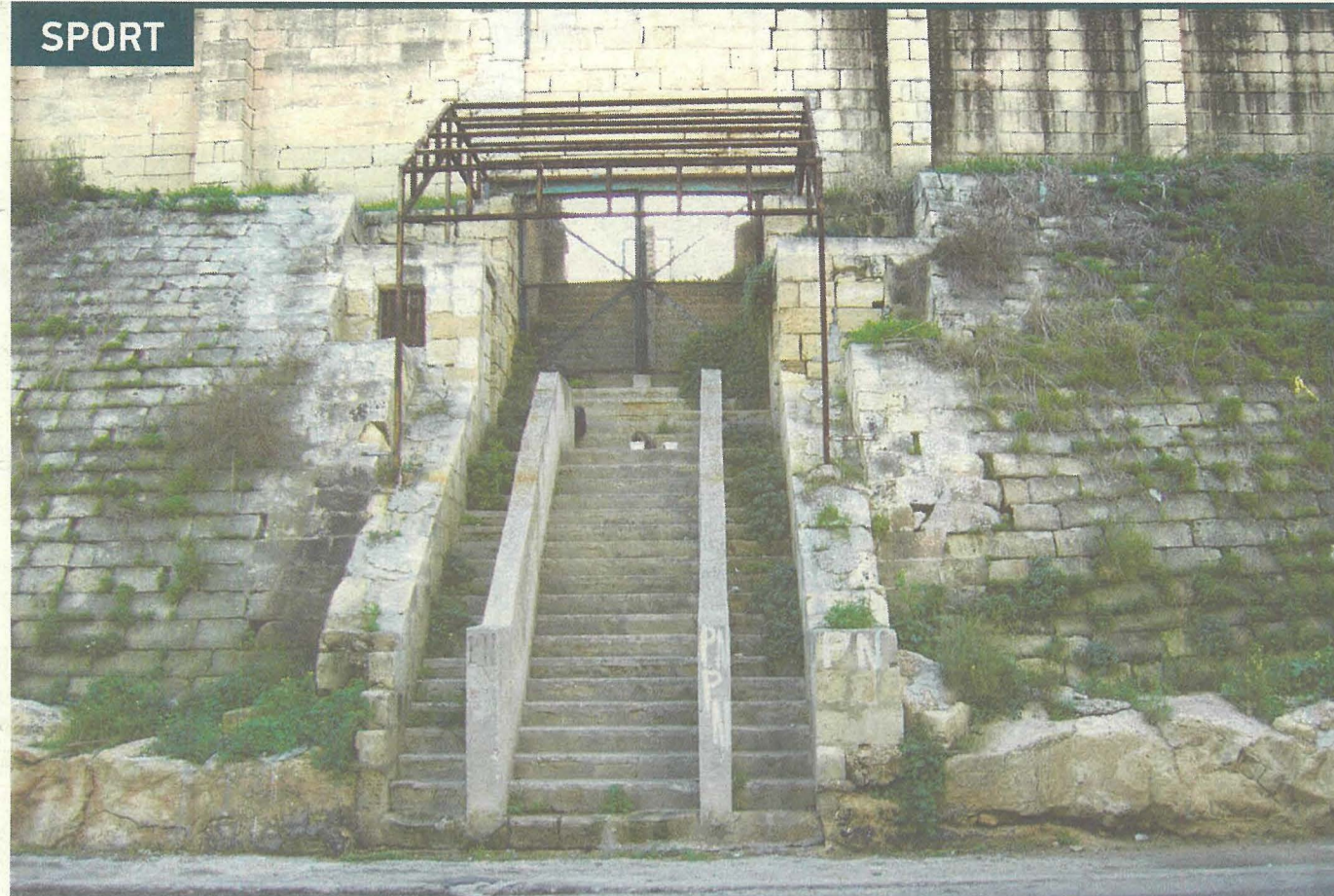


SPORT



The Schreiber Sports Ground in ruins. This recent photograph shows the dilapidated state in which the old ground has fallen. The area is marked for redevelopment and it will soon disappear, leaving only fond memories of a bygone era in the history of Maltese football.



Mons. Frans Xuereb, Prime Minister Sir Paul Boffa, Governor General Schreiber and Captain Serafino Xuereb during the inauguration of the Schreiber Sports Ground on October 12, 1946.

The ground of my childhood

The old Schreiber Sports Ground brings back many fond memories to Carmel Baldacchino.

