

Football in Malta (11) RISING FROM THE ASHES

Like the new white buildings sprouting out from the rubble and debris, accumulated as the heritage of a bitter war, the game of football started struggling to lift its head once more, and wake up from the paralysis clamped down on it by the siege conditions and constant bombing.

The game itself had not completely been abandoned, matches between Service sides, and some local sides brought together to form opposition. In this connection Melita were prominent in staging several of these friendlies, roping in many guest players.

Soon after the invasion of Sicily the game began to look up in earnest.

With the bulk of Malta's youth in the Services, many players began to catch the eye, especially a young curly haired youngster who was destined to become one of Malta's greats. Salvinu Schembri, a prominent member of the 1st Coasts of the R.M.A., had already been included in a Pick Army team.

There were also the pre-war stars still in the front line of combat when the game re-started in earnest, players like star goalkeepers Harry Edwards, Wenzu Gabaretta, defenders Robbie DeCesare, Effie Borg, the brothers Friggieri, Ċensu and Paul, and forwards "Scotch" Cauchi, Victor Vassallo, and Maurice DeCesare. These helped more than anyone else to put the game on two strong feet. Nearly all of them were playing for either the Army, R.A.F., or for teams of the Royal Navy.

When Civilian teams began re-grouping the Services allowed the clubs to sign two English service players, and soon a Malta Cup competition was held. Crowds began to cram the Stadium and even friendly matches between the Civilian Clubs and the Services during the week attracted much attention.

During this period of re-forming by the clubs it seemed that Valletta had been the luckiest as they were able to recruit practically the whole of the side doing so well in Services soccer, of the 1st Coast Regiment of the Royal Malta Artillery. This included stalwarts like Schembri, fulbacks Demicoli and Portelli, halfbacks Attard and Sulina Borg, with Lofaro and Curmi helping Schembri in the forward line plus the help of a clever inside forward from the Services by the name of Mee.

Together with Melita, who included in their ranks Pritchard and Humphreys of the Lancashire Fusiliers, Floriana and Sliema both with the tag of Athletic



Occwirk, the great Austrian centre half of S.K. Austria

(Photo Credit: J.H. Griffiths)

for economic reasons, and St. George's who included the British pro's Horton of Preston North End and Mitchell of Newcastle and Scotland, entered for this competition.

Valletta, by far the better combination, won this only edition of the Malta Cup when they beat Floriana in the final by 2 - 1.

The British Services had some grand players in their ranks, many re-joining professional clubs when they returned to Britain, and one memorable game was when they combined to play and beat a strong Malta XI by five goals to one.

Valletta went from strength to strength and when the League competition was resumed in season 1944 - 45, they won the competition. They beat Floriana in the final of the Cassar Cup, when both teams were allowed to field two guest players. Valletta had Tony Nicholl who scored a great goal, and Floriana included Victor Vassallo and Gabaretta.

Floriana got their own back by winning the Trophy, and excitement was at its height when the famous Hajduks, under the Red Army team tag of Yugoslavia, were invited back on their fourth visit. This was a new side completely except for having as their official two pre-war favourites, inside forwards Bencic (on his fourth visit) and Lemesic, both internationals.

The team modelled by the English international Cullis, of Wolves fame, played the Third Back game to perfection.

One could imagine how public interest was aroused after four years of famine, and how eagerly everyone responded to the call, as the clever Slavs again recaptured the approbation of their Malta public. Playing seven matches and winning them all, the Slavs were hard pressed in their last two games when they just managed an odd goal in three wins over the Combined U.K. XI and an M.F.A. XI.

The repetition of fielding an All-Malta side, a team which included both British and Maltese players had gone down by five goals to three. This experiment had been tried way back in 1935 during the visit of the S.K. Prostejov, when the Czechs had trounced a patchy looking All Malta XI by eight goals to two.

Back to Valletta, they again won the League the following season, and their nucleus of players from the 1st Coasts enabled their regimental side to win three Garrison Leagues in a run, and the Army Cup for five successive seasons.

