

Football – The Class of '98 – 36 Year Wait for Glory Finally Ends

✘ In July 1995 Falkirk manager Jim Jefferies stood outside Brockville Park to tell the waiting media and anxious Bairns supporters – “I’m staying at Falkirk”. The former Berwick Rangers manager had been given the opportunity to take the manager’s post at Hearts and, being a former Hearts captain as well as a lifelong supporter, the temptation was keenly felt. Jefferies had worked a minor miracle at Falkirk, not only taking the club to the Premier Division but also earning a respectable mid-table position when many pundits were tipping The Bairns for relegation. But, within forty eight hours of stating his intention to stay put, Jefferies’ uneasiness at turning down what may have been the opportunity of a lifetime intensified. When Hearts chairman Chris Robinson went back to try again, Jefferies changed his mind – and history was in the making.

Two years later Jefferies was beginning to make his mark at Tynecastle – but the Scottish media was obsessed with Rangers attempt to win the league championship for a record tenth season in succession. The other eight Premier Division clubs were written off even before a ball was kicked. But a new challenge was rising in the east. Hearts recovered from an opening day defeat at Ibrox to thrash Aberdeen 4-1 at Tynecastle and it was a taste of what was to come from Jim Jefferies’ side. Rangers still led the way but defeat from Motherwell meant that a rapidly improving Celtic and a born again Hearts were soon snapping at their heels. The Jambos were producing highly impressive performances, particularly away from home as was evident in a 4-1 win at Motherwell and another 4-1 victory at Pittodrie.

At Christmas there was a three-way split at the top of the Premier Division with Celtic, Rangers and Hearts streets ahead of everyone else. When Rangers went to Tynecastle on 20 December many observers thought it would be the acid test of Hearts championship credentials. Walter Smith's side coasted to a 5-2 win and everyone waited for Hearts bubble to burst, a view reinforced on New Year's Day when The Jambos let slip a 2-0 lead in the Edinburgh derby with Hibernian to end with a 2-2 draw. But Celtic's victory over Rangers twenty four hours later meant Hearts were still in the title race and would remain so until almost the last three weeks of the season.

When the Scottish Cup came around some commentators had been so impressed with Hearts displays that they thought the Tynecastle side were a good bet to take the trophy – even though it had been thirty six years since silverware last graced the west end of the capital city. The Old Firm, they reckoned, would be too involved with the championship but Jambos boss Jim Jefferies wasn't worried about that being an apparent backhanded compliment.

Hearts were given a home draw against Second Division Clydebank in Round Three and were somewhat fortunate to win 2-0 given that The Bankies created the better chances in the game. It was Third Division opposition in Round Four when Albion Rovers visited Edinburgh and Angolan winger Jose Quitongo inspired Hearts to a 3-0 victory before their penchant for home ties was illustrated again in the quarter finals with a 4-1 win over Ayr United. Hearts eighth semi-final appearance in the Scottish Cup in twelve years had many people believing their name was on the trophy when they avoided both the Old Firm and drew First Division Falkirk. Hearts luck in the cup held firm. Despite their poorest display of the season during which The Bairns outplayed them, Hearts emerged 3-1 victors (two goals in the last two minutes sinking their lower league opponents) and their third cup final appearance in two years beckoned.

Their opponents were the side that had thrashed them 5-1 in the Scottish Cup final of 1996 – Rangers. Ibrox boss Walter Smith conceded that Hearts were a much improved team from the one that capitulated two years earlier but the Govan men were still firm favourites for the trophy. More than 48,000 supporters headed for Celtic Park on a warm May afternoon to witness one of the most emotional cup finals in recent years.

Hearts: Rousset; McPherson; Naysmith; Weir; Salvatori; Ritchie; McCann; Fulton; Adam; Cameron; Flogel. Substitutes: Hamilton, Robertson; Murray.

