

# May 3rd – A date Hearts fans will never forget

✘ Saturday 3 May 1986.

Three years after emerging from the wilderness of First Division football, of the inept tactics of manager Tony Ford, of losing to Queens Park and East Stirlingshire and of being threatened with part-time football, Hearts were on the verge of a climax of an astonishing recovery. Former Rangers player Alex MacDonald had replaced Ford as player manager in 1981 and sought the help of his good friend and former Rangers colleague Sandy Jardine to rebuild Edinburgh's finest football club. MacDonald brought experienced players such as Willie Johnston and Jimmy Bone to the club and they were instrumental in the development of some promising Hearts kids such as John Robertson, Gary Mackay and Davie Bowman. By the time season 1985/86 commenced, 'Bud' Johnston and Bone had departed Tynecastle but they left a younger Hearts team that was now established in the cutthroat Premier Division.

MacDonald was still in charge and with money tight, his eye at spotting a bargain that would nonetheless improve the team was crucial to Hearts continued development throughout the 1980s. In the summer of 1985, MacDonald paid Celtic £60,000 for winger John Colquhoun and the Stirling born player would provide the service to strikers John Robertson and Sandy Clark. Midfielder Iain Jardine arrived a few weeks into the season and with Craig Levein a commanding presence in defence alongside the evergreen Sandy Jardine and the industrious Kenny Black in midfield, the Hearts team was slowly transforming from one that was looking to survive in the Premier Division to one that might actually think about challenging the dominance of the top two in Scotland. And younger readers may be surprised to learn that in the early 1980s Scotland's top two clubs were not Celtic and Rangers –

they were Aberdeen and Dundee United. The Dons, in particular, were one of the finest teams in Europe and under manager Alex Ferguson had won the European Cup Winners Cup in 1983 as well as several Scottish League championships and Scottish Cups that decade. Indeed, they were reigning league champions when season 1985/86 kicked off.

Hearts began the season with a 1-1 draw against Celtic at Tynecastle. New signing John Colquhoun scored the opening goal against the team he had just left and it took a last minute equaliser from Paul McStay to rob Hearts of a brilliant start to the league campaign. That goal from the Celtic midfielder would prove hugely significant on the very last game of the season...

Hearts were then affected by injuries and suspensions – Sandy Clark and full back Walter Kidd were sent off in a 3-1 defeat to Rangers dubbed ‘the battle of Ibrox’ and when the Maroons lost to Aberdeen, Motherwell and Clydebank they were sinking towards the bottom of the league – only pointless Hibernian sparing Hearts the indignity...

Slowly Hearts began to get their absent players back but when Iain Jardine scored his first goal for the club in a 1-1 draw against Dundee at Tynecastle in October few of us envisaged this would be the beginning of one of the most astonishing sequence of games in Scottish football history. Seven days later Hearts travelled to Celtic Park and produced the shock result of the day, a rare 1-0 victory in the east end of Glasgow. They followed this up with a 3-0 victory over St. Mirren and a result that instilled bucketfuls of self-belief – a 1-0 win over champions Aberdeen on a rain-lashed Wednesday evening at Tynecastle thanks to a goal from Craig Levein. When Rangers were comprehensively beaten 3-0 in Gorgie a fortnight later heads began to turn Tynecastle way.

After an injury hit start to the season Hearts players were now fit and raring to go. Alex MacDonald had also instilled a

discipline into his players so yellow and red cards were kept to a minimum. MacDonald was able to keep the same starting eleven for several weeks and the players had a system where they all knew what each other was doing. In November, Scotland were involved in a two-legged play-off to reach the World Cup finals in Mexico the following year. Difficult enough but their opponents were Australia – meaning those top flight league fixtures involving Scotland's 'top four' were postponed to allow the national side to prepare. Hearts, however, carried on and continued to produce good football and rack up the results. Four days before Christmas, Hearts defeated St. Mirren in Paisley – and proudly sat top of the league. Yes, other teams had games in hand thanks to the Scotland situation but when Hearts defeated Rangers 2-0 at Ibrox three days after Christmas they had well and truly posted their intentions. Hearts had joined the big players at the table and were blowing their cigar smoke in the faces of the big four.

The question was could Hearts maintain their challenge? The acid test came in the last week in January when they travelled to Aberdeen. 5,000 Hearts fans headed to the Granite City to see their team, unbeaten since the end of September, take on the league champions in their own patch. MacDonald organised his troops accordingly and The Dons struggled to break through the silver-shirted Hearts defence. When MacDonald replaced John Robertson with the old warhorse that was Colin McAdam with just eight minutes left, Hearts appeared to have settled for a priceless away point. Then Walter Kidd played a long ball towards John Colquhoun. JC skipped his way past the trailing Aberdeen defenders Willie Miller and Alex McLeish and stroked the ball past a bemused Dons keeper Jim Leighton to secure a famous and crucial Hearts victory. The travelling support in the Beach End were ecstatic. Their chants of 'We're Gonna Win the League' were now a serious prospect rather than a fanciful whim.

Hearts continued their unbeaten run as the end of the season

hovered into view. Their nearest challengers for the title appeared to be Dundee United and when Hearts won 3-0 at Tannadice following an unforgettable April afternoon on Tayside it seemed the fantasy of Hearts becoming champions was about to become incredible reality. A week later though came the first signs of nerves. Aberdeen came to Tynecastle and the game was switched to a Sunday to accommodate live television coverage – the first league fixture to be covered live on television in Scotland. Hearts looked out of sorts and had to thank John Colquhoun for a late equaliser in a 1-1 draw. Celtic had now emerged as the main threat to Hearts title aspirations and Dundee would prove key players in the dramatic end to the season.

