

Hearts in Bordeaux – Ten Years On...

A significant feature of Craig Levein's time as manager of Hearts, was achieving some decent results in European competition – particularly away from Edinburgh. Season 2003/04 would see Hearts maintain their steady progress under the former Scotland centre half even though money, as always, was tight at Tynecastle. Chairman Chris Robinson had to tell Levein – like the majority of Hearts managers before him – that he would need to wheel and deal in the transfer market, as there would be no money for new players. However, Levein was proving more than adept at spotting attributes in players others couldn't see.

Levein recruited two attack-minded players in the summer of 2003. Dennis Wyness had a decent scoring record at Inverness Caledonian Thistle and Hearts faced a fight with Wyness' former team Aberdeen – who wanted him back at Pittodrie – for the Aberdonian's signature. The fact that Hearts were about to play in the UEFA Cup seemed to swing it for Wyness, who ventured south to Scotland's capital city and signed for Hearts. Paul Hartley was a player who once played for Edinburgh's other team but saw the error of his ways. He had performed well for St. Johnstone and Levein saw the Glaswegian as an integral part of the Hearts team – something Hartley would prove to be for some time after Levein's departure from Tynecastle. Both players, to the delight of Chairman Chris Robinson, cost nothing as they were at the end of their respective contracts.

Hearts had enjoyed a productive campaign in season 2002/03 and a third place finish in the SPL meant participation in the UEFA Cup. Hearts awaited the draw for the first round knowing they would be sure to face tough opposition. They were paired with the Bosnian side Zeljeznicar Sarajevo and while the draw

could have been tougher, Hearts were grateful they had avoided the likes of Barcelona, Liverpool, Valencia and Borussia Dortmund. The Bosnians, though, were no mugs and on their substitute's bench was a 17-year-old striker who would go on to become a huge star in years to come. In January 2011, Edin Dzeko would move from German football to money-laden Manchester City for the not inconsiderable sum of £27m.

Hearts won the first leg 2-0 at Tynecastle, thanks to goals from Mark de Vries and Andy Webster. Crucially, they had avoided conceding an away goal, but those of us who recalled Hearts UEFA Cup trip to neighbouring Velez Mostar in 1988, knew the return leg would be a tough affair. The Bosnians weren't happy with their defeat in Edinburgh and sacked coach Amar Osmin afterwards. New coach Milomir Odovic told his players they not only still had a chance to progress, but they had to prove to him that they were good enough. It took a backs to the wall performance from Hearts to secure a goalless draw and progression to the second round on a 2-0 aggregate.

When the draw for the second round was made, Hearts fans clapped their hands with eager anticipation. No trip to the relative unknown this time. For Hearts were paired with one of the leading clubs in French football – FC Girondins de Bordeaux. The first leg was to be played in the south of France and the chance of heading to warmer climes seven weeks before Christmas to see their team take on one of Europe's top sides was not to be missed for Hearts supporters. 3,000 Jambos headed to the wine producing region of France. Hearts arranged a special charter plane to take fans there and back on the same day. With hindsight, the events of Thursday 6 November 2003 meant that, perhaps, we should have stayed over to fully celebrate one of the most famous results in the history of Heart of Midlothian Football Club...

There were just over 15,000 fans at the Stade Chaban-Delmas in Bordeaux – a fifth of whom had made the journey from Scotland. Those of us who boarded Hearts charter flight at 7.00am that

day, had been in the French city since 11.00am – and had spent much of the day sampling the delights of the city and French hospitality. It may have been early November but the temperature in the south of France was 72 degrees fahrenheit and while some Hearts fans headed for open-air cafes, most congregated at an Irish Bar (as you do when in France...) called The Connemara. It was a day when a copious amount of alcohol was consumed and it built up a magnificent atmosphere ahead of the match.

Bordeaux: Rame; Alicarte; Basto; Jemmali; Jurietti; Pochettino; E. da Costa; P. da Costa; Feindouno; Chamakh; Darcheville.

Hearts: Gordon; Neilson; McKenna; Webster; Pressley; Kisnorbo; Maybury; Stamp; Wyness; Valois; De Vries.

As for the game itself, the majority of Hearts supporters present may have been under various influences of alcohol but I suspect many of them were wondering if they had imbibed too much when they heard the team Craig Levein had selected for the game. Granted, several beers had been consumed during the course of the day but as I stood behind the goal with 3,000 other Jambos but it seemed to me Levein had gone for a 4-3-3 option – as Dennis Wyness, Mark de Vries and Jean-Louis Valois were all named in Hearts starting line-up. However, when the game kicked off, it soon became apparent that de Vries would plough a lone furrow up front. Wyness and Valois were part of a six-man midfield – with Kevin McKenna, Steven Pressley and Andy Webster forming a trio of centre halves in front of young goalkeeper Craig Gordon, making his debut in European football at the age of 20 years. Robbie Neilson, normally a full back, was given one of the six midfield positions and the intent was clearly to stop the home side from producing anything approaching French flair. What's more – it worked.

