

SPFL Hit Back at Hearts

Hearts owner Ann Budge has yet again shown she isn't afraid to speak her mind by criticising the SPFL's latest idea to bolster Scottish football with its plans for revamping next season's League Cup competition.

SPFL chiefs announced on Monday night that the 2016/17 League Cup will revert to the old section format used in the 1970s. This will involve all 38 teams not involved in European competition, plus the winners of the Highland League and Lowland League.

There will be eight groups of five teams playing each other once in a round-robin format, to take place across five July dates and will use the traditional three points for a win and one point for a draw model. However, all drawn matches will be decided by a penalty shoot-out – with the winner awarded a bonus point.

The eight group winners and the four best runners-up progress to the second round, when they are joined by the four clubs competing in Europe, and revert to a traditional knockout format.

Mrs Budge gave a lukewarm response to the changes.

“I would have liked to have known a little bit more about them before they were publicly announced,” said the Hearts owner. “I’ve had no longer to study them than the press have. They were all things that were mooted before, but in terms of a total package being put together it wasn’t something most of us were aware of. But I haven’t had a chance to examine whether I think it’s the right way forward.

“I know it will influence clubs financially, potentially in contract terms with players, and the fact that we haven’t had a chance to think these things through is a bit of a negative.

In saying that, I'm all for change, we do need change. We've talked about a winter break, we've talked about summer football, this is the beginning of something.

"So I'm not saying it's wrong, just that I would have liked to have known more about it before it was announced."

However, the SPFL said all clubs were consulted before changes to the League Cup were made public. They said they sent details of the League Cup revamp and additional changes to all 42 member clubs, in addition to the Highland and Lowland League organisations on Monday afternoon, several hours before they were announced in the media.

Hearts weren't the only unhappy club. It's worth noting that Motherwell were also far from happy at the way the changes were announced.

In a somewhat childish retort, an SPFL spokesman said: "Following media reports regarding the announcement of the new League Cup format and broadcast partner, it is worth clarifying that all 42 SPFL clubs involved received full details of the final announcement in advance. Specifically, three officials at Heart of Midlothian FC as well as two from Motherwell FC received emails at 2pm, and again at 4pm, on Monday 7 December 2015, seven and a half hours ahead of the announcement being made public.

"Furthermore it's worth noting that both Heart of Midlothian and Motherwell approved the BT broadcasting deal by written resolution at a meeting of the Premiership clubs on 10 September 2015, which made specific reference to the Group Stage for the League Cup (with the exception of the bonus point, which was debated and approved by the Competitions Working Group and the SPFL Board). This subject was widely trailed at general meetings where both Heart of Midlothian and Motherwell were present, over the past year.

"Consultation with member clubs on a possible new format for

the Scottish League Cup began as early as 21 October 2014 when, during a general meeting of all 42 clubs at Hampden, we announced that this topic would be explored by a competitions working group made up from representatives of member clubs, including Motherwell. Heart of Midlothian and Motherwell were both represented at this meeting.

“At subsequent general meetings held on both 19 January 2015 and 23 April 2015, each attended by Heart of Midlothian and Motherwell, all 42 clubs were again fully consulted on the considerations and recommendations of the working group, including a possible new July group stage format and potential broadcaster interest in this.

“Then, at our annual general meeting on 20 July 2015, attended by both Heart of Midlothian and Motherwell, all clubs were again reminded and consulted on the discussions taking place on a possible new format for the Scottish League Cup and broadcast interest.

“Finally, at our general meeting on 5 October 2015, at which both Heart of Midlothian and Motherwell were again present, all clubs were given a detailed update on intentions for the Scottish League Cup for next season onwards.

“We have received an overwhelmingly positive response to yesterday’s announcement from the vast majority of clubs, as well as many supporters, partners and the media, and look forward to continuing to work together for the collective good of Scottish football.”

In this writer’s opinion, the SPFL’s response to criticism is fairly typical. It seems the SPFL just assume member clubs will jump to their tune without considering that football clubs are run like businesses these days and many factors have to be considered – not least the supporters, many of whom will be on holiday in July when next season’s competition kicks off.

Whether the new format for the League Cup will be successful remains to be seen. Sadly, only Scottish football can take what was meant to be a positive announcement and turn it into a spat.