a competition, when beating Greece by two goals to nil. Standing: Aquilina, Gatt, Ciantar, Xuereb, Vella, Holland; squatting: Darmanin, Azzopardi, Vassallo, Magro, Camilleri
(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

Sweden had earlier beaten Malta by seven goals to nil in Stockholm in October, 1972, and was running neck and neck with Austria for the final qualification for the Munich World series.

Again hard preparation nearly did the trick, including some strange refereeing decisions which threatened a crowd invasion when a blatant penalty was ignored. The Swedes finally ran out winners by two goals to one, but had to play a decider with Austria before finally going to Munich, as a result of the Malta match. The trail blazed by the Malta representative sides, including some painful experiences by the Youth side, was one of hard endeavour, at times good at home, with a much different tale when performing away, sometimes under very strange conditions. When West Germany led by Beckenbaur came in December of 1974, they could only go back home with one goal in their baggage, and five years later they had to be content with a goalless draw. As a flashback one recalls Malta's Amateur side playing in the Mediterranean Games in Naples, pitting its young and inexperienced side against the national team of Egypt (0 – 6), against Lebanon (2 – 1), against Spain's Under 21 (0 – 8), and against the finalists Turkey (0 – 2). When Malta next took part in an Amateur tournee in Genoa, later, a full national side was fielded and the team did well to finish third, beating the Italian amateurs and the Dutch in the process.

Inadequate time and very little facilities for proper training plus the factor of playing our main football on a hard rocky surface, made the road taken by



Fabri, Floriana keeper, tips out a hot shot from Delia, second from right, with Debattista and Theobald looking on (Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

Maltese football in the international atmosphere a risky and bumpy one indeed, both at club and national levels.

Gradually all the best teams in Europe found it hard to beat the Malta team on our own ground, and in the recent qualifying matches for the World Cup, East Germany just scraped through by two goals to one, whilst the game with Poland had to be abandoned by a strange Yugoslav referee when he allowed the Poles to get away with a dubious second goal. For this the Malta F.A. had to pay heavily being fined by F.I.F.A. and having to play its first two home matches on pitches away from home.

In a way this helped to give great satisfaction when Malta had to play its home fixture with Iceland for the qualifying round in the U.E.F.A. Cup of Nations. Selecting the Sicilian town of Messina for its 'home' game, Malta had the satisfaction of beating Iceland by two goals to one, quite a festive ending to this rather curtailed review of Malta's matches at both friendly and competitive level, which in all totalled seventy-three. Fifty matches were played by Malta Youths, with a double victory over Leichenstein and a one-nil home victory over Wales, plus a no-goal home draw against Switzerland as being amongst the best results obtained.

Mention must also be made of Malta's participation in the competition called the President Cup which was played in Seoul, in South Korea, where two draws against Leichenstein and Vitoria of

Brazil, one defeat against Danubio of Uruguay, preceeded two victories over the National Teams of Thailand (2-0) and Indonesia (1-0).

In the domestic scene the seventies produced a balance of power amongst the teams, with a much more equitable distribution of the top prizes.

New names were coming forward and the fruit of learning and coaching was being produced at many levels, following the great drive by the M.F.A. and the Coaching Association made in this sector. Both Hibernians and Valletta were offering strong and positive challenges to the Old Firm's monopoly, and once Marsa, a pioneer club with little luck in the top sphere of the game finished top with Sliema Wanderers in the League when a play-off had to be staged before Sliema could be declared Champions. For their great run Marsa drew a plum in the U.E.F.A. Cup competition when being paired with the famous Italian club Juventus.

There was also the time in season 1972-1973 when all the big clubs were swept aside in the F.A. Trophy competition, and little Gżira United and Birkirkara faced each other in a thrice-played final, with Gżira emerging winners to inscribe its name on the famous trophy, where only Melita's name intrudes proudly against the names of the Big Four, not forgetting the big challenge offered to Sliema by Hamrun Liberty way back after the War.

In season 1974-1975, Floriana celebrated their 75th anniversary by winning the League, having in

their team such fine players as Willie Vassallo, who became Malta's skipper in many an international making a great tandem in midfield with Arpa plus others like Farrugia and the Holland brothers.

Valletta were coming along too with a nice blend of young and experienced players, having four successes in the last ten years or so.

Another team to make the headlines in the finals for the F.A. Trophy was that of Senglea United, who after winning promotion they challenged Floriana's might in the final, only to go down with banners flying.

Another occasion when one of the less glamorous sides nearly made soccer history was when Birkirkara ended runners up to Floriana in the League and just lost to the same team in the final of the Cassar Cup in the same season. Rabat F.C., known as the Magpies also made soccer history in the fifties when they emerged as a force in the League, only to come a cropper against Floriana in the final of the F.A. Trophy.

Now the name of Rabat has again jumped into prominence with the fine Rabat Ajax side which has recently won the Div. 1 title and promotion to the Premier League.

Rightly enough prominence has been given in this rather curtailed version of the history of the game in Malta to the top clubs who have figured so prominently through ninety years of football. Figures speak for themselves, Floriana won the League 24 times, Sliema 21, Valletta 11, Hibernians 6, Hamrun Spartans 3, St George's 1, and K.O.M.R. 1. The F.A. Trophy has gone 17 times to Floriana, 16 times to Sliema Wanderers, Valletta have won it four times, with Hibernians winning it five times, Melita and Gzira once.

In this summing up one must not forget the consistency of the other clubs, who have trodden a hard trail, but each of whom has had its own moment of glory, or those clubs who despite maintaining an independent status, provided the Big Clubs with so many players, who also eventually graced the National XI. To these clubs goes the merit of being the basis on which the local game is built, to their committees and supporters a high degree of admiration for their steadfast belief and devotion to their colours.

To those like Marsa and Msida, who both played in the early days of the game, to Melita's big run in the 'thirties', to the many Amateur clubs like the Tigers, Gioventù Cattolica, Constitutionals, Senglea and Sliema Rangers, all of whom played for the game's sake and were indirectly looked upon as fertile nurseries of the big clubs, and to the others, too many to name goes the thanks and appreciation in their efforts to contribute to the game all their pains and efforts.



A group of Malta coaches together before the start of an M.F.A. course sponsored by F.I.F.A. with John Jarman, the main tutor, standing at the extreme right
(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)



Malta players hold a tactical talk three days before their big match against England
(Photo credit: J.H. Griffiths)

The end of this treatise finds Hibernians as the team of the present, and rightly enough the Paola Club is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, winning a unique double. Finally, after so many years football is now being played on the turf of the National Stadium, built by the Ministry of Sport, which in its turn has given a fillip to the game by its organizations of Government and Parastatal soccer, its Under-16 competitions, and also the popular Military tournaments.

To all those who have played, to those who have laboured hard between the scenes, to the referees, to the supporters of this great game goes the wish that when in ten years time Football in Malta will be hundred years old they will be there to celebrate a unique occasion.

J.H. Griffiths

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FURTHER READING

Griffiths, Joe H. A Football Saga. Malta, 1985.

The author of this series regrettably died before completing his last contribution on local football in the eighties.