Jo Araf

The FORGOTTEN Cup

History of the Mitropa Cup, Mother of the Champions League (1927-1940)

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FROM AMATEURS TO PROFESSIONALS: GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF EUROPEAN FOOTBALL

IN FACT, cross-border football took root in Europe almost at the same time as local football. The first attempt to create a competition between clubs from different nations dates back to 1897, just a few years after the first football teams appeared in continental Europe. The Challenge Cup, or Challenge Kupa as it was known in Budapest, was founded in Vienna by John Gramlick, a prominent member of the Vienna Cricket and Football Club. The tournament adopted the knockout format from the very first edition and began as a sort of progenitor event of the Vienna Cup, only to become a competition open to the best teams gathered under the Habsburg crown a few years later.

Despite the noble intentions of the founders, fair play did not always prevail on the field: due to the growing anti-Austrian sentiment in the various provinces of the Empire, the matches often ended in brawls. The organisers had decided that the cup would be awarded once and for all as soon as a team had won it for the third time, but then went back and decided to continue after 1904, the year that coincided with the third success of WAC (Wiener

Athletiksport Club). It was also agreed that the defending champions could keep the cup until 1 April the following year and that at the end of the tournament the winners would each receive a gold medal. While the teams from Budapest and Prague participated free of charge as guests, the teams from Vienna were required to pay an entry fee of 20 crowns.

The key year in the Challenge Cup's progress towards becoming an international competition was 1901, when two Bohemian teams, Ceski AFC and Slavia Prague, battled it out in Prague to decide which team would face the Austrian champions in Vienna. Slavia won and six months later the red-and-whites played the final against WAC. It was the first time that two European teams played each other in an official trophy match. The match ended 1-0 to the Austrians thanks to a goal scored by Josef Taurer, a player now forgotten, who collected some respectable records: only 13 days before, Taurer had scored the first goal in the history of the Austrian national team against Switzerland and the following year he would repeat the feat in an officially recognised match against Hungary.

The 1902 edition was the first to which teams from Budapest were invited and a few years later a representative from Moravia, DFC Brno, and a team from outside the Empire, the Germans of VfB Leipzig, would appear, two clubs now defunct but at the time among the continent's best. The Challenge Cup was also the showcase for the first stars of the Danube firmament to make a name for themselves and be worshipped by their fans: among those idolised in Budapest, for example, were Imre Schlosser, who would later become one of the most prolific strikers in the history of football, and Gáspar 'Gazsi' Borbás, to whom FTC and national team goalkeeper Alajos Fritz dedicated a poem in which he depicted him as the soul of his team

and the best Hungarian player. For their part, Austrian fans had cultivated an adoration for Jan Studnicka, WAC's star player, known for his irresistible dribbling and deformed legs often depicted by the cartoonists of the time; Ludwig Hussak, star of the Vienna Cricket and Football Club and captain of the Austrian national team; and Willy Schmieger. In the years between the wars, Schmieger would become the country's best-known sports broadcaster, and was a forward in the Wiener Sport-Club team, with whom he won the Cup in 1911.[7]

The Challenge Cup was played until 1911, despite a temporary suspension between 1906 and 1908. The matches, which at the time were not very well attended, were mostly played on uneven and unmaintained ground. From time to time there were curious episodes that would become customary over the years. For example, when a ball was kicked outside the playing area, fans would sometimes try to take it away as a souvenir, unleashing the wrath of the players eager to resume the game.

The competition was always won by teams from Vienna, except in one case, in 1909, the year of the only Hungarian success by FTC, later known as Ferencváros. The local press reported:

'FTC managed to bring the cup to Hungary after an extremely intense struggle. The team had to face three very strong opponents in one week and played without Rumbold. In addition, the main problem of the attack was that Seitler was sick. Because of this, the player worked hard to follow the ball but could not do much more. The defence was excellent, especially Fritz!'

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7 An employee of RAVAG, Schmieger was one of the European pioneers in the field of sports radio commentary and a controversial figure. However, in this work I will only mention his contribution to the game of football.

