

SPORT

FOOTBALL IN GOZO

President Tabone keen to keep Hotspurs at the top

Victoria Hotspurs has reconfirmed their status as the dominant force of Gozitan football this season as the capital club completed a memorable domestic treble after winning the Super Cup, the Division One and the GFA Cup titles. President **DR ANTON TABONE** told **Valmor Camilleri** that the Hotspurs are hungry for more and are determined to extend their winning cycle for many years to come...

In football winning titles is difficult but maintaining those high standards in successive seasons is even harder. Started the campaign as Gozitan champions, Gotthard Conti's men have not only managed to retain their title crown but they did so by matching their record tally of points attained the previous campaign as well as ending a 23-year wait to win a second GFA Cup.

"Naturally, this season has been a huge satisfaction for our club," Dr Tabone said.

"To win titles is already tough but maintaining those standards is even tougher. This year we knew it was going to be difficult since as champions we were hunted by all of our rivals. But we not only managed to retain the title but we managed to add more.

"We won the GFA Cup for the second time in our history and we had been waited to bring that trophy to the club for 23 years. It's a competition that had looked haunted for us as before this year's triumph we had lost seven finals.

"Added to that we repeated the record tally of points we registered last season to maintain the high standards we set last season."

Dr Tabone is currently in his second stint as Hotspurs president. He returned two years ago when the club was passing through a difficult spell and he admits that given his love for the club he could not turn his back on such a request.

"Two years ago some members of the club approached me to return to the club," Dr Tabone said.

"I had already been president of the club in 2004 and my attachment with the club goes for many years as other members of my family had already been involved in the club administration.

"During that time, the club was passing through a very difficult financial situation and to be honest I could not turn that opportunity down as I felt responsible to put back on track



Victoria Hotspurs players lift the GFA Cup. PHOTO: STEFAN ABELA

a club that boasts 70 years of glorious history.

"Slowly we rebuilt the club administration on solid foundations, involving many passionate persons and formed a formidable team and the results are there for all to see. When you see the team achieve success it's natural that you get driven by your enthusiasm and we have already started our homework to build a even stronger team for next season."

Dr Tabone admitted that Gozitan clubs are somewhat at a disadvantage to Maltese clubs when it comes to long term planning as they don't have the financial lure of playing in European club competitions.

"The satisfaction of winning a title in Gozo is somewhat limited when compared to Malta," Dr Tabone said.

"Ok you are delighted that you had the better of your closest rivals from another town but there are no financial incentives or the opportunity to play

against Maltese team with a chance of qualifying to the Europa League apart from going all the way in the FA Trophy.

"It would be great if the Gozitan champions had access to play in the Maltese league the following season but according to the current rules any team entering the MFA competitions must start from the Third Division and that puts off any ambitious bid to play in the Premier League.

"The reason is that there is no administrator in Gozo who is capable of embarking on a four-year plan, at least, to guide his team in the Maltese top flight given the huge financial demands needed.

"The only way for this to happen is that the Malta FA Council accepts to change regulations and gives access to the Gozitan champions who want to play in the Maltese league to start from the First Division."

Dr Tabone admits that it's looking unlikely that such plan

will come to reality. He said that a more realistic plan would be to create a new Challenge Cup that would see the Malta champions facing the Gozitan champions.

"I think it's more than feasible to create a new competition that would see the Malta champions facing the top team in Gozo in a two-legged play-off," the Hotspurs president said.

"I'm sure that such competition would be of great interest for both Maltese and Gozitan fans. Every time Maltese team come to play in Gozo they always bring with them a huge amount of supporters and the same happens when our Gozitan sides travel to more.

"I appeal to any company who would love to sponsor such Cup to come forward as it would surely be of great benefit to Gozitan football, in particular."

The one only blemish for Victoria Hotspurs last season was their shock elimination from the FA Trophy to Division Two side

Siggiewi in a penalty shoot-out in a match they dominated for long stretches despite being down to 10 men early in the match.

Trophy heartache

"The FA Trophy elimination hurt us a lot, with all due respect to Siggiewi," the Hotspurs president said.

"It was a match that if we had to play it another ten times I'm sure it would not end in that way. We had a player sent off early on but we still created the better chances, had a number of shots cleared off the line and we simply could not score.

"That disappointment was an eye-opener for us and next season we are determined to be well prepared for the FA Trophy. We will make sure that the players will have the right focus and intensity as I believe that we are competitive enough to do much better than that."