Referee: W. Young

It was a sign of the cosmopolitan times that, of the Rangers side, only Gordon Durie and Ian Ferguson were born in Scotland (Gough was born in Stockholm while Goram and McCall were born in England of Scottish parentage). Even the Hearts side contained two Frenchman, an Italian and an Austrian.

Both sides were affected by pre-match blows. Rangers influential German, Jorg Albertz was sent off for violent conduct the previous week at Tannadice while injury ruled out Swede Jonas Thern. Hearts captain Gary Locke, who was stretchered off injured after just seven minutes during the 1996 final, missed the '98 final because of a hamstring injury and, being a Hearts daft youngster, his anguish was felt by every Hearts supporter.

Rangers-Hearts Scottish Cup finals have a history of having remarkable beginnings. The 1976 final between the pair began at two minutes to three, Rangers scored within 80 seconds, and so Hearts were a goal behind before the official kick-off time! Astonishingly, the 1996 final kicked off at a minute to three and Hearts lost their captain within seven minutes. The fans wondered what the 1998 final would have in store – they got their answer after just 33 seconds!

From the kick-off Hearts stormed upfield. Stand-in captain

Steve Fulton burst into the Rangers penalty box only to be halted by Ian Ferguson. Halted illegally said referee Young and he awarded a penalty to Hearts. It looked initially like the foul had been committed outside the penalty box but, tellingly, few Rangers players protested. Colin Cameron stepped up to slot the penalty kick beyond goalkeeper Andy Goram and Hearts had a sensational lead after just eighty seconds. Maroon clad supporters erupted in the Celtic Park cauldron and it was certainly a start to the match few people – even in Edinburgh – had predicted.

Rangers, although stung by such an early setback, responded. Rino Gattuso embarked on a powerful run from midfield, which ended with a shot, which was comfortably saved by Rousset. Then Brian Laudrup had an effort which was blocked by nineteen year old Gary Naysmith. Hearts, however, weren't just sitting back. Despite a significant change in tactics by manager Jim Jefferies which saw the team adapt a more rigid 4-4-2 formation rather than their normal swashbuckling style of 4-3-3, the maroons were still capable of lightning raids on the break, epitomised by young Naysmith who was having an outstanding game at full back. The Scotland Under 21 star had just been named Young Player of the Year and his assured defending and attacking abilities were there for all to see at Celtic Park.

After half an hour Rangers Ian Ferguson – a veteran of St. Mirren's cup triumph in 1987 – was put through by Laudrup but pulled his effort wide. Then came Rangers best effort thus far. Accepting a short free kick some thirty five yards out, Lorenzo Amoruso fired in a magnificent shot which appeared to be heading for the top left hand corner of the net. But as Rangers prepared to celebrate the equaliser Hearts keeper Gilles Rousset leapt majestically to palm the ball past the post. It was a fantastic save and a defining moment. In the 1996 final, the big Frenchman let a shot slip through his fingers to give Rangers a two goal advantage from which they

never looked back. It was a schoolboy error and Rousset hid his face behind his hands at the realisation at what he had done. But now, two years later, he produced one of the great stops and the twenty three thousand Hearts supporters stood to acclaim the moment. Half-time arrived with Hearts still ahead and one wondered if history was about to be made.

At the start of the second half Rangers replaced the unhappy Stensaas with the veteran campaigner that was Ally McCoist. It signalled an all-out attacking policy by Walter Smith and for the opening five minutes of the second period Hearts were pinned back in their own half. Within minutes McCoist received a pass from the tireless Brian Laudrup but his effort went into the side net. Urged on by captain Richard Gough -playing his last game for the Ibrox club – Rangers swept forward and one wondered if Hearts could hold out. But, on fifty three minutes, the Hearts support erupted once more. Gilles Rousset launched a long ball down field from a free-kick and it seemed that Rangers Amoruso would clear the danger. But the Italian dithered as he went to strike the ball and Frenchman Stephane Adam nipped in behind him. Taking the ball into the penalty box, Adam fired in a powerful shot which goalkeeper Goram could only parry into the net. 2-0 to Hearts and Adam ran with outstretched arms to an ecstatic Jambos support to milk the celebrations.