Bordeaux struggled to produce a threat of any kind in the first 15 minutes. Hearts six man midfield snapped at the heels

of any home player threatening to venture forward, with Bordeaux striker Jean-Claude Darcheville – who would later go on to play for Rangers in the SPL – hardly getting a touch of the ball. The old adage in football in games like these is if the underdogs can survive the first 20 minutes, then anything is possible. After 20 minutes, came the first real chance of the game – but not at the end of the ground most expected. Robbie Neilson, of all people, had been fouled on the edge of the Bordeaux penalty box and while there were hopeful appeals from the less than sober visiting support, the resultant free kick taken by Valois, back in the country of his birth, went wide. Nevertheless, it added to the belief in the Hearts camp that a positive result was possible.

It did, however, alert the home team that they had a game on their hands. Jemmali fired in a ferocious shot that Craig Gordon did well to save, before an effort from Feindouno went just over the crossbar. Moments later, a moment of carelessness from Valois presented another chance for Feindouno but again his effort was not on target. The game was now taking on the pattern we all thought it would, with the French continuing to press, although Hearts threatened again just before half-time when Neilson – revelling in his midfield role – delivered a cross that caused consternation in the home defence. With both Kevin McKenna and Mark de Vries lurking in the Bordeaux penalty area, the aforementioned Feindouno headed the ball towards his goalkeeper Rame – who had Dennis Wyness bearing down on him. The Bordeaux number one managed to avert the danger but it was another encouraging sign for Hearts, roared on by their vociferous support who were showing their French counterparts just how to get behind your team. Those Jambos were happy to get the chance to ease their voices at half time with the game still goalless – Craig Levein's master plan was, so far, working well.

Five minutes after the re-start, Darcheville produced a chance out of nothing but fired his shot over the bar. Minutes later,

the same player had a goal bound shot hooked off the goal line by Andy Webster, before Gordon produced another fine save from Costa. It didn't help the now sobering Hearts support that Bordeaux were attacking the end behind which they stood anxiously and we constantly looked at our watches in the belief that time had stood still in the south of France.

Craig Levein brought on fresh legs when Paul Hartley replaced Valois but Hearts suffered a blow when the magnificent Robbie Neilson had to go off injured, to be replaced by Austin McCann. Inevitably, it was Bordeaux who continued to make all the running and, at times, Craig Gordon must have felt it was he against the French as the home team did everything but score. The young goalkeeper came of age that evening and one could see the frustration on the faces of the home players as the Hearts supporting goalie kept them at bay, one save in particular from Pochettino damn near taking the breath away.

Still the game remained goalless. Hearts supporters would have been delighted with a goalless draw and the chance to complete the job at Tynecastle three weeks later. With just 12 minutes left, the deadlock was broken. On a rare foray into the Bordeaux half, Hearts were awarded a free kick for a foul on Phil Stamp that Hartley elected to take. He was too far out to have a shot on goal but he expertly floated a long ball towards the far post, which the tall figure of McKenna met with his head. 'Moose' as the big Canadian defender was known, headed the ball across the penalty box where Rame palmed his effort away – but only into the path of de Vries who slotted the ball into the net for an incredible goal. Cue absolute bedlam in the Hearts end as 3,000 disbelieving maroon and white clad supporters leapt for joy.

The home support was stunned. It has to be said the same feeling was prevalent among a nonetheless, ecstatic travelling support. The game ended with an historic 1-0 win for Hearts, their first and, to date, only victory on French soil. Bordeaux were one of the leading clubs in France and for a

young, inexperienced Hearts team – and manager – to come away with a victory was nothing short of sensational. At the end of the game, the Hearts players celebrated with those who had travelled to support them.

It was to Craig Levein's credit that he said, immediately after the game had ended, that the tie had still to be won. Bordeaux weren't a top team in Europe for nothing and they would fancy their chances of overturning the deficit at Tynecastle in the return leg. Which, inevitably, as far as Hearts are concerned, they did. In front of a full house of close to 18,000 fans in Gorgie, the French team displayed their undoubted class with a performance of maturity and authority and won 2-0 on the night to progress 2-1 on aggregate. Domestically, Hearts secured another third place finish in the SPL but lost to Dundee in the League Cup and Celtic in the Scottish Cup.

Nonetheless, the disappointment of that cold November evening in Gorgie will never take away the jubilation felt by those of us who travelled to the south of France three weeks earlier. Such trips take a fair degree of planning but it's doubtful if any of us could have made a better job if we had planned it in details ourselves. The weather, the hospitality, the magnificence of Bordeaux, the alcohol – and, of course, the result, meant it was just the perfect day to be a Hearts supporter. In fact, I would say it was the best day I have had as a Hearts supporter outside of seeing the Jambos win two Scottish Cups. A day none of us who were there will ever forget.

Mike Smith's book [Hearts 50 Greatest Games](#) is still available in all good bookshops and at amazon.co.uk