

Burley's Bombshell – 10 Years On



There are certain traumatic events in your life which remain etched in your memory. You remember where you were when such a moment occurs. On a personal level, the very sudden death of my father aged just 58 in 1997 left me devastated for some time.

On a Hearts supporting level, such traumas have been seeing a certain team score seven offside goals to win at Tynecastle on New Year's Day 1973; Hearts suffering the indignity of relegation for the first time in their history in 1977; the transfer of my hero John Robertson to Newcastle United in 1988; hearing the news that Wallace Mercer had tried to buy Hibernian in 1990 (Edinburgh United anyone? Well, actually, no one...) and seeing the Scottish Cup winning team break up with alarming rapidity in the second half of 1998.

Saturday 22 October 2005 saw one more trauma added to the painfully long list of the agonies of being a Hearts supporter.

All was well in the Station Tavern just before one o'clock. As we supped our pre-match pints we were optimistic as one can ever be as a Jambo that Hearts would complete the first round of games in the SPL undefeated and remain top of the league. The television in the corner of the bar was showing the Sky Sports News channel. The sound was low but as I glanced up I saw Tynecastle Stadium on the screen. Now Sky Sports in those days paid Scottish football scant attention, particularly on a Saturday lunchtime, so I immediately knew something was wrong. Then the yellow tickertape scrolling across the screen displayed the news which stunned as all – manager George Burley had left Hearts. As bombshells go this was one of nuclear proportions.

Just when I thought I had seen it all as a Hearts supporter, my beloved club came up with something else to make me reach for the Prozac. Hearts had made an astonishing start to their league campaign

of season 2005/06. They were unbeaten, were top of the league and scoring goals aplenty, with Czech Republic star Rudi Skacel the new idol of Gorgie. Burley's departure, barely three months after his arrival, left the fans stunned. We wanted to know why he had left in such a dramatic fashion – and just hours before a vital league game.

The press conference held after the game against Dunfermline Athletic on that Saturday evening – designed to let people know what had happened – was a waste of time. George Burley had left and, because of a confidentiality clause, nothing else could be said. Not much more had been added to what we discovered hours earlier as we spluttered into our lunchtime pints. If Burley had been sacked, surely the fans had a right to know why.

Naturally, the rumours were flying and speculation was rife about Burley's relationship with Hearts Russian owner Vladimir Romanov but, if that was the reason the manager had left, why on earth would he drop such a bombshell on the morning of a game? Surely he could have delayed it until after the Dunfermline game?

The timing of Burley's departure was one of the many things that angered Hearts supporters. Burley had been asked by a reporter a couple of weeks before if Romanov had been telling him which players to play – as had been rumoured at the time. But Burley emphatically denied this, declaring that the day this happened would be the day he walked out the door. Now he had done....

The rumour mill was also rife with gossip about Burley's private life. There were stories that the reason he had left Tynecastle were related to the same issues that had seen him inexplicably leave Derby County a few months earlier. A story that emerged some time after Burley's departure from Gorgie suggested Romanov had wanted his manager to seek counselling in relation to an alleged alcohol problem but that Burley had refused. Whatever the reasons for the former Scotland defender's departure from the team he had taken to the top of the league, the bemused Hearts supporters in Gorgie and beyond felt the feel-good factor had suddenly been blown away.

To say Vladimir Romanov was a man who courted controversy is like saying John Robertson liked scoring a goal or two. Burley's successor was former Arsenal and England player Graham Rix – someone who had served a prison sentence for sex with an under-age girl and whose name was on the Sex Offender's Register.

Hearts continued to challenge the Old Firm but it was clear Romanov was pulling the strings and Rix was little more than his puppet, something the new manager alluded to when he tried to explain the omission of Andy Webster from a game against Dundee United in February 2006 as 'not my decision'.

Rix was shown the door soon after and Lithuanian Valdas Ivanauskas became Hearts third manager of season 2005/06 at the end of March. Hearts chances of landing their first league title in 46 years had, by now, drifted away although the team did finish in second place in the league, thereby qualifying for the following season's Uefa Champions League – the qualifying rounds at least. And Ivanauskas will go down in history as leading Hearts to a Scottish Cup triumph, even if they did need a penalty shoot-out to defeat lower league Gretna in the final at Hampden in May.

Season 2005/06, however, will forever be remembered as what might have been for Hearts. Ten years on from George Burley's sensational exit, the Station Tavern – where I learned the devastating news – now lies empty and somewhat forlorn.

Rather synonymous, I think, with Hearts supporters' dreams and hopes of league title glory a decade ago.

Mike Smith is the author of Hearts 50 Greatest Games, available in all good bookshops and on [Amazon](#)