

## Football in Malta (10)

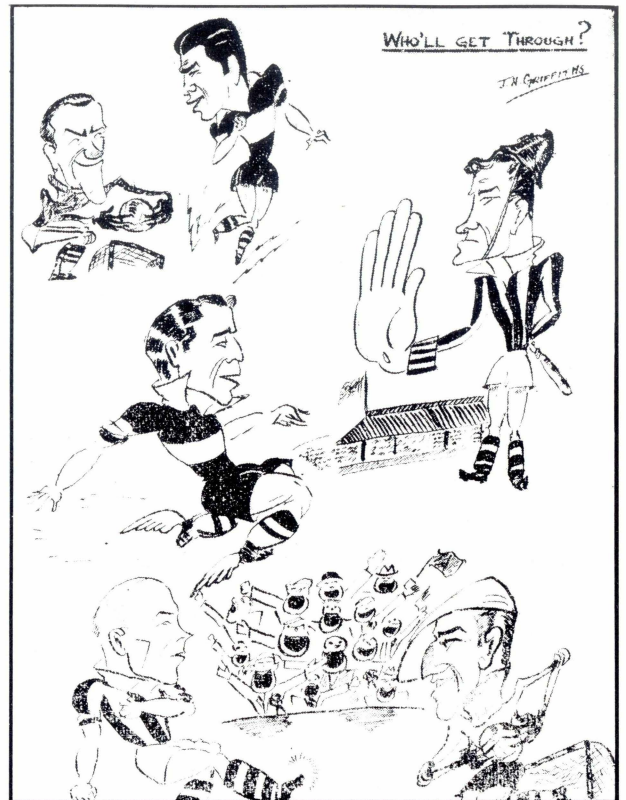
# THE SHOOTING STARS

The popularity of the game never soared higher, with so many skilful foreigners playing alongside our own, lifting the latter's potential. Sliema Wanderers on their return from their tour of Yugoslavia and Austria, brought along with them a blond, stocky Austrian, by name Freyberger, who operated at centre half. This position had created problems for the Wanderers especially after their abortive attempt to lure Garret of the Rifle Brigade from the Army. But after Vickers' resignation, the Army authorities put up the red light and no more transfers were allowed.

Later with the arrival of Frimmel, another Austrian, who made a great debut against the S.K. Rapid, Freyberger moved to outside right on a memorable day the Blues avenged their heavy six-one defeat at the Hutteldorf in Vienna, turned the tables on the Austrians to inflict on them a three-two defeat, Sammut scoring Sliema's first with Tony Nicholl scoring the other two with a memorable winner. Now the Rapid's centre half was none other than Wunderteam's Smistik who once dribbled round seven players before scoring a goal against St. George's.

During Rapid's stay the Hungarian from Budapest came also to Malta, and these if anything had more class than the Austrians. A memorable game was played against the strong Floriana team, the Hungarians winning by a Cseh goal, whilst when the two foreign teams met, the latter won the day by the odd goal in three. In the ranks of the Rapid, one man stood out both by his height and by his shooting power, this was none other than "Bimbo" Binder, the terror of many of the best European goalkeepers. Both teams went home with a bagful of goals, although both Sliema and Floriana had given both something to think about.

When they went away local rivalry asserted itself once again and everyone rubbed hands when a Sliema-Floriana duel hovered on the horizon. More foreigners joined these two clubs, Marat an elegant leftback, an Austrian, and Krcil, a Czech who had played for his country at left halfback in the World Cup Final in Rome, wore the white and green, whilst Sliema continued their search for a centre half by engaging Lowinger, and then the Yugoslav international Gayer. All these showed great class but they failed to fill the bill as a centre half, until the Blues solved their problem, with Kelinu Azzopardi,



A pre-Old Firm match cartoon, pairing Svoboda and Nicholl, Sammut and Vickers, Bond and Edwards  
Credit: J.A. Griffiths

ex-Valletta, and R.M.A. playing the game to perfection. Great duels were played then, "Scotch" Cauchi, younger brother to Kaneni, tussled with Robbie DeCesare, Tony Nicholl against his guardian angel, Steve Vickers, Salvu Sammut versus the wiles of Marat, and how the crowd roared and loved it all. Bond's terrific bursts down the middle and the great goal he scored against Sliema after brushing aside DeCesare's challenge will long be remembered.

Although all four senior teams had from four to five foreign players, it was evident that both Floriana and Sliema Wanderers had clinched the best bargains, and the championship, the Cassar Cup and F.A. Trophy, saw a tight grip by the Old Firm in the sharing of honours.

The Blues won the League and F.A. Trophy, with Floriana winning the Cassar Cup in 1935-36, at the end of which season the Greens left to play in an international tournament in Algiers winning third place behind the Scottish League Club Queen of the South and Santander of Spain. The following season



A shot by Nicholl beats Svoboda when the latter kept goal for Hibernians



Peter Platzler of Admira is seen being beaten by a shot from Baister of the Royal Navy  
Credit J.A. Griffiths

Floriana not only regained the championship, but ran up the highest score ever to be recorded in a Cassar Cup Final by seven goals to nil. This match created plenty of argument, and left much bitterness in its wake, especially when Hibernians eventually disbanded and disappeared from a glorious setting they had done so much to create.

