

Defining Season Ahead for Hearts – and Robbie Neilson



The new SPFL season kicks off this weekend. Mike Smith looks ahead to what may be a defining season for Hearts...

Last season, upon their return to the top flight of Scottish football, Hearts exceeded expectations of many observers by finishing third in the Ladbrokes Premiership. For most of the season they were challenging Aberdeen for second place but, nonetheless, a third place finish in the top flight for a promoted team was a fine achievement. Although, it's fair to say, not every Hearts supporter saw it that way...

Hearts began season 2015/16 in impressive fashion, winning their first five league games before the controversial sending off of Callum Paterson at Hamilton Academical contributed to the Maroons throwing away a 2-1 lead to lose 3-2.

If not quite a rollercoaster campaign, season 2015/16 had its fair share of ups and downs for the Maroon Army. There were some impressive displays – the 4-0 win away to Partick Thistle and the 6-0 demolition of Motherwell at Tynecastle spring to mind – and there were some not so impressive displays – a 3-0 loss to St. Johnstone in Gorgie was one of those afternoons to forget.

Nevertheless, a third place finish in the league was enough to secure qualification in this season's Europa League qualifying rounds – and I'll just let that lie there...

There is an argument that says finishing third in the top flight of Scottish football isn't much to write home about. The present standard of the game in Scotland is as low as I can recall in nearly 50 years of watching what was once called

'the beautiful game'. In the aforementioned Motherwell game, Hearts did hit the heights with a display that was full of good passing, determined tackling and a passion that made it a joy to watch. But, one has to say, that was the exception rather than the rule. There were many Hearts performances last season which hardly set the Gorgie heather alight.

Head Coach Robbie Neilson knew that the team that coasted to the Ladbrokes Championship the season before would need changing for the Premiership. Transition is the word oft-used for such a scenario. Some players who helped the Jambos gain promotion left Tynecastle without getting a chance to make an impact in the top flight. Players like James Keatings, Dale Carrick, Adam Eckersley, Kevin McHattie, Gary Oliver and Kenny Anderson all exited Tynecastle while players such as Blazej Augustyn, Igor Rossi, Juanma, Gavin Reilly, Arnaud Djoum and Juwon Oshaniwa arrived with Don Cowie, Abiola Dauda, John Souttar and Perry Kitchen arriving during the season.

At the end of last season Augustyn, along with midfielder Miguel Pallardo, Dauda and fellow striker Soufian El Hassnaoui – who didn't kick a ball in anger last term – also left Gorgie.

The question many Hearts supporters pondered was did these new arrivals last season take the club forward? The jury is still out on that one. Augustyn and Dauda have now taken their leave while Reilly has been sent on loan to Dunfermline Athletic for a season; Billy King, a highly talented youngster has started a similar loan spell at Premiership rivals Inverness Caledonian Thistle. The most curious move, though, was the departure of young defender Jordan McGhee who has gone on loan to newly promoted Middlesbrough. It would appear young McGhee isn't good enough for Hearts but is good enough to play in the English Premiership...

Neilson has said that any player coming to Tynecastle has to be better than the players already on the books. This summer

has seen the arrival of strikers Conor Sammon, Robbie Muirhead and the on-loan former Celtic striker Tony Watt. Time will tell if they are better than those who left but I suspect many Hearts fans will need to be convinced.

The goalkeeping situation is one that hasn't been dealt the way one would have expected. Former Scotland keeper Neil Alexander proved invaluable when he arrived in Gorgie two years ago and was a key figure in Hearts promotion winning team. As season 2015/16 drew to a close it seemed likely the former Rangers keeper would remain as number one at Tynecastle as well as continuing with his coaching duties. But then, out of the blue, Alexander was given his P45. No proper explanation was given other than Neilson wanted Jack Hamilton to be his number one this season – this despite the fact the 22-year-old was being considered as yet another Hearts player to go out on loan.

Paul Gallacher has arrived as Hamilton's understudy and he will also be carrying out coaching duties.

Last season Hearts did well to finish in third place in the league. But, in the cups, there was yet more disappointment. Neilson's side exited the League Cup at the quarter final stage after inevitably being paired with Celtic at Tynecastle. A 2-1 defeat was difficult to take for the Maroon Army – but this wasn't half as difficult to stomach as Hearts exit from the Scottish Cup.

After memorably knocking out Aberdeen at Tynecastle, Hearts were given another home draw – against neighbours Hibernian. I won't relive what happened but when your team is 2-0 up at home against lower league opposition with just ten minutes to go you expect them to see out the game – not be forced into a replay. And even in the replay you don't expect your team to go down as meekly as they did.

This was too much for some supporters who hired a light

aircraft to fly over Tynecastle during a league game against Partick Thistle in March with a trailing banner which read 'No Style, No Bottle, Neilson Out'. While this protest was met by boos from the majority of the Hearts support it was evident there were more than just a few dissenting voices over Neilson's style of management, tactics and a perceived lack of bottle in big games, particularly in the cups and league games against Celtic.

It's fair to say the number of dissenting voices has grown following Hearts less than impressive start to season 2016/17 which saw them play poorly against Estonian side FC Infonet – the 2-1 win at Tynecastle in the first leg was fortunate although there was an improvement in the return leg in Tallinn – before the roof metaphorically fell in at a soon to be redeveloped Tynecastle when Birkirkara won 2-1 after a goalless draw in the first leg in Malta. Unwanted history was made by Hearts becoming the first Scottish side ever to lose to Maltese opposition.

As well as strikers Sammon, Muirhead and Watt, Hearts have added another forward – Bjorn Johnsen – as well as left back Faycal Rherras and goalkeeper Viktor Noring. Another forward – Nikolay Todorov – signed from Nottingham Forest but has immediately been loaned out to Cowdenbeath.

Of course, it remains to be seen how well the new Hearts players will gel. Given the team's untimely exit from European competition, the early signs are some way short of encouraging. Hearts have made progress since the dark days of administration three years ago but some of the Hearts support are well within their rights to start asking if this progress has stalled somewhat. It doesn't help that, across the capital city, Hibernian have won silverware (even if it did take them 114 years to win the Scottish Cup) and look to be a club literally on the up. Manager Neil Lennon will surely ensure promotion is attained this season and there is, without doubt, optimism again at Easter Road.

Optimism at Tynecastle is of the more cautious kind. With Rangers now in the Ladbrokes Premiership, Hearts will do well to repeat last season's third place finish. Those of a more pessimistic outlook will look at Hearts fixtures in the opening few days of the domestic campaign – Celtic at home, Aberdeen away and, sandwiched in between, a tricky away League Cup tie at St. Johnstone – and may harbour thoughts that their favourites may be bottom of the league and out of the League Cup before the end of the Edinburgh Festival. If so, the 'Neilson Out' brigade may have recruited a few more members.

Season 2016/17 looks like it will be a defining one for Hearts and Robbie Neilson in particular. The feel-good factor prevalent in the last two years has been tempered somewhat. A return to the free-flowing football that marked Neilson's first season in charge along with a settled team and a formation the players understand and enjoy is what the fans are looking for. And a much-needed cup run or two wouldn't go amiss. A top six finish in the league is certainly achievable for this group of Hearts players – whether that will satisfy the steadfastly loyal support remains to be seen.