

Future Still Bright For Hearts

Two years ago this weekend, Hearts hosted Celtic in a SPFL game at Tynecastle. As is the way with these fixtures it was a lunchtime kick-off to meet the demands of satellite television coverage. The question was why Sky TV thought the game worthy of live transmission to the nation. Celtic were running away with the league – they were more than 20 points clear at the top of the table – but, more importantly in the eyes of the Hearts support, their team were cast adrift at the bottom of the league. The Maroons were 16 points behind Partick Thistle and Ross County. Of course, the 15 point deduction imposed on Hearts at the beginning of the season for entering administration in the summer of 2013 meant relegation was likely from day one.

Six of the Hearts team that day were aged 21 or under with another four teenagers on the substitute's bench. Despite a spirited performance from the home side the champions-elect scored two second half goals – the second deep into injury time – to win 2-0. Hearts Head Coach Gary Locke took consolation from the fact that his side's performance was a huge improvement from the last time Celtic visited Tynecastle and cruised to a 7-0 Scottish Cup win. Nonetheless, relegation was merely a matter of when and not if for Hearts and the future of one of Scottish football's great clubs was very uncertain.

The Hearts support remained loyal to their team – nearly 16,000 were at Tynecastle that day – but to say they were apprehensive is putting it mildly. Russian businessman Vladimir Romanov, who presided over the club from 2004 until 2013, had long gone and the club's financial backers UBIG had collapsed. There were many a sleepless night for the Maroon

Army. How long would their team be out of the top flight of Scottish football? What did the future hold? In fact, would there even be a future for Heart of Midlothian Football Club? A question that brought a lump to the throat of every Hearts supporter and brought horrific flashbacks of when Hearts nearly went bust in 1981 only to be saved at the last minute by Wallace Mercer.

History will relate that Hearts were saved two years ago by the Ann Budge fronted Bidco 1874 who intend to pass control to the supporters group Foundation of Hearts around three years from now.

Mrs Budge helped rescue the club and installed former Hearts defender and manager Craig Levein as Director of Football and former Hearts defender Robbie Neilson as Head Coach. Neilson enjoyed huge success in his first season, securing automatic promotion as a revamped Hearts side won the Ladbrokes SPFL Championship in breath-taking style, finishing 21 points ahead of Hibernian, who were also relegated, and 24 ahead of Rangers – the two teams many thought would be favourites for promotion.

You may ask why I'm writing about this now. Well, although the events of season 2013/14 are still fresh in the memory for the majority of Hearts supporters, it seems there are some who still can't acknowledge how close to the abyss their club actually came. Less than two years after relegation was confirmed, Hearts are now back in the top flight of Scottish football. Not only that but they sit third in the Ladbrokes SPFL Premiership, presently 11 points ahead of fourth-placed Ross County. Participation in the Europa League in season 2016-17 looks likely, a thought unimaginable just eighteen months ago.

Yet, there are some Hearts supporters who are seeing this as a winter of discontent. There is a general assumption in Scottish football that the best chance of success for clubs

other than Celtic is in the cup competitions. Since they lifted the Scottish Cup in such exhilarating fashion by demolishing Hibernian 5-1 in the 2012 final, Hearts record in any cup competition makes for dismal reading. Until this season, they hadn't even scored a goal in the William Hill Scottish Cup since that historic day nearly four years ago. They finally scored against Aberdeen in the fourth round last month and secured a fine victory. However, all that counted for nothing as Hearts threw away a two-goal lead against Hibernian in the fifth round at Tynecastle – and subsequently lost the replay on Tuesday evening before a baying Easter Road crowd, tormented by the 5-1 experience in 2012 and desperate for some form of retribution even if this came before this season's competition had even reached the quarter final stage.

As tends to be the way with many who are passionate about their team, many Hearts fans saw the defeat in black and white terms. After all, Hearts were playing lower league opposition. They didn't play well in the first game at Tynecastle but couldn't enhance the adage that it's the sign of a good team that plays poorly but still wins as Robbie Neilson's side couldn't hold on to a two goal lead at home with barely ten minutes remaining. It not only gave their old rivals a reprieve but handed them the initiative. Hibernian manager Alan Stubbs said the Hibeas would fancy their chances against anyone at Easter Road. Striker Jason Cummings, once on Hearts books, stoked up the mind games by saying Hibs would definitely win the replay.

Hearts, it seems, couldn't handle this. Gorgie defender Jordan McGhee spoke after the game on Tuesday.

“The boys know we didn't really turn up in the first half. For the first ten minutes, we weren't even on the pitch. Hibs came out of the traps and we didn't know how to deal with it. We settled in the second half and started passing the ball, which we're good at. I thought we were much better then, we created a few chances and possibly should have scored. Fans and

everyone else give their opinion but, as footballers, it's our job to take it on the chin and move on."

What has dismayed many Hearts supporters in the aftermath of the cup exit is their team 'didn't know how to deal with it' to quote young McGhee. Why was this? I find it difficult to believe it was down to a lack of preparation as Robbie Neilson is one of the most studious coaches in the game and would have told his players what to expect. Neilson's reaction after the game spoke volumes. He didn't say many words but what he did say struck an ominous note for some Hearts players

"We're disappointed. It was a big game for us, the club and the fans and we failed to get through but we have to accept that and take it on the chin.

