

Hearts fighting for a sense of purpose

I harbour a strong suspicion I won't be alone in wanting to see the back of season 2013/14. As Gary Locke said on the eve of the recent game with Partick Thistle, a game that finally consigned the once mighty Heart of Midlothian to relegation, it's been a long, hard season both physically and mentally for players and supporters. Now, those who know me will all too readily tell you the chances of me running around for an hour and a half are akin to Leigh Griffiths signing for Hearts next season so, physically, I've not found it hard at all. However, mentally, this has been one long hard slog.

Hope rose on Monday that Hearts would exit administration this week. Creditors of major shareholder UBIG agreed to transfer their 50% holding to BIDCO, the Anne Budge-backed vehicle for future fan control through the Foundation of Hearts. However, no deal has yet been reached regarding the 29% shares held by Ukio Bankas, who hold a charge on Tynecastle Stadium. Talks will continue between lawyers representing the failed Lithuanian bank and Hearts' administrators (BDO). The major concern is that Hearts will run out of money by the end of April, so a decision from Ukio's creditors is a matter of urgency. The Foundation of Hearts spokesman, Ian Murray MP, said that a formal meeting is expected by the end of next week. The long hard slog just keeps getting longer and longer.

Of course, the 15 point deduction imposed on Hearts by the SPFL at the start of the season for the club going into administration meant Hearts were always going to fight, forlornly as it transpires, against relegation. Arguably, the embargo on signing players has had an even stronger impact. When injuries affected key players such as Ryan Stevenson, Jason Holt and Jamie Walker, it affected the team badly.

The Hearts support accepted this but it didn't stop them turning out in huge numbers, week in, week out. Their magnificent support and unquestioning loyalty has been one of the few highlights of the season. Hindsight, they say, is a wonderful thing and I wonder if going into administration at the tail end of last season might have been an option with the drop into what is now known as the Championship for this campaign. My thinking behind this is that at least this would have made this season a wee bit more competitive than it has been. A brief spell at the beginning of the campaign apart, Hearts have spent the season cut adrift from the rest of the league. And this has robbed us of the cut-throat intensity normally associated with following this beloved team of ours.

When Hearts last played outside the top flight of Scottish football, I lived afar – 140 miles away in Aberdeen. I did go to a few games but I felt somewhat isolated. I missed the weekly passion of heading along Gorgie Road, shuffling into Tynecastle's wide-open terracings and cheering on the boys in maroon. When I did make the trip south, the anticipation and excitement of watching Hearts take on Ayr United with around 4,000 other Jambos at Tynecastle marked me out to my friends in the Granite City as being somewhat 'different'. The point I'm rather labouring somewhat is that there was a real purpose to going to the game, even if it was a First Division clash.

The present day Hearts team contains some of the most promising youngsters in Scotland and watching them progress and learn from experience this season has been gratifying. Nonetheless, the aforementioned 15 point deduction has meant the laddies' task of staying in the top flight of Scottish football has been akin to climbing up Ben Nevis in the middle of winter wearing a pair of carpet slippers. The end of this season can't come soon enough for me and, I suspect, Gary Locke and his young team.

Some of my associates, particularly those of the Hibernian persuasion, snigger when I tell them I'm really looking

forward to next season. This isn't a display of bravado, I'm being sincere. Assuming Hearts are playing in the SPFL Championship next season (and disaster hasn't struck in Lithuania and we end up starting again in League Two à la Rangers) I'm of the view that the second flight of Scottish football next season will actually have more entertainment value than the top one.

Rangers and Hearts will likely assume the mantle of pre-season favourites for the automatic promotion place. The games against Ally McCoist's side will likely mean full-house signs at Tynecastle with the kick-off likely to be switched to accommodate live television coverage. And this young Hearts team will have nothing to fear heading to Ibrox for what will be one of the highlights of the season.

Next season, the Championship may also include Dunfermline Athletic. I hope the Pars win their promotion play-off games as a trip across the River Forth to East End Park is always a pleasure while their manager Jim Jefferies will always be welcome to Tynecastle. Depending on who wins promotion this season, there's also the possibility of games against Falkirk and Dundee and another short trip to Livingston. At the time of writing, one can't even rule out the possibility of there still being Edinburgh derbies (anyone else keen to know the Hibs score this afternoon?) All of these games will prove tricky but, crucially, all will be meaningful. Meanwhile, in the SPFL Premiership, few would bet against Celtic being so far ahead of the rest come Christmas the others will require snookers just to stay in touch...

Hearts supporters have been truly magnificent this season and they can be forever proud of the support they have given their team during trying and truly exceptional circumstances. I have a feeling that, as they did back in 1977 when Hearts suffered relegation for the first time in their history, the Maroon Army will back their team in huge numbers again, despite demotion. It's worth recalling that nearly 20,000 fans watched

Hearts play fellow promotion hopefuls Dundee at Tynecastle in January 1978. Back then the fans stuck by their team. I have absolutely no doubt that they will again next season – a season that will have a sense of purpose and intensity once more.