The referee of that match was Hugo Meisl, a former footballer and the major driving force and visionary within football at the time, the man who more than anyone else worked to make football become a business and a mass product as we know it today. A character without whom, probably, this book would never have seen the light. In order for football to become as popular in continental Europe as it was in England, Meisl and some of his colleagues used to invite British teams to play friendly matches on the Old Continent. British football was 30 years ahead of its time and was well known in Vienna and the surrounding area, so much so that every time an English or Scottish team faced a Central European outfit the crowds were drawn to the playing fields. The first time an English team travelled to Vienna was on Easter Sunday 1899, when Oxford University defeated a local selection 15-0. The game was repeated the following day, but the outcome was almost identical: 13-0 to the visitors.

These were years in which the gap between the English masters and their European pupils was evident, both from a collective and individual point of view. Defeats by visiting British teams were formative for Austrian football: Robinson, for example, goalkeeper of Southampton, would be remembered in Vienna for his unprecedented interpretation of the role and would be long imitated by his local colleagues. Thanks to his innate agility, the extraordinary defender was able to dive from one side of the goal to the other and neutralise his adversaries' low shots. This type of save would set the standard in Vienna and be renamed *Robinsonade*.

As the years went by, the difference between Austrian and British clubs became smaller and smaller. Some good individual performances did not go unnoticed and on one occasion Glasgow Rangers decided to offer First Vienna

goalkeeper Karl Pekarna a contract after a friendly match in the Austrian capital. He was the first European player to go to the United Kingdom, although that spell was cut short after just one match: Pekarna, deemed unfit for the task, was sent back.

Thanks to the efforts of Hugo Meisl, who as his brother Willy recalled in his work *Soccer Revolution* squandered a small fortune in organising friendly matches between Viennese and foreign teams, tours of English teams to continental Europe became more frequent and in 1905 a mixed mini-tournament would end in an all-British final. Tottenham and Everton faced off in front of a record crowd of 10,000 spectators! In all likelihood it was then that Meisl realised he was on the right track. He would do everything in his power to encourage the development of football and in 1912, when Austria took part in the Stockholm Olympics, the first event in which football became a truly respected discipline, Austria went to Sweden with an English coach. His name was James 'Jimmy' Hogan and in the years to follow he would shape European football like few others.[8]

Despite being English, Hogan decided to import the philosophy of Scottish football, known in the UK as 'the passing game' or 'combination football'.[9] Danubian football, in contrast to the English style of 'kick and rush', provided a strong cohesion between departments, the emphasis on short passes and a module, the 2-3-5, known as 'the Method', which would take root without distinction in the various countries of Central Europe. It included two full-backs, which today would be the central defenders, a

8 Jimmy Hogan and his impact on European football is a matter of debate. However, the coach is cited by most as one of the fathers of continental football.

9 In Austria it would soon be renamed *Donaufußball*.

three-man midfield line composed of the so-called 'halves' or 'supports', as the Italian newspapers called them, two wings, usually exempt from defensive duties, and the forwards. The characteristics of the centre-forward were different from those of the English centre-forwards: he was something between a false nine and a *trequartista* – also defined as a centre-forward – capable of receiving the ball to feet and sending his team-mates, the 'inside forwards', who acted as real strikers, towards the goal, to positions from which they could shoot easily.

Hogan came from the Dutch team of Dordrecht and arrived in Vienna at the behest of Meisl who, after a disappointing friendly match between Austria and Hungary that ended in a draw, had asked Howcroft, the referee, if he knew of a coach who could lead his national team. Howcroft's advice fell on his compatriot Hogan, 28 years old at the time. At the Olympics in Sweden, the Austrian players, Hogan and Meisl (present as referee) got a taste of how football would evolve in the following years. Meisl had also made the acquaintance of his Italian alter ego, Vittorio Pozzo, a figure with whom he would share the European stage in later years.