"We fought back well but didn't manage to get the ball in the net. We had a good period of play in the second-half and a lot of chances and we didn't take them.

"It was a big game for us but you have to take the highs and lows.

"We're still building as a team. We've got a long, long way to go and I think tonight proved that."

Hearts do indeed have a long way to go and the cup defeat from Hibernian clearly demonstrated that. Despite playing poorly Hearts should have won the first game in Gorgie. The players have the ability to have played far better, particularly in that first half at Easter Road. If the players have a long way to go then so too has Neilson. His team selection and tactics against Aberdeen in the previous round were spot on. Hearts played exceptionally well in the first half and thoroughly deserved to win. Now there may have been extenuating circumstances when Hibs came to Gorgie; Osman Sow was in the process of finalising his move to China, Prince Bauben and the hugely influential Arnaud Djoum both hobbled off injured while Sam Nicholson was clearly struggling with injury in the final

few minutes. Nonetheless Hearts performance against their city rivals was nowhere near as intense and impressive as it had been against the Dons.

Some Hearts supporters say Neilson concentrates too much on the opposition and chops and changes his team selection according to who Hearts are playing. Alan Stubbs, on the other hand, believes his Hibs team are good enough to beat anyone, particularly at home. This belief filters through to the players as was demonstrated at Easter Road on Tuesday. It's not difficult to form an opinion that perhaps some Hearts players don't believe they are good enough. Billy King, for example, was a key part of last season's success and had recently come back into Hearts first team following a spell on the sidelines. But no sooner was he back making an impact than he was sent on loan to Rangers until the end of the season. Yes, the return of Jamie Walker from injury may have influenced Neilson's decision but young King must wonder about his future at Tynecastle.

Many Hearts fans have questioned the decision to let King go, even if it is only on loan. At the time of Neilson's appointment as Head Coach in May 2014 there wasn't a shortage of people questioning that decision either. His predecessor, Gary Locke, was popular with the Gorgie faithful and some felt the way Locke along with experienced players such as Jamie MacDonald, Jamie Hamill and Ryan Stevenson were treated – all of whom were pointed towards the Tynecastle exit as soon as Craig Levein returned – didn't cast the club in a good light.

Some of those critics are now rounding on Robbie Neilson. It seems the impressive performances of last season – admittedly in the Championship – and the manner in which Hearts raced to promotion have been forgotten. Some have questioned the decision to let talented youngsters such as Dale Carrick, Brad McKay and Kevin McHattie leave and have doubted the wisdom of bringing in replacements from overseas such as Juwon Oshaniwa, a player who featured in the last World Cup for Nigeria but

whose Gorgie career has stalled somewhat. Last season Hearts played a very effective passing game with Neilson saying he would never revert to a long ball style. Yet, this season, the critics argue, Hearts have resorted to long ball tactics to a big target man – previously it was Osman Sow, now it is Abiola Dauda – on several occasions.

This is the first time Neilson and Levein have faced criticism since they restructured Hearts less than two years ago. As is always the case when the team is winning and delivering success all is well. When things don't go so well the critics aren't slow to voice their opinion. Which is what makes football the game it is.

That said, Hearts remain on course for a decent season. There will be no silverware at the end of this campaign while Hibernian are chasing two cups and the Championship title Hearts secured with such ease this time last year. However, for a promoted club, one should not overlook the fact that Hearts have done very well in their first season back in the Ladbrokes SPFL Premiership.

When Ann Budge took control she said there was a two year plan to get Hearts back to the top flight of Scottish football. The two years aren't up yet but Hearts are not only back in the top division but are sitting pretty in the chase for a place in Europe next season. They have attracted one of the best young players in the land in John Souttar who was prised away from Dundee United as well as an experienced Scottish internationalist in Don Cowie. And there have already been goals from on-loan striker Abiola Dauda.

Yes, a derby defeat is always difficult to take, particularly so in the Scottish Cup. Hearts didn't play well in either of the ties against Hibernian but the reputation of Heart of Midlothian FC is such that surely some credit should be given to the opposition. Hibs are playing well just now and have the status of a Premiership club. No Hearts fan likes to lose to

Hibs but it happens – nowhere in the laws of the game does it say Hearts have to win every Edinburgh derby.

As Robbie Neilson said on Wednesday – and there is no doubt Craig Levein and Ann Budge concur – Hearts are very much a work in progress. And as some of the Hibs players said earlier this week, Hearts are presently in a place Hibs want to be – doing well in the top division of Scottish football.

A place in next season's Europa League is eminently feasible for Hearts. Which brings back memories of the last Hearts team to win promotion to the top flight of Scottish football – Alex Macdonald's side of season 1983/84 which finished in fifth place in the Premier Division and were rewarded with a Uefa Cup tie with Paris St Germain the following season.

Mistakes will continue to be made by the players, the coaching staff, the Director of Football (Danny Swanson, anyone?) and the Board of Directors. That's what being a work in progress is about. Every fan is entitled to their opinion but all I would ask disgruntled Hearts fans is to consider where their club was heading this time two years ago – and where they are likely to be heading a few months from now.

The Foundation of Hearts was founded on the community spirit which refused to let a Scottish football institution die. The fans will continue the remarkable progress initiated by Ann Budge. One cup defeat, no matter how bitter it tastes, will not change that.