

# Criticise, Yes – But Hearts Fans Must Stick By Their Club



The fall-out from the reaction to Hearts exit from the Europa League at the second qualifying round to Birkirkara from Malta continues to drift around the streets of Gorgie. More than 14,000 Hearts fans headed for Tynecastle last Thursday and it's fair to say the majority of them went in anticipation rather than hope – even Jambos of my generation, who have been around the block a few times and know **never** to take anything for granted regarding this damn team of ours.

Unless you've been out of the Earth's atmosphere in the last four days, you will know that Hearts created a piece of unwanted history – the only Scottish team to have lost a competitive game against Maltese opposition. The reaction from an understandably angry Hearts support has ranged from wanting Head Coach Robbie Neilson to visit his nearest Job Centre Plus post haste to the 'remember where we were two years go' lament with the case for the defence (if you'll pardon the pun) being we are lucky Hearts are still in existence following the Vladimir Romanov years.

I have previously written on this here website that comparisons have been made between the Hearts team that won the SPFL Championship – not that much longer than a year ago – to the last Hearts team who gained promotion to the top flight of Scottish football back in 1983. That team, managed by Alex MacDonald, finished in fifth place in the then-called Premier Division. Back in the 1980s, such a final league placing merited a place in the Uefa Cup – and not in the multitude of qualifying rounds either, it was straight into the first round. The Hearts side of 1983/84 were pitched in against Paris St Germain which, given French football's outstanding

pedigree at the time – the national team had just lifted the European Championship – couldn't have been any more difficult for MacDonald's side who lost 6-2 on aggregate.

That same 1983/84 season saw Hearts make a miserable start to their domestic campaign and there were murmurings of discontent when former Hearts player Willie Pettigrew hit the winner for newly-promoted Morton in a league game at Tynecastle. Similarly, after Hearts came so agonisingly close to winning a league and cup double in 1986, the following season began with Hearts hosting lowly Montrose in a League Cup tie. As with last week's result against Birkirkara, no one foresaw the visitors winning 2-0...

The point I am rather labouring here is that shock results are part of football. Yes, it's hard to stomach at the time. Hearts will be lampooned for some time to come over their failure to overcome part-time opposition and I wrote in my match report it was the Maroons' most embarrassing result in their European history. Defeating the likes of Bayern Munich, Stuttgart and Atletico Madrid in the claustrophobic confines of Tynecastle (yes, I'm painfully aware Hearts lost the away legs of these ties and ultimately went out of European competition) seemed light years away. It's not easy being a Hearts fan but then it never has been. That's what makes the glorious results our team gleans occasionally all the more satisfying.

Some fans are demanding the head of Neilson and there have also been calls for Craig Levein to go with him. The critics argue that, yes, Neilson guided Hearts to the SPFL Championship but he has been found wanting at a higher level. While the counter-argument is Neilson's side achieved a third place finish in the SPFL Premiership last season, the standard of the top flight is as poor as one can recall. For some Hearts supporters, Neilson will never be forgiven for his side's inability to hold on to a two goal lead in a Scottish Cup tie against lower league opposition last season – and then

rather meekly losing the replay. Since that aforementioned Hearts team returned to Scottish football's top flight thirty-three years ago, Hearts have dominated the Edinburgh derby. The fact Hibernian went on to lift last season's Scottish Cup sticks in the throat of many of the maroon persuasion.

The fact Hibs also made a valiant attempt in their Europa League campaign last week – going out on penalties to a decent Danish side – while Hearts suffered the indignity of defeat to the part-timers of Malta also sits uncomfortably with many Hearts fans.

However, one can no longer regard Scottish football as anything like a force to be reckoned with in Europe. Yes, thirty years ago it would have been unthinkable for a Scottish club to lose to Maltese opposition. But then it would also have been unthinkable for Scottish clubs to lose to teams from Gibraltar and Luxembourg as Celtic and Aberdeen have done this season. True, they both progressed thanks to winning their home legs. But without wishing to appear to be clutching at straws, Hearts would have remained in the Europa League had Alim Ozturk's free-kick hit the underside of the crossbar in the first leg in Malta and gone in instead of the ball being cleared; had Jamie Walker and Sam Nicholson's spectacular efforts not crashed against the crossbar in the return leg at Tynecastle; and had Prince Buaben not wasted a penalty kick in the same game.

The fine line between success and failure has never been so starkly illustrated. By all accounts, Hearts played well in their 4-2 win over FC Infonet in the previous round in Estonia. No one was calling for the head of the Head Coach then. I firmly believe if Uefa ordered a replay of the Hearts v Birkirkara tie that Hearts would win the game.

Yes, fans who pay their money have every right to criticise those who run their club. And the irony is that Hearts fans will soon own their club. As Hearts fans, we're all hurting

over the events of last Thursday and will continue to hurt for some time. New players have arrived who didn't take part last week and Levein and Neilson are working tirelessly to attract fresh blood to Gorgie. I criticised Neilson last week as my disgust got the better of me. But he's still learning his trade as a Head Coach. It's one thing to cruise to a 10-0 win over Cowdenbeath. It's another when pitting your wits against European opposition. Even if it is a team from Malta – and let's be honest, Scottish football is now one of the so-called 'minnows' alongside the likes of Malta, Ireland, Estonia etc.

It wasn't so long ago Hearts were toiling with a team of youngsters as a result of the transfer embargo rightly imposed on the club by the powers that be. Then manager Gary Locke did his job with one hand tied behind his back but one thing he could guarantee, week in, week out, was the magnificent backing of the Maroon Army who continued to support the team through thin and thinner. There was a unity about Hearts and their loyal supporters that was the envy of many. Perhaps now Hearts are a victim of their own success – from administration to Europe (however, briefly) in just three years is a remarkable achievement by any standards. Ironically, it makes it easier to criticise when the club is making progress.

Hopefully, Neilson, Levein and the players will learn from last Thursday's bitter experience and put it to good use when Hearts next return to Europe. And put into practice the old adage of 'though we sometimes go down, we can aye come back up'.

By sticking together, Hearts and their supporters will certainly do that.