But the giant steps that the new-born football movement was taking were frustrated only two years later by the outbreak of the Great War. The conflict pitted nations against each other that had only a few years earlier begun to forge their first sporting relationships. Not only that, but on 28 July 1914, the day on which the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia, many of the English pioneers and those who had given an important impulse to the game of football over the years became 'persona non grata', 'enemies on foreign soil', and consequently were taken prisoner. Among them was Hogan: only two days before the start of the conflict the

coach had gone to the British Consulate in Vienna to ask if he and his family should return to England in a hurry. He said he was reassured that there was no real danger, but two days later war was declared, he was taken from his home in the middle of the night and put in a cell 'along with thieves and murderers'.

A similar fate had befallen other British footballers who had contributed to the development of European football in previous years. Among them were John Cameron, then coach of Dresdner, Steve Bloomer, coach of Britannia Berlin 92 and John Pentland, who had just arrived in Germany to lead the German national team that was due to take part in the 1916 Olympic Games. The three were sent to the Ruhleben labour camp, not far from Berlin. Here, together with other inmates from the world of football, they created a very popular championship. Fortunately, none of these personal events ended in tragedy: Bloomer, for example, told how life in Ruhleben was not so terrible and that he had often had the feeling that it was worse for the guards than for the prisoners, who enjoyed some small freedoms such as the possibility of engaging in sports activities. Hogan was saved by the Blyth brothers, one of whom, Ernest, had been one of the founders of the Vienna Cricket Club. The Blyths were two wealthy Englishmen who had obtained their freedom by paying about £1,000 to the Austrian Red Cross. They allowed Hogan to work at their property where he did various jobs including being a tennis instructor for their children, always keeping the local police informed. The fate of other athletes was not so rosy, as witnessed by the various victims that the football world mourned in those years. Some of these were Olympic athletes whom Meisl and Pozzo, employed at the front on opposing sides, had met, known and admired a few years earlier in Stockholm.

Despite the reverberations of the Great War, football did not have to start again from scratch at the end of the armed conflict: it had been played in the work camps, near the trenches and whenever the soldiers had the chance to take a break from the routine of war. Hugo Meisl was thus able to pick up his plans where he left off. Having hated his experience at the front, he now aimed to create a system that, in addition to encouraging healthy sporting competition, would act as a glue between peoples. A system that, in virtue of the increased popularity of football, would allow players to earn a living through their performances on the field of play and clubs and federations to exploit the passion of the fans for commercial purposes. This is how, in Europe between the two wars, football became the most popular sport on the continent.

Football was talked about in the streets as well as in offices and public places. In Vienna and Budapest the discussion about football took a much more intellectual turn than in England. While in London and the surrounding area everything that revolved around football was discussed in the pub, for a few minutes over a pint of beer; in the main metropolises that had been part of the Empire, football was discussed in coffee houses, places where until recently people from all walks of life had gathered to talk about music, literature, cinema and theatre. This new way of approaching a conversation about football, sitting down and taking their time, gave the participants the opportunity to delve into specific analysis of tactics, technique, roles and other related topics. The coffee houses were also places where the exploits of the first real stars – who in Vienna were called *Kanonen* – of the European football scene were extolled: true icons comparable to those of cinema and music.

But there was also another trend emerging: the football market. In fact, the first transfer of a player from one club

to another recorded in Europe dates back to 1913, when Genoa secured for a few thousand lire the services of Milan defender Renzo De Vecchi, then nicknamed '*Il Figlio di Dio*' ('the Son of God'). But it was in the early 1920s that the phenomenon intensified, especially on the Hungary-Austria axis, when the wealthiest clubs in Vienna, Austria Vienna – at the time Wiener Amateur Sportverein – and Hakoah signed Hungarian champions such as Alfréd Schaffer, nicknamed 'the King of Football', Kálmán and Jenő Konrád, Béla Guttmann, Ernő Schwarz and József Eisenhoffer. Football, although still at an unofficial level, had in fact become a business and some clubs, not having the economic strength to compete, were forced to sell most of their talents, ending up in the lower positions of the league table, if not in the lower divisions.

