

# Glam Rock, Flares and Saturday Afternoons

Given Scotland haven't qualified for the finals of a major tournament since the World Cup in France in 1998, there was inevitable excitement when the draw for the qualifying stages of the 2016 European Championships was made in Paris the other week. After what seems like a life-long struggle to make any kind of progress, there seems genuine hope that Scotland, under the tutelage of the ebullient Gordon Strachan, might actually qualify for the finals in France two years from now. Of course, Germany are rightly the favourites but there's no reason to suggest Scotland can't get the better of the Republic of Ireland, Poland – who the Scots defeated in Warsaw a few days ago – Georgia and Gibraltar, particularly when those countries visit Glasgow. And there would be a certain symmetry if Scotland's first appearance at the finals of a major tournament for the best part of two decades were in the same country of their last appearance in 1998.

Much as the draw was the cause of some excitement, my enthusiasm was dampened somewhat when I saw the dates and kick-off times for the fixtures. Not one of the scheduled games involving Scotland will kick-off at 3.00pm on a Saturday. The Scots' opening game in Germany will kick-off at hardly the most traditional of times – 7.45pm on the evening of Sunday 7 September. Scotland will play their next game on a Saturday – against Georgia in Glasgow on 11 October – but it will start at 6.00pm. The following fixture in Poland will be on a Tuesday evening before the Republic of Ireland visit Glasgow – on a Friday six weeks before Christmas.

Those of you who regularly read my ramblings on this website – and I thank both of you – may realise I'm something of a traditionalist. Yes, looking back at years gone by can sometimes give a false impression, with fifty-something

supporters like me tending to view things through maroon-tinted spectacles. I try not to hark on to youngsters about how things were when I were a lad because it can be very irritating. However, (here we go – Ed) when I were a lad, for the most part, there were two days when games were played and two kick-off times. Hearts and Scotland, for that matter, would either play at 3.00pm on a Saturday or 7.30pm on a Wednesday.

Of course there are two main reasons why football in 2014 can be played at any time, no matter how inconvenient to the fans. Television and money – and one follows the other. Some of my childhood in the 1970s was spent watching a struggling Hearts team and a Scotland team who, on their day, could just about beat anyone (the Scots returned home from the World Cup in Germany in 1974 as the only unbeaten team in the tournament) Back then, we didn't need to check the fixtures to see if Hearts were playing on a Friday night, Saturday lunch time, Sunday or Monday evening. When Scotland played it was usually a Wednesday with the home internationals occurring at the end of the season, for example, Wales on a Saturday, Northern Ireland midweek and the auld enemy of England on the following Saturday with the bi-annual weekend trip to Wembley being the highlight of many Scots supporters lives.

Of course, back in the decade of glam rock, flares and long hair – and I recall fondly the days when I actually had hair – there was no satellite or cable television in this country. We had the BBC and ITV and that was it. The attitude from the powers-that-be who ran Scottish football was that televising an entire 90 minutes of football live would drive fans away from the game. Therefore, only the Scotland-England international and perhaps the odd World Cup qualifier were shown live on the wee box. Even the Scottish Cup final wasn't shown live on television until 1977. There were the odd game or two, such as Celtic or Rangers in big European games which were shown live but these were few and far between.

Now, television dictates when football will be played. Hearts game with Dundee United this coming Friday is a case in point although, in fairness, there's something appealing about Friday evening football as the increase in attendances at these games has shown. However, there's something which strikes at the heart when looking at Scotland's fixtures for the Euro 2016 qualifiers. The big kick-off in Germany will be eagerly anticipated but a Sunday evening, when many people are contemplating another fraught working week, may douse the fervour somewhat. And it will mean another Saturday afternoon kicking our heels or being dragged through DIY stores having to answer the perennial question 'why haven't you fixed that shelf in the kitchen yet?'

The huge sums of money involved in club football these days has led many people to question if international football has quite the same appeal as it did in the days of the dodgy perm and the dulcet tones of commentators Archie MacPherson and Arthur Montford. Having obscure kick-off times will only add fuel to the fire of those who feel it doesn't.

And those who feel a sadness that a Saturday afternoon at 3.00pm is fast becoming become eerily quiet...