The semi-final for the F.A. Trophy in season 1936–37 saw the partners of the Old Firm paired together and they combined to produce one of the finest matches one could ever recall between these two giants of the local game. The score stood at one each at full-time, but in the closing stages of extra time Salvu Sammut seized on a Marat miskick to send the ball thundering into the net for the winner.

In this particular season a twenty-five-year-old record was broken when St. George's managed to beat Floriana – then at their best – by a sensational goal scored by Degiorgio from a pin-pointed pass by the Saints' German forward, Grenfeld. The Saints had parted with Drucker after the latter was made a scapegoat, when the famous Sliema trio, of Sammut, Nicholl and Gayer, had struck in five goals in a league match.

Drucker was later snapped up by the amateur team

Melita as a player coach, where he found the ideal field for his unbounded talent as a teacher.

Melita were then struggling in Division 1B when Drucker took over, after a phenomenal three season rise from the Fourth to the First Division.

Back to 1936–37, Sliema Wanderers earned much satisfaction when after disposing of Floriana they went into the final to win the Trophy, after having to break a stubborn goalkeeping display by the Saints' Scottish goalkeeper, Haggart. Two goals in the second half by Tony Nicholl put an end to the Saints' hope.

It was the other way round the following season, Sliema Wanderers won both League and Cassar Cup, but lost the Trophy to Floriana who had Leo Dunne, an Irish international at back, instead of Marat who left the Island together with that graceful and stylish Czech, Krcil.

Slowly dark war clouds began to gather on the far horizon and many of the Central European stars in the ranks of the local teams began to leave for their homeland. Some of these departures were swift and sudden, without even the Club committees being advised or warned. This was mainly during and after season 1937–38 when the crack Hungarian side

Ferencvaros, came, saw, played and conquered, chalking up the unbeatable tally of fifty-five goals in seven matches. This indeed was a great side with Sarosi at centre forward and Toldi at inside left, the spearheads of a magnificent forward line.

Their departure towards the end of January 1938 seemed to signal the end of an era, the end of the years of plenty, preceeding a harrowing seven years of famine.

One after the other, Malta's foreign legion began to disintegrate. Many were the reasons given, and it seemed that a glance into the crystal ball had induced the many financial backers of the clubs to close their cheque books, with the result that local soccer had to face up to another bleak spell.

However, the Services were again looking up as far as their encounter with Civilian Clubs were concerned, and when a strong Royal Navy side beat Floriana in the semi-final of the Cassar Cup, the odds were on the Sailors repeating their success by beating Sliema Wanderers in the final.

Predictions seemed to be coming true when the Sailors led the Blues by two clear goals in the first half, and few fans present gave Sliema a chance.

On the changeover the miracle happened and Sliema got two quick goals to equalise, and when

with only few minutes to go Tony Nicholl flashed in the winner the whole Stadium exploded to honour a great goal, a great player and a great recovery.

The season ended with the Greens getting some satisfaction when they beat Sliema Wanderers, regarded as firm favourites before the match by two goals to one.

For some unknown reason Floriana failed to compete in the next two seasons, and Melita, the all-amateur team, rising like a meteor from the fourth to the top division, took up a leading position in all competitions. Coached by Drucker, Melita played some excellent soccer, ending runners-up to Sliema in the Senior League, losing by five goals to Sliema in the Cassar Cup final after beating the Royal Navy in the semi-final, and capping a great season by beating their rivals of Sliema by a four goal margin in a memorable Trophy final, to become the only team apart from the Old Firm to win the famous trophy. During this crimson patch Melita won the Amateur Cup on three distinct occasions, all this giving more than ample satisfaction to the Amateurs' founder and mentor, that grand old man of soccer, the late Sur Ġann Bencini.

Before writing finis to the post war period it is apposite to recall the grand goalkeeping of Wenzu Gabaretta against the might of the Ferencvaros when keeping goal for St. George's. The Saints had taken the lead, but all the fury of the Hungarians' attacks broke down at the hands of the inspired goalkeeping of the Saints' custodian. Beaten once finally for an equaliser, Gabaretta was only beaten twice more and on both occasions from the penalty spot for minor infringements.

In order to revive the game after the departure of the foreigners, the Ruling Body issued a "Yellow Form" allowing amateurs in both the Senior League and in Division I, to play in both competitions, each club not to play more than two players with the yellow form.

In the last season before War II broke out St. George's were strenghtened by the inclusion of the Wanderers' sharp shooter Salvu Sammut, and managed to beat the Blues for the newly launched Christmas Cup. This competition was intended to fill the gap left wide open by teams who could not be enticed from abroad for the popular Christmas tourney. The last to come to Malta were the Rigas of Latvia, a modest side which went away unbeaten, and drawing two all against a Malta XI. George Bond had stayed on in Malta and that year helped Sliema Wanderers to win both League and Trophy, but lost the Cassar Cup to the Army.



George Bond, ex-Millwall and Floriana centre-forward

Credit J.A. Griffiths

**J.H. Griffiths**

*(to be continued)*