It was clear to Hugo Meisl that all the ingredients existed for football to make a leap in quality from the amateur model to the professional one. The fear that haunted several Central European clubs was that they would not be able to cope with the burdens that this model would bring, such as salaries, advertising expenditure and expenses related to the maintenance of the playing facilities, despite the fact that their earnings would also increase due to a larger turnout at the games and the increase in ticket prices. Meisl recalled that 'the practice of paying footballers' salaries had in fact already begun during the war years', although this was done unofficially and usually as reimbursement for expenses.

The first professional league in Central Europe was created in Austria at the beginning of the 1924/25 season, one year earlier than in Czechoslovakia and two years earlier than in Hungary. However, the fears expressed by some clubs materialised almost immediately, and while the major clubs in the capital were strengthened by being able

to acquire players from smaller clubs, the latter struggled to the point of bankruptcy. The football market was thus made official. An article in *Sport-Tagblatt* outlined how it worked:

'A contract can last six or 12 months. Goals and bonuses are meant to be included in the contract and the minimum monthly wages must be 500,000 kronen for the first division and 300,000 for the second division. Regarding transfers, the system is that a good portion of the sum goes to the player, although this depends largely on the number of years he has played for the selling club. The basis is ten per cent to the player, which rises by a further ten per cent with each passing year. This means, for example, that after five years of playing, 60 per cent of the sum goes to the player.'

The new system came into effect and the vehement protests of some clubs and players were to no avail. Some of them, gathered in Vienna outside the Hotel Post, protested strongly against this decision. The accusation was that a new system had been imposed without the consent of those concerned, who were now forced to choose between their profession and that of footballers. An example of this was the case with the Konrád brothers, Kálmán and Jenő. The two players, who had embarked on careers outside football, Jenő as an employee in a bank and Kalmán in the financial sector, wanted to continue playing football while earning a second income. And in such an uncertain period, dominated by financial problems, to give up a fixed and paid job to devote themselves entirely to football seemed a big gamble. The issue was not resolved and Konrád, who was sidelined for several months, was sold to First Vienna the following spring.[10] In order to resolve these

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10 Despite the friction, Kalmán Konrád would return to the Wiener Amateur within six months and Jenő, struggling with knee problems, would hang up his boots.

issues, the first trade union in continental Europe was formed to protect the rights of footballers, headed by Josef Brandstetter, defender and captain of Rapid Vienna.

The football world was thus split in two – those who believed football should remain amateur and those who advocated the leap towards professionalism – and Hugo Meisl, who nevertheless enjoyed the support of old and new acolytes, had two competitions in mind. One would be for club sides, the Mitropa Cup, reserved for the best Central European teams, and one for national teams, the International Cup, a good antidote to heal the wounds of the previous years. The prevailing aim, however, remained of an economic nature. Meisl was inspired after watching a friendly match between First Vienna and Slavia Prague at the Hohe Warte Stadium. There were only 3,000 spectators in attendance, which was not enough for a match of that level. This is because in the years between the wars, while matches between national teams already attracted a large number of spectators, the same could not be said for those between clubs. Several football managers of the time were promoting European club competitions: first of all Henrik Fodor, president of the Hungarian federation and director of MTK, who proposed a mini-league with return matches. Meisl, who had not endorsed Fodor's proposal, because it did not include Czechoslovak teams, developed another idea: to conceive the same tournament but with a direct elimination format along the lines of the Challenge Cup but introducing – an absolute novelty – round-robin matches. This formula met with far greater approval, although some suggested further changes: Edwin Herzog, president of Hungarian side Sabaria, wanted to create a parallel competition to involve clubs from nations that had been left out, but that proposal was soon abandoned. Although the idea of an event for Central European clubs

had been the result of several heads, there was no doubt about one thing: the driving force behind the new-born competition was and would be Hugo Meisl. *Nemzeti Sport*, a well-known Budapest sports newspaper, in an article published on 1 June 1927, claimed that Mitropa was born thanks to Meisl's diplomatic and organisational skills, 'capable of convincing the federations involved through figures and concrete data, making them understand the economic potential of the event'. In fact, it would be Meisl himself who would weave, manage and, where necessary, adjust the fragile relations between the forces that would participate in the tournament.