In 1944, His Excellency the Governor General Sir Edmund Schreiber launched a scheme for the provision of recreational facilities for the Maltese islands. He appealed to all public-spirited people to come forward and help him. A council made up of citizens prominent in various spheres of society was set up.

Captain Serafino Xuereb, the head of a well-known firm of building contractors, and a keen sportsman had just won a government contract to clear the war rubble of Cottonera. The Captain who, at the time was also the president of Hibernians FC came up with the idea of using the rubble to build a retaining wall around a low hill in Paola to turn it into a football ground.

The captain was the ideal man for the undertaking and the Council for Recreational Facilities lost no time to accept his proposal. On July 21, 1945, the Paola and Tarxien branch of this committee was formed. It was this committee which paved the way for the dumping of tons of war debris from the Cottonera area around the hill known as 'Tal-Borg' to form the basis of the new football ground.

The first trucks started to arrive on site on October 10 of the same year. Work started in earnest but after a short while it had to stop. It seems that the people who lived in the area objected to the idea of having a football ground in their midst. Many letters for and against the project were written in the newspapers. However, the Governor as the originator of the idea was very much in favour of the project and after his direct intervention the work was re-commenced.

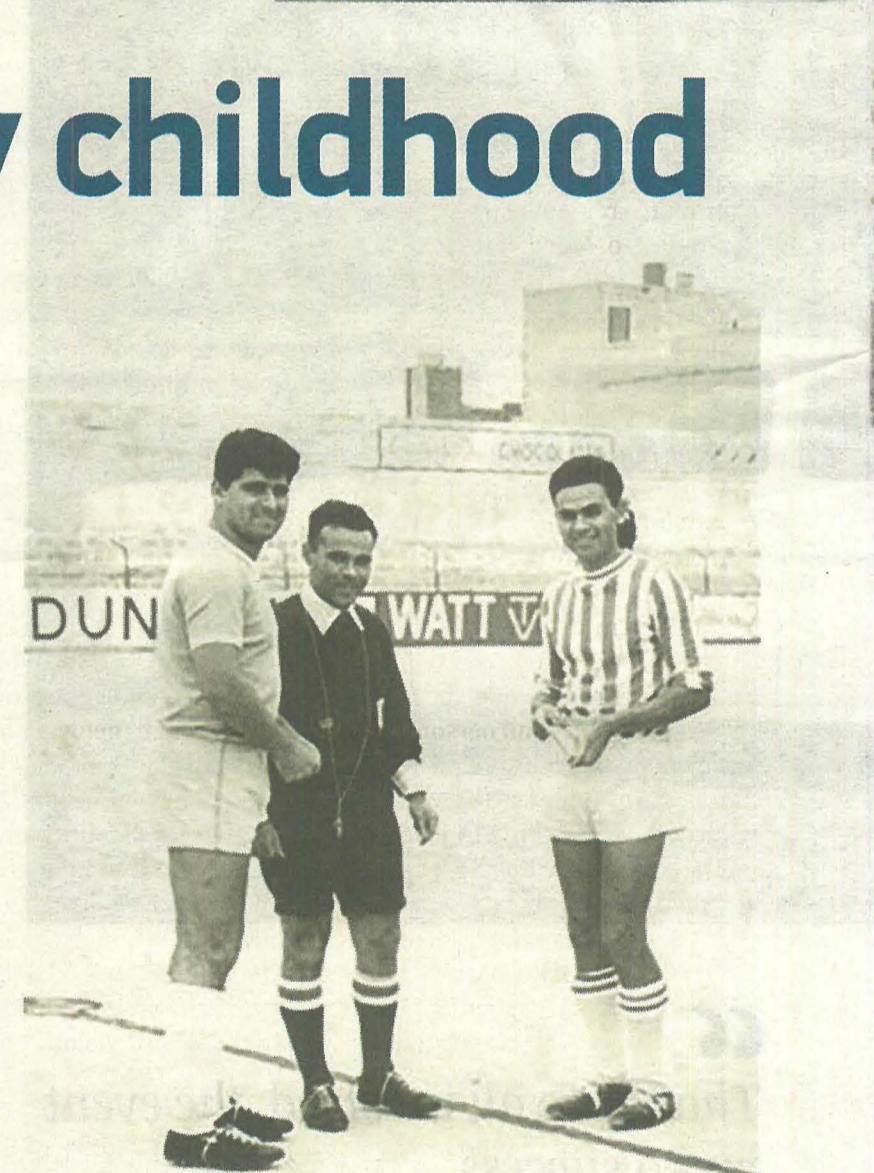
The very name of the place, 'Tal-Borg' which means 'a heap of stones' was a fair indication of the enormity of the task facing Captain Xuereb. The place was just a wild tract of broken rock and rubble. Levelling, with differences of 20 to 30 feet in some cases, was in itself a huge task. But in an amazingly short time the ground started to take shape. The retaining walls slowly rose up to embrace three sides of the hill which in time took the appearance of a carefully rolled bowling alley.

