

Hearts Must Become Hungry Again



While the billions of pounds from the Sky and BT television deals have arguably taken football away from its working class roots in England, it's reasonable to suggest that, in Scotland, the game is still associated with those who work hard in order to earn enough money to pay the bills and afford themselves the odd treat now and again. With spring already here and summer on the horizon there will be many who are looking forward to their holidays in the weeks ahead. Until the time for their break arrives, of course, it will be business as usual with their noses still pressed to the grindstone.

Going to watch their football team is one of those treats (depending on who you support) that supporters will put ahead of many others. So when the fans read comments attributed to the Head Coach of their team that some of his players had failed to show the hunger and desire to win a game, some are entitled to express their feelings of anger – some quite vehemently if some of the comments on social media are a gauge.

Sunday's Edinburgh derby at Easter Road saw Hibernian run out deserved winners as their city rivals, having secured the SPFL Championship title a few weeks ago, failed to provide any intensity to their game. Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson seemed in little mood to defend the performances of some of his team in the aftermath of a pitiful performance.

"My complaints are that we never performed as well as I expect the players to," Neilson told Hearts official website. "We didn't do what we were meant to do, and as a result we had to

change things.

“We were already 1-0 down by that point. The second half was a bit better, but to be honest, the players didn’t have the desire today and that’s the worst thing. The hunger wasn’t there today. It’s alright doing it against Livingston, Dumbarton, Alloa and the rest, and we’ve done it consistently but the past week has not been good enough.”

Until last weekend, Hearts had lost just one league game all season and that had an element of self-destruction when Falkirk won 3-2 at Tynecastle in January, the winning goal coming after Morgaro Gomis was dispossessed on the edge of his own penalty box. That Hearts had opened the scoring in the first minute of that game but still contrived to lose it perhaps demonstrated the first signs that Hearts need to develop a ruthless streak. They certainly demonstrated this a little more than a month later when they demolished Cowdenbeath 10-0 at Tynecastle but since clinching the title and automatic promotion three weeks ago, Hearts have undoubtedly gone off the boil.

Having lost just once in nine months, Hearts have suffered two defeats in the space of a week – to Rangers and Hibernian. Neilson pointed out that the players who have coasted through the league campaign until the last fortnight would be in for a shock if they thought they could win games regularly next season in the same manner.

“They’ll need to learn quickly because they’re not going to have it all their own way next season in the top league,” he said. “We’ll be at Celtic Park, Tannadice, Pittodrie next season. We’ll be up against bigger and better teams than anyone we’ve faced this season, and my question to the players is – are you ready for that?”

We’re going up to the Premiership and we need better performances than the one at Easter Road. It needs to be a

higher standard.

Sometimes in defeat you learn a lot more about people. There are players that I thought did really well on Sunday, there's others that didn't step up to the plate. We can work with them over the summer, or we bring other guys in."

It has been a marvellous season for Hearts and they deserve to take their place at Scottish football's top table again next season. Some of the performances during this campaign have been outstanding – which makes it all the more difficult to accept why standards have slipped in the past couple of weeks.

Hearts defeat at Ibrox last weekend was a disappointment, particularly as the Maroons played the whole of the second half against just ten men following McCulloch's ordering off just before half-time. Despite dominating the second half, Hearts struggled going forward and managed just one goal through Zeefuik meaning Rangers won 2-1. There were murmurs of discontent among the Hearts support but they knew the big one for them was the Edinburgh derby the following weekend.

On Wednesday evening Neilson, with perhaps one eye on the capital clash, made seven changes to the side to face Alloa Athletic at Tynecastle. Again, it was a less than impressive performance from the champions although they did win 3-0 and victory was never in doubt. It was a little disconcerting, though, to hear the outgoing Adam Eckersley bawl at his team mates during this game having to 'encourage' them to move for a pass from the full back. If Eckersley, not knowing where he'll be playing next season, was having to urge his SPFL Premiership bound colleagues to look for the ball then it gave the impression some of the Hearts players had already let their minds wander on to the beach.

This mind-set was never going to be afforded in the cut and thrust of an Edinburgh derby. Hearts were second best in all areas and this was perceived by some of the supporters as a

lack of effort from some of the players – and in a game the fans want their team to win more than any other this is wholly unacceptable. Neilson himself seemed to have tinkered with a winning formula, opting for a 3-5-2 formation with Sam Nicholson and Billy King, so impressive this season, on the substitute's bench at kick-off. As someone said on Twitter on Sunday 'If you want to experiment that's fine – but can you let us know before we spend £28 on a ticket?'

They say every cloud has a silver lining. Robbie Neilson will have discovered more about some of his players in the last eight days than he did in the preceding eight months and there's no doubt he will put this right in the summer. Defeats to Rangers and Hibernian, difficult as they were to digest, will serve as a reality check to not only some of the players but many supporters who may have begun to believe that all their team had to do was to turn up for a guaranteed three points.

Football is still a working class game in Scotland. It's not so long ago that the miners, shipyard workers and tradesmen looked forward with much anticipation to the Edinburgh Fortnight Holiday at the beginning of July. They will have got their wages on the Friday but knew they still had to put in a shift before stopping for a well-earned break.

With games against Raith Rovers, Cowdenbeath and Rangers still to come, that's something some of the Hearts players may wish to think about.