

Hearts Look to Beat Again in the Big Time



After storming to the SPFL Championship last season – easily swatting aside the challenges from city rivals Hibernian and the club that fell from grace i.e. Rangers – Hearts will find another challenge to overcome in their return to top flight Scottish football in season 2015/16 – expectancy.

A year ago, Hearts had undergone major changes following their demotion at the end of season 2013/14. The 15 point deduction imposed on the Gorgie club at the beginning of that season as a consequence of entering administration in the summer of 2013 was always going to prove to be an obstacle too high for then manager Gary Locke. The former Hearts captain was thrown into the deep end as a rookie manager but he had both hands tied behind his back as Hearts battled not only a points deduction but a ban on signing players. Locke had no choice but to throw in many of Hearts' promising youngsters and they didn't let anyone down with their efforts.

Sadly, Hearts didn't quite manage to pull off the great escape although they made a valiant effort. Indeed, had it not been for the 15 point deduction they would have finished above Hibernian and taken their place in the dreaded play-offs.

When the Hibeers joined Hearts 'downstairs' and were met with a resurgent Rangers moving 'upstairs' from League One, many observers thought the best Hearts could hope for was taking their chances in the aforementioned play-offs. With another rookie manager in Robbie Neilson and another summer of upheaval, the Maroons weren't really thought of as automatic promotion contenders by many people outside Gorgie. But, oh

how the Gorgie boys proved so many people wrong. With a mix of youth and experience – Neilson having brought in players such as Morgaro Gomis, Prince Buaben and Neil Alexander – they romped to the Championship title. Hearts never looked back from their opening day win over Rangers at Ibrox and, in truth, the title was all but secured by Christmas with the Gers and Hibs trailing in the wake of the marauding Maroons.

Now there has been another summer of significant change at Tynecastle. Championship winning captain Danny Wilson has opted to remain in that division by returning to his first club Rangers. He has been joined at Ibrox by Jason Holt whose departure from Tynecastle last season surprised many. Equally surprising were the departures of James Keatings – who, for the second year in succession chose not to go with his promoted team and has instead signed for Hibernian – and Brad McKay who was snapped up by St. Johnstone.

Robbie Neilson has brought fresh faces in. Forwards Juanma Delgado and Gavin Reilly and defenders Blazej Augustyn, Juwon Oshininiwa – subject to international clearance – and Igor Rossi Branco will all be wearing maroon in the new season. Now it's a well-worn cliché that having these new faces will mean the team will take time to gel and on the evidence of some of Hearts pre-season results – defeats from Stirling Albion, Dumbarton, Preston North End and Everton for example – this is proving to be the case. However, it's another cliché that the serious stuff starts when the competitive season begins. For Hearts, this is this Thursday when Arbroath visit Tynecastle in the Scottish League Cup.

Hearts supporters will need to accept that their team won't get things anywhere near as easy this season. Their team will lose more games and after a year of winning games at will this may take a bit of adjusting to. That said, there is much for the Maroon Army to look forward to. More than 13,000 season ticket holders will ensure the renowned Tynecastle atmosphere is cranked up for most games, even if city neighbours

Hibernian won't be among those visiting Gorgie.

Most newly-promoted teams look at avoiding relegation as their first target. But it's not unreasonable to suggest Hearts should be aiming at not only avoiding demotion but securing a top six place come the tail end of the season. I expect Celtic to run away with the league again with Aberdeen likely to be their nearest challengers. Inverness Caledonian Thistle and St. Johnstone should also be in the top half and I have a hunch that Kilmarnock, with former Jambos Jamie MacDonald, Dale Carrick and Scott Robinson now on board, will also be pushing for a top six place.

If they can avoid injury – and striker El Hassnaoui has already been ruled out until November – Hearts can also contend for a top six place which would be a commendable achievement given where the club were a little over a year ago.

Robbie Neilson and Hearts Director of Football Craig Levein have never been ones to shout from the rooftops. Levein's naturally cautious approach to the game, particularly when he was Scotland manager, has brought its critics. And there have been some Hearts supporters who have questioned the decision to let the likes of Jason Holt, Adam Eckersley and James Keatings leave Tynecastle. All three played their part in Hearts romp to the Championship last season and it remains to be seen if those players brought in during the summer will be able to improve the team.

For now, the Hearts fans have put their trust in Robbie Neilson. The new season in the Ladbrokes Premiership will be a challenging one for Edinburgh's finest and something of a contrast to last season.

Re-establishing Hearts in the top flight of Scottish football has to be the club's priority. They should be capable of achieving that and, perhaps, a run in one of the cup

competitions. Hearts haven't scored a goal, never mind win a game in the Scottish Cup since they lifted the trophy after the hammering of Hibernian in 2012. Those who look at omens will note next year ends in 6 which means there's a fair chance the Maroons will reach the Scottish Cup Final, having done so in 1896, 1906, 1956, 1976, 1986, 1996 and 2006. Given that my youngest daughter has foolishly arranged her wedding for May 21 next year, you can bet your rent money on it happening...

It should be another eventful season in Gorgie. The Jam Tarts are back in the big time. And Hearts supporters can hardly wait.