

Hearts Need to Find Their Scoring Touch



For Hearts supporters, Wednesday evening's defeat at Kilmarnock was an all-too familiar story. The Maroons had won their previous two Ladbrokes Premiership games against Motherwell and Dundee and Head Coach Robbie Neilson was bullish in his pre-match talk about how he saw this week as being an ideal opportunity for Hearts to gain six points from their trips to Kilmarnock in midweek and Inverness at the weekend. While one expects a manager to talk up his team's chances of taking the opportunity to leapfrog Aberdeen and go into second place in the league, many Hearts fans, probably of my generation, winced as they heard the Head Coach speak. For inevitably, as has been the case regularly in the near 50 years I've been a supporter, Hearts flatter to deceive.

Hearts lamentable defeat in Ayrshire meant not only did they pass up on the chance of going second but they relinquished third place as St Johnstone's draw at Ibrox the same evening meant they climbed into third spot with Hearts now down to fourth.

Neilson said after the game at Rugby Park that the result was a 'wake-up call' for his players. Certainly, Hearts had chances with Tony Watt and substitute Bjorn Johnsen missing two guilt-edged opportunities. Both Watt and Johnsen made promising starts to their Tynecastle careers but neither has overly impressed in recent games. The media like to proclaim Watt as the enigma of Scottish football. He made a name for himself as an 18-year-old when he scored the winning goal for Celtic against Barcelona in an Uefa Champions League game at Celtic Park and was hailed as the next great star. However, Watt has fallen from grace in recent years, departing Celtic

for Belgian football and most recently plying his trade with English League One side Charlton Athletic. Watt remains a Charlton player and is presently on a season-long loan at Hearts, Robbie Neilson having decided the winger was worth the considerable gamble. The jury is out on whether the gamble has paid off – one goal in a maroon shirt thus far would indicate it hasn't and his miss at Kilmarnock proved costly and embarrassing.

Johnsen hasn't been given the same opportunity as Watt, the American being restricted to a handful of substitute appearances. His debut against Inverness Caledonian Thistle in August saw him produce a sublime back heel to Sam Nicholson who duly did what his strike partners have failed to do so often this season and find the net. Against Dundee two weeks ago, Johnsen scored his first goal in maroon but the chance he fluffed against Kilmarnock on Wednesday rivalled that of Tony Watt's for sheer wastefulness.

The brunt of Hearts lack of goals return from their forwards is a player who, ironically, made his name at Kilmarnock. Conor Sammon is another who has struggled to make an impact at Tynecastle this season and he has emerged as a figure some Hearts fans love to hate. When I suggested to a fellow Jambo the other day that Sammon wasn't a natural goalscorer, the somewhat acerbic reply was 'he just isn't a scorer'.

Hearts now head to Inverness on Saturday – another venue, like Kilmarnock, where the Gorgie side don't have an impressive record in recent times. Another defeat in the Highlands will see the Maroons possibly fall further down the league rendering talk of challenging Celtic – rapidly disappearing at the top of the table – irrelevant. Neilson's team selection will doubtless come under more scrutiny and if his forwards again fail to produce the goods, Hearts fans dismay may well turn to anger.

The seemingly endless analysis of last weekend's Celtic-Rangers game (there are other teams in Scotland, although

sometimes you wonder) suggested Rangers manager Mark Warburton has not recruited players as wisely as his Celtic counterpart. With the likes of Tony Watt and Conor Sammon continuing to huff and puff in front of goal, similar accusations could be made of Robbie Neilson. The former Hearts defender said after the rather fortuitous win over Dundee that Watt and Sammon did all the hard work but others took the glory. No one doubts the effort Watt and Sammon put in but their inability to score goals is a mounting concern for the Maroon Army.

That Hearts have come a long way since the dark days of administration is without question. However, this season, when one considers the embarrassing exit from the Europa League qualifiers to Maltese opposition, throwing away a lead at St Johnstone in the Betfred Cup and the stuttering league performances of late, the maroon revival seems to have stalled somewhat.

Hearts fans will be hoping Robbie Neilson, accused by some last season of having no style and no bottle, can reignite it.