The captain then put his hand into his pockets and found money for the extension of the water supply, the dressing

rooms, and all the necessary equipment. Captain Xuereb was an elegant white-haired gentleman of the old school – he named the ground after Sir Edmund Schreiber and for the next 50 years the ground served Maltese football as the under-study of the Stadium, and the Ta' Qali National Stadium.

The Schreiber Sports Ground was inaugurated on Sunday, October 12, 1946 with the Minor League match between Mosta Youngsters and Birzebbuga St Peter's. During that first season, the ground became a beehive of activity with matches from the Third Division, the Minor League and the Associate Members League being played nearly every day and in all kinds of weather.

The ground remained the property of Captain Xuereb up to 1959 when the lease passed to the hands of the brothers Scicluna of the Stadium for the sum of £9,750. The Scicluna brothers wanted to demolish the ground and build a new one so that a system of 'home and away' could be introduced in league matches. The clubs to the north of the island would use the Stadium as their home ground and the southern clubs would use the



The late referee Johnnie Casha was a mainstay in the Schreiber Sports Ground in the 1960s. Johnnie was one of the many characters who left their mark on the famous old ground.

Schreiber. This plan however, never materialised.

On May 4, 1963, the Nationalist Government extended the lease of the ground to the Empire Stadium Co. Ltd. This lease was terminated in season 1977-78 when the Labour Government of the period took over the ground. The ground was given a general facelift and all colonial ties were severed once and for all when the name

was changed from Schreiber to Pace-Grasso Football Ground in memory of the two Hibernians' supporters who were tragically killed in an explosion right after the 1952 FA Trophy final between Hibs and Sliema Wanderers. The renovation gave the old ground a new lease of life and it was still in use well into the 1990s.

The old Schreiber Sports Ground brings back to me

many fond memories. I was brought up at Tal-Borg, which is the street leading from Paola Square to the famous old ground. I remember the grand old days of the ground when thousands of people made their way every weekend to watch those titanic battles in the Third Division of yesteryear.

I remember every Sunday, come rain or come shine going to the ground early in the morning with a lunch pack under my arm and staying on up to the early evening when the last match on the programme was completed.

The Schreiber had its fair share of events and personalities. I remember the time when the world famous three-ring circus, Apollo came to Paola. The circus met with all kinds of calamities during its stay in Malta including the accidental death of one of my friends. He skipped school to go and watch the animals being transported into the ground only to finish up squashed against the ground's door by one of the truck-driven containers.

I remember the ground's caretaker, *Ic-Combos*. He was a surly man who did not think twice to set his dogs on you if you got on the wrong side of his nerves. Yet, on his best days, he would let us in the ground free, as long as we did not make too much of a nuisance of ourselves.

There was also *Id-Dajna* who acted as a sort of kit-manager for Hibernians during their daily training sessions at the Schreiber. He was a kind old man who let us use one of the balls for our daily kick-about at the old ground.

There were many other characters, mostly players and referees. One had to be brave to be a referee in those days when the spectators acted as crazy Romans at the arena. One of those foolhardy enough to sound the whistle in those days was my late friend and colleague, Johnnie Casha.

I first met Casha during my RAF days when he worked as an engineer at RAF Luqa. Later on he joined Enemalta where he took care of the company's apprentices. This brought me in touch with him frequently. Later on Casha became a colleague with the Education Department.

Casha spent most of his refereeing career controlling matches in the Second and Third Divisions and he was a regular fixture at the Schreiber and the Stadium on Sunday mornings. I also remember him acting as linesman in the First Division.

For many years Casha was secretary of the Industries Soccer Association and when he retired he became president of the Association. He also represented the association in the MFA. But it is as a referee in the lower divisions that Casha will always be remembered.

The ground now stands forlorn and abandoned. It is in a depilated state and the area is earmarked for redevelopment and it will soon disappear for ever, leaving only memories of a bygone era in the history of Maltese football. For me and others who like me were brought up in its vicinity it is another broken link with our childhood. •