

From The Stand – Consistency is the Key

The Edinburgh Reporter's Mike Smith gives his take on Scottish football in the first of a regular series of articles.

It's been a week of conflicting emotions for the good followers of Heart of Midlothian. It's fair to say there had been an air of apprehension in the build up to last Saturday's game with Inverness Caledonian Thistle at Tynecastle. Without a domestic win so far this season – albeit we're still in the month of August – sitting second bottom of the Ladbrokes Premiership, out of the League Cup and, most painful of all, out of the Europa League at the hands of Maltese opposition, many Hearts fans were dubious about their team's chances of putting one over the Caley Jags, who have been something of a bogey team to Hearts in recent seasons.

As well as the poor results, there had also been criticism from former players Gary Mackay and Michael Stewart about the team's style of play. For the first time since Robbie Neilson took over as Head Coach two years ago, the feel-good factor was on the wane. However, after a superb performance against Inverness and a 5-1 demolition to record their first league win of the season, spirits were restored to their previous lofty levels. Hearts supporters headed out of Tynecastle on Saturday with smiles on their faces once again as it appeared their team, inspired by the much-maligned Don Cowie who seems to be revelling in the captain's role in the absence of Alim Ozturk, produced a display reminiscent of the Jambos at their best.

But the life of a Hearts supporter is anything but smooth. When the SPFL announced that Willie Collum is to referee Hearts Ladbrokes Premiership game at Partick Thistle this Saturday, there were groans of despair from many of the Maroon Army. Mr Collum is the man most football supporters love to hate. Despite his assured performance in the European Championship Finals in France this summer, Collum is sure to be the target of fans of both sides at Firhill on Saturday. The

wags on social media weren't slow to express their views. 'What's the odds on Hearts getting a player sent off?' seemed to be the question directed at the SPFL's sponsors with the anticipated reply of 'very short'.

It was whistler Steven MacLean's turn in Gorgie last Saturday. A series of bemusing and inconsistent decisions invoked the ire of the home support (and, I suspect the couple of hundred travelling Caley Thistle fans) Every week there seems to be some contentious decision involving referees and while everyone is human and prone to mistakes, the frustration this creates is palpable. What the players, managers and fans want is consistency – the problem is you just never know what to expect.

The frustration felt towards officials is, perhaps, a by-product of the feeling of malaise in the game in Scotland in general. There has been much celebrating this week over Celtic's qualification to the group stages of the Uefa Champions League. Scotland's champions haven't achieved this 'feat' for a couple of years now and have somewhat stumbled their way to European football's top table after accounting for opponents from Gibraltar, Kazakhstan and Israel. They nearly threw away a three goal lead in Israel on Tuesday night but they made it – which is more than can be said for Hearts, Hibernian and Aberdeen who exited the lesser Europa League some time ago.

The feeling that Scottish football is being left behind is given more unwanted credence when one considers the national team. England, Northern Ireland and Wales – as well as the Republic of Ireland – all graced the aforementioned European Championship finals in France during the summer. Scotland's presence was in the shape of the also aforementioned Willie Collum. It was hard to take for the Tartan Army and their mood would not have been helped when they read Scotland Head Coach Gordon Strachan's squad for the forthcoming World Cup qualifier against Malta. True, Hearts Callum Paterson and Jack Hamilton are in the squad, as is Hibernian's John McGinn. But it's fair to say the squad doesn't exactly fire the imagination. 35-year-old Gordon Greer is not exactly a nod to the future – the defender will be 37 if

Scotland make it to the World Cup finals in Russia. Yes, Celtic's Kiernan Tierney and Rangers Barrie McKay are also included but the days when fans eagerly anticipated the announcement of the Scotland squad have long gone.

Perhaps, as with the club game, we've become accustomed to failure. This is perhaps why Celtic qualifying for the group stages of the Champions League is being treated as if it's a major achievement. The Scotland team hasn't qualified for a tournament in twenty years and if any of our clubs remain in European competition beyond Christmas it's almost a cause for a national celebration.

This may come across as a 'doom-and-gloom' article but there are occasions when good football is played as demonstrated by Hearts last weekend. Just as with the referees, players need to be more consistent.

Who knows, by the New Year, Scotland might sit top of their World Cup group with Tony Watt scoring a hat-trick against Lithuania, Celtic may have qualified for the latter stages of the Uefa Champions League and Juanma may be a contender for European football's Golden Boot award.

Then again...