

# Stylish Hearts Are Back From The Brink

It's been on the cards for some time now and on Sunday it was finally confirmed – Heart of Midlothian are the SPFL Championship winners for season 2014/15 and will take their place one again at Scottish football's top table in August, namely the SPFL Premiership. Hibernian's inability to defeat Rangers at Easter Road meant that Hearts are now unable to be caught at the top of the table and their supporters can sit back supping champagne and smoking cigars as they watch Hibs, Rangers and either Queen of the South or Falkirk endure the nerve-eroding play-off games.

A colleague of mine at work told me her wee boy has been going to Tynecastle this season for the first time. I've told her she needs to tell him that having such a successful season and winning games 10-0 won't happen every year! But for now, we can rejoice in an incredible season.

It's been less than a year since Hearts said goodbye to last season's Head Coach, the always-popular Gary Locke. No one was more passionate about Heart of Midlothian than dyed-in-the-wool Jambo Lockie and he did a sterling job in what was really a thankless task given the 15 point deduction imposed on Hearts following the club's slide into administration in the summer of 2013. It's easy to forget there was a lot of anger among many Hearts supporters at Locke's departure and, it has to be said, a fair amount of scepticism at the appointment of his successor, Robbie Neilson. Accusations of doing things on the cheap and treating a Hearts icon appallingly were aimed at Hearts new owner Ann Budge and newly appointed Director of Football Craig Levein. The big Fifer had seen his reputation tarnished – unfairly, in my view – after his spell as Scotland manager, so public opinion had to be earned again in any case. Less than twelve months later, Hearts have enjoyed one of

their most successful league campaigns ever – and in a club forever associated with the word ‘trio’ as in Bauld, Wardhaugh and Conn from the all-conquering side of the 1950s, there is another modern day trio who have revolutionised Hearts. Budge, Levein and Neilson.

There were those who doubted the wisdom of appointing a rookie Head Coach in a season where promotion either by winning the SPFL Championship or via the dreaded play-offs was deemed a necessity. Some people sniped that they thought the appointment of Robbie Neilson was a cheap option, that Levein would be calling the shots and this would just be another version of the ‘puppet regime’ many believed was operated by previous owner Vladimir Romanov. How wrong they were.

There have been several iconic moments in my five decades of following Hearts. Robbie Neilson has featured in couple – his momentous winning goal for Hearts in Basle in the Europa League in 2004 and ‘the tackle’ on Gretna’s David Graham in the 2006 Scottish Cup Final which proved to be a crucial element in Hearts lifting the famous old trophy for the second time in eight years. Robbie recently said that Hearts lifting the SPFL Championship this season would eclipse anything he had done as a player. Even taking into account his heroics in Switzerland and Hampden Park, the manner of Hearts achievements under Robbie’s tutelage this season certainly backs this notion.

Like Craig Levein, Robbie Neilson was a defender. I have to admit I feared Hearts would adopt a cautious approach this season, even to the extent of taking their chances in the play-offs. How wonderful it has been, therefore, to witness stylish, free-flowing attacking football from Hearts this season with the emphasis on possession and passing. Admittedly, some supporters were initially frustrated at seeing the ball passed across the back four with seemingly no progress forward. However, Neilson’s approach has been that, without the ball, the opposition can’t do any harm. The more

often than not aimless lump up the park was usually self-inflicted damage as it usually meant giving the ball to the opposition. Now, under Neilson's philosophy, possession is the name of the game and if this means passing the ball backwards until an opening is found then so be it.

The exciting attacking play of youngsters Billy King, Sam Nicholson and Jamie Walker has been breathtaking at times this season. Added to the goalscoring prowess of Osman Sow, James Keatings and Genero Zeefuik; the midfield class of Prince Buaben and Morgaro Gomis and the defensive rock that is Danny Wilson, Alim Ozturk, Callum Paterson and Adam Eckersley then it's not difficult to see why Hearts have ran away with the SPFL Championship this season. And, even though sometimes this season he could have sat next to me in the Wheatfield Stand given his teammates have spent so much time marauding up the other end of the field, goalkeeper Neil Alexander has proved to be a safe pair of hands.

That wee boy I mentioned at the beginning of this article will doubtless discover that, as is the nature of life supporting Hearts, it doesn't always run as smooth as it has done this season. There will be defeats in the SPFL Premiership next season. A top six place will be the initial aim for Hearts and, perhaps a decent cup run (boy, we could certainly do with that!) But what is without doubt is that Heart of Midlothian, under the new trio of Budge, Levein and Neilson, have made astonishing progress in such a short space of time.

For now, the Hearts supporters are celebrating their side being back in the big time. Promotion achieved before the end of March, before the clocks go forward. Their side now has a clearer purpose than ever before. Given the club we love was in danger of going out of business not so long ago, this is something we daren't have dreamt of. But after this glorious season, Hearts supporters are dreaming again. To Ann, Craig and especially Robbie and the players – thank you for keeping our dream not only alive but flourishing. What a team. What a

season!