Following the successes of a team called the Hamrun Liberty in their tussles with Naxxar Lions to win the Second Division title, and the heroic bid by the same players in trying to win the Trophy from Sliema Wanderers in the final, Hamrun took on their old name of Spartans when playing in the First Division the following season. Back to the final of the F.A. Trophy, when the Hamrun onslaughts were only

thwarted by the great goalkeeping of Gabaretta, and two goals from a sick Tony Nicholl. The Trophy that day went to Sliema but the honours went to the Hamrun lads. The inspiration from this final fired Hamrun Spartans to an extent that they took the First Division League title the next season.

The previous season had seen a great comeback by Sliema when losing by two goals at halftime against the Royal Navy in the Cassar Cup final, they staged a great rally, inspired by a great goal from a diving header by Nicholl, they ended winners by four goals to two.

Now during this period trouble once again reared its head behind the scene when the Ruling Body and the Ground Owner were at cross purposes, and while the game idled, the Ground Owner together with some prominent sportsmen formed the Anglo-Maltese League from which emerged the famous Ajax of Floriana, founded and coached by the old Floriana stalwart, Frankie Tabone. Ajax began to attract the crowds, even to the extent of filling the newly constructed Schreiber Ground, and an average of four to five thousand spectators wherever they played.

The Schreiber Ground was constructed by the late Captain Xuereb, who used the accumulated war debris in the Cottonera area to build this ground,



Floriana Ajax, in their original formation, with Frankie Tabone their coach and mentor on the left

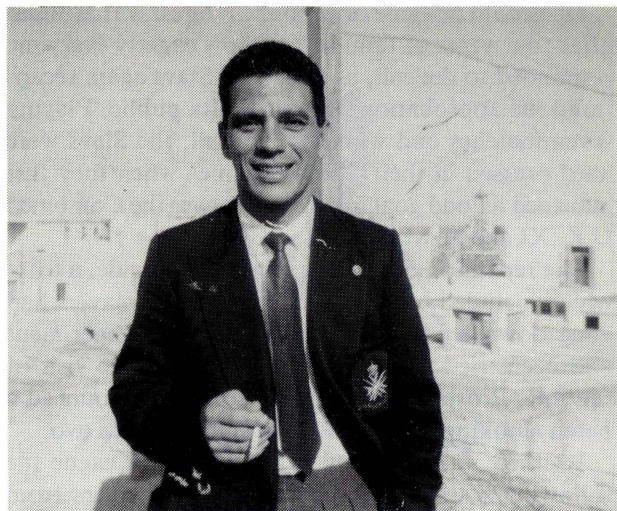
(Photo Credit: J.H. Griffiths)

which was named after the Governor of the Island who had given the permission.

All minor and third division matches were then played on this high patch of ground at Paola, which was the scene of heated matches between the Hibernians and St. George's (third strings) and some marvellous games by the Ajax.

The next Cassar Cup final for 1946 – 47, saw a big clash between Hamrun Spartans and Valletta, when the former had to battle their way through a packed Stadium, and go on to beat Valletta by two goals to one. It was described as the "Forest Fire Final" by that fine journalist, Tommy Hedley, the day after the match.

Back swung the pendulum to the benefit of Valletta who had engaged as a pro' Sam Rodgers, who had played for the R.A.F. during the War and had guested for Floriana in the Malta Cup matches. The City, playing some fine football, won the League, Sliema won the Trophy, whilst the 1st Coast Regiment beat Hamrun Spartans in the Cassar Cup final. Foreign visitors that season were the Zabrovesky of Czechoslovakia, who played seven matches, lost three, one to a fine Valletta/Floriana combination by three goals to one, and lost their final match against a Malta XI by five goals to one. They had alternate luck in their other matches against a conglomeration of combinations, raised mainly to attract public support. This method of combining players from different teams to play well-drilled sides from the



Salvinu Schembri, one of the most talented players, Captain of Malta
(Photo Credit. J.H. Griffiths)

Continent showed its fallacy when the clever S.K. Austria turned up for that year's Christmas tourney. With a star-studded side, including the great Occwirk, Stojaspal, Stroh and Melchior, it was mostly a "Slaughter of the Innocents" until they met an inspired Malta XI which held them to an honourable 1 – 1 draw. In all, they had scored 54 goals against five, notching double figures on four occasions.

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(to be continued)



The teams of Hamrun Liberty and Sliema Wanderers, before their F.A. Trophy final; Hamrun in dark shirts

(Photo Credit: J.H. Griffiths)