However, the plan to set up the tournament presented at the FIFA Congress in Paris in 1926 was rejected, which led its promoters to seek outside support. Between August and October of that year, Meisl met with the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian secretaries Fodor and Loos and with some members of the Italian federation, with whom relations had been frozen for a few years. On 27 October came the final squeeze: the representatives involved met again to define the birth of the tournament. All agreed except Italy, which said it was sceptical about the travel costs and the difficulties of including the matches in its calendar. The Mitropa Cup thus became a reality and the subsequent meetings were only intended to extend the invitation to other possible participants. One of the Czechoslovak representatives, Bednář, was appointed secretary of the committee, whose headquarters were established in Vienna along the Tegethofstrasse, since the organisation would be entrusted to Hugo Meisl. Between 1927 and 1940, more than half of the meetings related to the event took place here. In the first few months of 1927, several meetings took place, attended by representatives of hitherto disregarded nations such as Poland, Yugoslavia,

Romania, Italy – which was considering a change of heart – and Sweden, whose presence would probably force the organising committee to adopt the more inclusive name of the Central European Cup.

In the minds of Meisl and his team-mates there was still the hope of obtaining official recognition from FIFA, and with this goal in mind the main representatives of Central European football presented themselves at the congress that FIFA held in Helsinki in 1927. The US delegation, with whom the Central European federations had enjoyed frosty relations for years, was also present: Austria and Hungary, angry that two of the leading clubs in the USA had signed a number of Central European championship-winning players, had lodged a complaint with FIFA. Relations were then mended when Meisl decided to withdraw the complaint, and although this enabled him to gain the support of the United States, FIFA issued a second rejection. It was clear that the Mitropa Cup, at least at first, would have to be created with a private agreement between the signatory federations.

The congress for the foundation of Mitropa, which took place simultaneously with that for the International Cup, was held in Venice between 15 and 16 July. While he was in Italy, Meisl learned that the Palace of Justice in Vienna had gone up in flames: a very violent citizens' revolt had broken out that had forced the Austrian Chancellor Seipel to order the police to open fire on the demonstrators. Some 600 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured.

The congress decided the cup would have four participating federations: Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Italy, which at first seemed to be confirmed, was excluded, due to the fact that relations between Austria and Italy had cooled again: since 1926 Mussolini had been implementing a process of Italianisation that had

undermined the freedoms of German-speaking minorities living in northern Italy, especially in South Tyrol. The controversy, of course, had reverberated in the newspapers, and not only on a sporting level. Fascism, moreover, had made a number of changes to the world of football: in 1926 it had introduced the Viareggio Charter which, while on the one hand marked the transition to professionalism, on the other would have first limited and then, from 1928, prohibited the use of foreign players by Italian teams, most of whom came from Austria and Hungary. For these reasons, the Austrian federation boycotted the FIFA Congress held in Rome, which Meisl, as a member of the association, had attended.

In the end it was decided that Italy, like Switzerland, would only participate in the International Cup. The Italian federation acknowledged Meisl's commitment and in September 1927 Mussolini granted him an audience at the end of which the Austrian secretary was presented with a photo of them signed by the Duce in person. Germany was excluded from both competitions: from Mitropa because of its refusal to compete with professional teams and from the International Cup at the behest of the organising federations, given that in 1924, when Austria had turned professional, Germany had asked for its exclusion from FIFA.[11]

One of the biggest problems that Meisl and his associates knew they had to live with was the calendar: it was decided to put the International Cup matches on certain weekends during the season when the national tournaments stopped, while the Mitropa Cup matches would be played in the summer after the championships, and in the years when

11 You have to take into account the fact that German football and its teams did not have much appeal at the time.

the World Cup would be held immediately after the latter. The winning team would receive two trophies: the cup, bearing the names of the participating federations and that of the finalists, and the Providentia, a reproduction of the fountain that stands in the Viennese square of Neumarkt.