

Great Expectations Won't Deter Neilson



In adjoining countries there are, on the face of it, two similar scenarios.

In one country there is a team which is five points clear at the top of their league and enjoying the multitude of kudos deservedly going in their direction. They have been described as a breath of fresh air and history may well be in the making.

In the other country there is a team which is four points clear at the top of their league. However, they are enduring much criticism and are experiencing plenty of flak being thrown in their direction.

Leicester City of England and Celtic of Scotland may well be competing in next season's Uefa Champions League but the circumstances of both clubs could hardly be more different. While City are enjoying being in the limelight and have lit up the top flight of English football, north of the border Celtic are perceived as toiling with a manager who has reportedly lost the respect of some of his players and who many are suggesting will be replaced in the summer. The difference can be put down to levels of expectation. No one in their wildest dreams – apart from the Foxes fan who stuck a fiver on his team winning the Barclaycards FA Premiership this season – expected Leicester City to be top of the league and heading to the Uefa Champions League at this stage of the season. Conversely, there were few in Scotland who thought Celtic would be just four points ahead at the top of the Ladbrokes Premiership going into the spring and looking anything but convincing champions. However, the expectations of the Celtic

support are that their team should be coasting to all the silverware, certainly domestically – and anything falling short of this is deemed as failure.

Expectations can be a heavy burden. A club as huge as Celtic has to contend with this every year. But even other clubs have a level of expectation which can be ridiculously high at times and leave realism a frustrated and bewildered on-looker. Tynecastle on Saturday was a graphic illustration of this.

Two years ago Hearts were not only facing relegation from the top flight of Scottish football but the horrific prospect of liquidation as the Vladimir Romanov era drew to a sorry close. Then Ann Budge and the Foundation of Hearts stepped in on a white charger and rescued a Scottish football institution from the abyss. Former Hearts players Craig Levein and Robbie Neilson were given the task of restructuring the football club and within a year had taken Hearts back to the Premiership in convincing fashion, leaving the arguably more fancied Rangers and Hibernian in their wake. Ah, said the cynics, the real test for Hearts would be how they fared in the cut-throat Premiership where every mistake would be punished and one-sided games such as the 10-0 romp against hapless Cowdenbeath would be a million miles away.

Less than a year since running away with the Championship, Hearts have already achieved what many supporters believed would be a realistic target – a top six finish in the Premiership with no fears of relegation. Not only that but the Maroons sit pretty in third place and are looking more than likely to qualify for next season's Europa League, albeit the qualifying stages, a fate which greets every Scottish club given the performances of Scots in Europe in recent years.

There was, admittedly, disappointment in the domestic cup competitions. Defeat at home in the League Cup by league champions Celtic was hardly a shock, disappointing though it was. The one that sticks in the throat of many Hearts

supporters, however, was the Scottish Cup defeat by Hibernian – particularly after throwing away a two goal lead in the first tie at Tynecastle which necessitated a replay at Easter Road. And we all know what happened there.

It was this defeat which proved too much for some supporters and, on Saturday just as the team kicked off against Partick Thistle, a light aircraft flew over Tynecastle with a banner declaring *No Style, No Bottle, Neilson Out*.

It was an incident that provoked much booing among thousands of disbelieving Hearts supporters as well it might. Head Coach Robbie Neilson has his critics – as most managers do – but to call for the hero of Hearts 2006 Scottish Cup winning team (who can forget that tackle against Gretna's David Graham which prevented a certain goal) and the man who has transformed Hearts from also-rans to one of the best sides in the country is, quite frankly, ridiculous.

I've been a Hearts supporter for nearly 50 years. Jambos of my generation have experienced more highs and lows than a hyper-active lift operator. We've been angry – remember the journey from the Scottish Cup final of 1976 to relegation a year later? We've been *very* angry – try as we might, who could forget Hearts losing at home to East Stirlingshire and Forfar Athletic in season 1981/82? We have felt despair more than most – we're approaching the 30th anniversary of losing the league at Dens Park in the last eight minutes of season 1985/86 after going unbeaten for eight months. Yet these heartaches have made the good times all the sweeter. The three Scottish Cup triumphs of 1998, 2006 and the Edinburgh derby to top all Edinburgh derbies of 2012 are occasions Hearts supporters will never forget. I had waited three decades to see Hearts win anything of any note and when Stephane Adam score Hearts second goal in the 1998 Scottish Cup final which secured victory over Rangers, I was too numb with disbelief to let thirty years of hurt break down the emotional barriers.

European victories over Bayern Munich and Bordeaux (I'll skip the bit which relates these teams turned around a first leg deficit) and countless victories over Hibernian in the last 33 years – some of which have turned the likes of Wayne Foster and Rudi Skacel into Gorgie folk heroes – are part of the story of following Hearts. You can't go wrong, the song goes but we all know that's far from the case.

Things certainly went wrong in the Scottish Cup replay at Easter Road three weeks ago. But even Hibernian have to win an Edinburgh derby now and again. Some cite Robbie Neilson's record as a manager against Hibs as the reason Hearts 'don't have the bottle'. How soon they forget Hearts finished 21 points ahead of Hibs in the Championship last season.

We live in a democracy and for that we should be grateful. Everyone is entitled to their opinion provided it's reasonable and isn't offensive. Those behind the plane stunt at Tynecastle on Saturday were making their feelings known – even if these feelings are against what the majority of Hearts supporters feel about their club right now. From the depths of despair, the ridicule of the Vladimir Romanov era and the very real threat of the death of their club – to a return to the Premiership, sitting pretty in third place and the almost certain prospect of European football back at Tynecastle next season. Not only that but under the astute and excellent stewardship of Ann Budge, respectability and integrity has returned to Gorgie (plane stunts notwithstanding)

Back in season 1957/58, Hearts record-breaking league championship winning side lost only one league game all season and won the league by 13 points, scoring an astonishing 132 league goals, a record unlikely to be beaten. However, they were knocked out of the Scottish Cup at Tynecastle by Hibernian. I suspect no one was inclined then to fly over Tynecastle with a banner declaring 'Walker Out'...

Hearts are beating strong again thanks to Mrs Budge, Craig

Levein and, yes, Robbie Neilson. Hearts remain a work in progress and, therefore, of course mistakes will be made. But Hearts are also back because of the financial dedication and passion of their loyal supporters.

I hope Leicester City do go on to prove the doubters wrong and life the FA Premiership. The comparisons of their season to Hearts ultimately heart-breaking campaign of season 1985/86 are obvious. If the Foxes don't win the league I'm pretty sure their vociferous supporters will still be grateful for what has been a marvellous season.

Great expectations bring their own burden. Something Robbie Neilson – a former Leicester City player – is beginning to find out. However, 'The Tackle' can rest assured the majority of the Hearts support are grateful for what he and his players have achieved in such a short space of time.