When Hearts entertained Clydebank on the last Saturday in April, they had just two games left – and were four points clear of Celtic. Back in the 1980s there were just two points awarded for a win and although Davie Hay's side had a game in hand, Hearts fans knew if their team defeated Clydebank and Celtic lost at home to Dundee the league flag would be on its way to Tynecastle for the first time in 26 years. A nervous Hearts team won 1-0 thanks to a Gary Mackay goal – but, as they would do seven days later, Dundee proved party-poopers by losing in Glasgow. Inevitably, Celtic won their game in hand and so were just two points behind Hearts when the curtain came down on the league season on 3 May 1986.

Hearts needed just a single point for glory. In fact, they had a superior goal difference so they might even lose their first game in eight months and still become champions – providing Celtic didn't score a barrow load of goals against St. Mirren in Paisley...

15,000 Hearts fans headed for Dundee ready to party like there wouldn't be a 4<sup>th</sup> of May. Hearts only needed a draw and were unbeaten in 31 league and cup games. Celtic needed to thrash St. Mirren. Surely, nothing could go wrong...?

The events of that day are ingrained on the memory of every Hearts fan who was there. My wife was expecting our first child just a week later so I was in ecstatic mood anyway. Then I read a copy of the *Daily Record* on the way to Dundee and read about the events of 1965 when Hearts needed to avoid a 2-0 defeat to Kilmarnock on the last game of the season to clinch the league championship – and duly lost 2-0 to hand the title to the Rugby Park side. In all the excitement, I hadn't thought about that. Now the first seeds of doubt were planted in my head. I wondered if the same was happening to the Hearts players. Then rumours circulated about a sickness virus affecting the Hearts team. We watched the players warm up on the Dens Park pitch – they looked fine to us. Hang on, though – there was no sign of Craig Levein. Roddy MacDonald was drafted in. It later transpired that the bug had affected five Hearts players. As the game kicked off it certainly looked like it.

Hearts looked a pale shadow of the team that had swept all before them since October. Sandy Clark was bundled off the ball in the penalty box in the first half and 15,000 Hearts fans screamed for a penalty kick. Nothing doing said referee Bill Crombie – ironically from Edinburgh. My anecdotal tale about Mr Crombie is I interviewed him for a job several years later – he didn't get it...

Hearts struggled all afternoon while Dundee believed if they won and Motherwell won at Ibrox they would be in the following season's UEFA Cup – so the incentive for the Dark Blues was certainly there. As we stood nervously on the open terracing behind the goal, we wondered if St. Mirren might come to Hearts aid and take a point off Celtic or at least keep things tight. The fella in front of me had a radio to his ear and was nearly embroiled in a fight when he relayed the news to irritated Hearts fans that Celtic were four goals ahead at half time. The Hoops added a fifth in the second half and now had the better goal difference. However, we tried to calm our

nerves with the belief that it didn't matter if Celtic scored ten goals, as long as Hearts secured the single point needed for glory. Although the silver-shirted Hearts players were collectively having a poor game, we still believed they would get this point. I checked my watch for the hundredth time that afternoon. There were just eight minutes to go when Dundee won a corner at the end where the Hearts masses had congregated. As the ball came in it fell at the feet of substitute Albert Kidd. His effort on goal flew into the roof of the net and the Dundee fans leapt for joy. The massed ranks of Hearts fans stood motionless, as if time had stopped. Our world certainly had. As the disconsolate Hearts players made their way to the centre circle to re-start the game, I shouted 'C'mon Hearts – we can still do this!' I was a lone voice – in our heart of hearts, we knew the dream was over, a suspicion confirmed when the blasted Kidd added a second goal a minute from the end. It was all over. Hearts lost 2-0, their first defeat in 31 games and eight months. Celtic won 5-0 and therefore clinched the league championship on goal difference.

I lived in Aberdeen at the time and a relatively short journey home turned into the longest trip in the world. My mate and I sat on the bus back to the Granite City and said nothing to each other. On arrival in Aberdeen, we went for a quick pint but our sombre mood didn't call for alcohol, particularly as more than one smart Alec in the pub noticed our crumpled Hearts scarves sticking out our pockets and made a less than sympathetic comment.

I made my way home and my wife at the time greeted me with the news she thought she felt our first baby might be on its way. Selfishly and to my eternal shame, I ignored her and headed for bed. It was 7.30pm on a Saturday night and I just wanted the world to end. It was one of the most traumatic experiences of my life, only surpassed by the sudden death of my father in 1997.

Thankfully, my wife didn't go into labour that evening. Along

with 40,000 other Hearts fans I tried recover some kind of composure and headed to the Scottish Cup Final against Aberdeen at Hampden a week later. However, deep down Hearts fans knew the events at Dens Park had ripped the soul out of the Hearts players and Aberdeen won 3-0 to end any dreams of silverware.

A week later and my first child, Laura was born. Three successive Saturdays in May 1986 saw the three most emotional experiences of my life and, thankfully, ended with the joy and gift of a new life.

Of course, seeing Hearts lift the Scottish Cup in 1998, 2006 and 2012 exorcised some of the ghosts of 1986. But, try as I might, I can never forget *that* day at Dens Park...