

When Alice Cooper Played Behind Rab Prentice...

The fact Hearts played competitive football before the beginning of the Edinburgh Trades Fortnight earlier this summer is a sad reflection of how far Scottish football has fallen. That Hearts struggled against the Estonian side FC Infonet tells its own story.

When I was a lad (no, not the war years) in the early 1970s, Hearts often struggled in an eighteen team First Division (the top flight in those days) and an early exit from the Scottish Cup meant tedious end of the season fixtures against the likes of Arbroath and East Fife with nothing to play for.

In order to relieve such turgid fare, my cousin George and I would arrange our annual Subbuteo Challenge Cup match, a game that would take on unhealthy significance for both of us. Subbuteo was then, and probably still is, the world's best table football game and was the saviour in the Smith household on many a Saturday evening.

It says much for my nerdiness that I still recall the 1974 Slade Album to the Winner game that was to become not so much the Battle of Santiago (younger readers ask your grandfather about the 1962 World Cup) as the Battle of South Aberdeen, where I was living at the time. The game was my first experience of the class war that still exists in today's society. While I had just two Subbuteo teams, a set of two goalposts and a brown ball, cousin George had a dozen teams – one of which was Ajax of Amsterdam – a green baize pitch with markings, a dugout, plastic figures of a manager and an assistant and, the piece de resistance – floodlights. It was at this grand arena (George's house) that this classic encounter took place one Saturday more than forty years ago. After the football results had been read out on Grandstand,

George and I retired to the spare room.

Typical gamesmanship followed when George decided to use his England team after I had won the toss of the coin and selected Ajax, whom Hearts had somewhat bizarrely modelled their strip on that year. While George played a 4-4-2 system with Mick Channon and Martin Chivers up front, I was steadfastly sticking to Donald Ford and co. In a bid to add spice to the occasion we both agreed that our substitutes would contain two pop stars from that era. That George elected for Elton John and Gary Glitter to sit on his bench tells you all you need to know about him. I opted for Noddy Holder and Alice Cooper but as the away team we didn't have a bench so the glam-rockers had to make do with Uncle Norman's ashtray – used in later years for Nicky Butt...(get on with it – Ed)



Elton John at Meadowbank June 2016

Now with all the smart-Alec gear, George was naturally more experienced at the game than I was. As The Undertones sang so memorably in My Perfect Cousin, he flicked to kick and I didn't know.

After ten minutes, England were 3-0 up and my cause wasn't helped when in a fit of rage I picked up Kenny Aird and threw him across the room only for the diminutive winger to be trodden on by George's mum as she came to tell us supper was ready.

After a half-time break that lasted an hour – Dr Who was on BBC1 – the match resumed in a tense atmosphere.

After Jeff Astle scored a fourth goal for the home side, I brought on Alice Cooper, a move that was to have devastating consequences for the game. As I was re-arranging the team's formation so that Cooper was playing just behind Bobby Prentice, cousin George raced up the pitch and scored a fifth. When I protested that I wasn't ready George merely smirked

which provoked me to swing a right hook that landed on my cousin's nose. As George rolled on the floor in agony, he inadvertently sat on Gordon Banks and as Alice Cooper and Drew Busby combined brilliantly to grab a goal back, the floodlights were switched off and the pitch was being rolled up in a vain attempt to avoid the drips of blood oozing from George's nose.

The ensuing wails from said cousin brought a rapid appearance from his mum and I was immediately ejected from the room by the ear and told to wait for my mother who was on her way to pick me up. The subsequent four-week ban from my cousin's house was probably for the best.

So while many of us wish to forget some of the games witnessed this year, there are still some things worth recalling in the Smith household from tedious end of season eras. England 5 (Chivers 2, Channon, Astle, Moore) Heart of Midlothian 1 (Alice Cooper) – match abandoned after 60 minutes – remains etched on the memory even though I was only twelve years old at the time. I know, there can be few people as sad as me.

But at least Alice Cooper and Noddy Holder are still going strong...