The noise from the Hearts end was deafening. Was the dream about to come true? Was thirty six years of anguish about to end? The supporters, so often kicked in the teeth by countless near misses from their side, could scarcely believe it. But there were still thirty five minutes to go. And a wounded Rangers side is when they are at their most dangerous. Seconds later Hearts almost ended the argument when Austrian Thomas Flogel headed a Steve Fulton free-kick powerfully towards goal but his effort was well saved by Goram. But, inevitably, Rangers stormed back.

Ally McCoist, despite being written off by some people at 35

years of age, was proving a real handful for the youthful Hearts defence. A snap shot from the striker from just six yards out was well saved by Rousset before the former Sunderland player appeared to be fouled by Dave McPherson. Time was running out for Rangers but, with nine minutes to go, McCoist finally got the goal both he and his side deserved. Ferguson played the ball forward to Gattuso. The Italian slipped it to McCoist who drove the ball past Rousset and into the net from 18 yards.

The last few minutes of the 1998 Scottish Cup final were tense, nervous and fraught for supporters of both sides. Rangers threw everything at the Hearts defence but the Jim Jefferies' side scented glory. But there was still time for more drama in this epic cup final. With two minutes to go, McCoist went down in the penalty box after a foul by David Weir. Referee Young immediately blew his whistle. For a moment it looked like a penalty to Rangers and Hearts hopes appeared to be cruelly dashed once more. But, after a nod from the assistant referee, Young awarded a free-kick on the edge of the penalty box much to the disgust of McCoist. Brian Laudrup's free-kick was deflected wide and Hearts and their supporters breathed a huge sigh of relief. The period of injury time seemed to last forever. Fully four minutes stoppage time had been played when, at last, referee Young blew for the end of the match. The Hearts support roared themselves hoarse and danced for joy. Jim Jefferies almost crushed his assistant Billy Brown with a hug of delight. Hearts had won the cup for the first time since 1956 and four decades of heartbreak had come to an end.

The scenes which followed at Celtic Park were remarkable. Grown men wept and the tide of emotion that washed over those in maroon seemed almost to overpower them. Veteran striker John Robertson, a substitute but who never came on, was clearly overcome. 'Robbo' had been at the club for seventeen years but had yet to win a medal with the club he loved. Now,

in his last season at Tynecastle, his dream had come true as it had for the thousands of jubilant supporters who found it difficult to comprehend just what had happened. When Steve Fulton went to collect the trophy he invited club captain Gary Locke to go up with him. The injured Locke – a dyed in the wool Hearts fan if ever there was one – didn't need to be asked twice and the two players held the cup aloft to a huge ovation from the Hearts support.

Edinburgh partied all weekend as the players paraded the cup through the streets of the famous old city and on to Tynecastle Stadium for a truly emotional homecoming. An estimated one hundred thousand people welcomed them home and Edinburgh let down its collective hair. Manager Jim Jefferies had said before the game that the players could become legends if they won the cup and there's little doubt that the Hearts support treated their heroes in a way befitting such a status.

It was an emotional end to an emotional season. In the last quarter of the league season Hearts championship challenge, admirable though it was, faded as the side dropped points to Motherwell, St. Johnstone and Aberdeen. The final nail in their title coffin was, ironically, driven in by city rivals Hibernian who recorded a rare win in the Edinburgh derby by 2-1 at Easter Road in April. It was, however, Hibernian's last hurrah – they were relegated at the end of the season.

Such upheavals meant little to those connected with Heart of Midlothian, however. It's true to say that the club had become something of a laughing stock in Scottish football as a result of their lack of success and their almost constant failure to produce the goods when it really mattered. Season 1997-98 changed all that. Throughout the season Hearts had consistently produced a sparkling brand of fluent, attacking football which delighted the purists. They had given the Old Firm the fright of their lives in the race for the league title.

And, on 16 May 1998, after 36 years of hurt, they had finally brought silverware back to Tynecastle.