

# Vibrant Hearts Beating Once More



Hearts highly impressive start to their return to top flight football – winning their first four Ladbrokes Premiership games to sit proudly at the top of the league – has evoked memories for some of the George Burley era (if three months can be classed an era) when Hearts won their opening eight Premier League fixtures of season 2005/06. With new recruits such as Edgaras Jankauskas, Takis Fyssas and the ebullient Rudi Skacel, Hearts looked like they would offer a serious challenge to Celtic and Rangers for the league championship. But then manager Burley was sensationally dismissed by then owner Vladimir Romanov and the fall-out had a damaging effect on Hearts title hopes. The Maroons did finish second in the league and lifted the Scottish Cup at the end of the season but there will forever be a feeling of what might have been had Burley been allowed to finish the job he started in such spectacular fashion.

Hearts present Head Coach, Robbie Neilson, was an integral part of that 2005/06 squad. However, the former full back is quick to dismiss comparison between the present day table toppers and the side who so impressed the country a decade ago. As Neilson pointed out, Burley's side contained a Uefa Champions League winner (Jankauskas) a European Championship winner (Fyssas) and Czech Republic stars Skacel and Michal Pospisil among a whole raft of foreign imports. At that time Hearts weren't averse to spending the cash via UBIG the Lithuanian bank who bank-rolled Romanov's over-grand designs for the team from Gorgie. When UBIG hit the financial buffers a couple of years ago, Hearts faced calamity and the club's very existence was at stake.

Hearts have paid the price for such financial extravagance with administration, a ban on signing players and a 15 point deduction imposed on the club meaning Hearts had to spend a season in the second tier of Scottish football for the first time in over thirty years. Securing financial stability thanks to new owner Ann Budge, the football know-how of former player and manager Craig Levein and the hard-working and rapidly developing

coaching skills of Robbie Neilson, Hearts coasted to the SPFL Championship last season, fending off what little resistance the likes of Rangers and city rivals Hibernian could throw at them.

Any promoted side will look at avoiding relegation back to whence they came as the immediate target and, to lapse into cliché mode, anything else is a bonus. Given they had two tricky away trips – to Dundee and Ross County, who both finished last season strongly – in their opening fixtures, few people outside Gorgie believed Hearts would be at the top of the Premiership after the first four games. But sitting there they are, hence the comparisons with the side who made a similar start to a season exactly ten years ago.

For those of us who recall the yo-yo years of the late 1970s/early 1980s, perhaps a more accurate comparison is with the last Hearts team who won promotion to the top-flight of Scottish football – Alex MacDonald and Sandy Jardine's team of season 1983/84.

Hearts won promotion along with St. Johnstone in the spring of 1983 and then, like now, optimism had returned to Tynecastle. There are other similarities between 1983 and 2015. In 1981, Hearts had been saved from financial oblivion by an Edinburgh businessman, Wallace Mercer. Mercer restructured the club and appointed MacDonald and Jardine as his management team. To help develop the club's promising youngsters such as John Robertson, Gary Mackay and David Bowman, MacDonald and Jardine brought in players with Premier Division experience such as Willie Johnston, Stewart McLaren and Jimmy Bone. They passed on their experience and know-how to the Tynecastle young guns and Hearts began their return to the Premier Division (as it was then) with five straight wins – including winning difficult fixtures at Dens Park and St. Mirren. Hearts sat joint top of the league with Celtic and champions Dundee United before reality kicked in and points were inevitably dropped. Nonetheless, Hearts ended the season in fifth place in the Premier Division – enough to secure a place in the Uefa Cup the following season.

Thirty-two years later, Hearts have again returned to Scottish football's top flight. Again, they have won their opening fixtures and, again sit top of the league in the early weeks of the season. Experienced players such as Neil Alexander, Morgaro Gomis and Prince Buaben have helped youngsters such as Sam Nicholson, Billy King and Callum Paterson not only secure promotion but

ensure a brilliant start to life back in the top league. Talk of this team challenging Celtic for the league title are unrealistic but there's no reason why Hearts can't match or even better the fifth place finish of 1984. Fourth place should be sufficient to secure European football for next term and, on the early evidence at least, this is something not beyond Robbie Neilson's side.

Given where Hearts were just fifteen months ago there has been spectacular progress made in Gorgie. Ann Budge said when she took over that there was a two year plan to get the club back to the Premiership. Not only are Hearts there a year ahead of schedule, they are setting the Premiership alight – just as they did in 1983/84. Like three decades ago, attendances are up (although, in truth, they never really dipped even with a season in the second tier) Nearly 14,000 season ticket holders is testament to the club's resurgence and the supporters belief that the good times are back again. There will be setbacks in the weeks and months ahead but the club is so strong now that these setbacks will be overcome.

Hearts are back, beating vibrantly once more. And Scottish football is all the richer for it.