

Cathro Can Drag Scottish Football Out of the Dark Ages



Photo: Hearts FC

If ever there was a bare-faced example of why Scottish football has become something of a laughing stock in recent years, then it was this week. When Hearts announced on Monday evening that Ian Cathro would be the man to replace Robbie Neilson as their new Head Coach, the appointment was generally welcomed by the Maroon Army. However, among some of the football fraternity, there was behaviour akin to a sniggering schoolboy some years away from maturity. All that was needed was a screwed-up face and a blowing raspberry and the classroom idiocy would have been complete.

The butt of childish jibes from the likes of Kilmarnock striker Kris Boyd, former Motherwell captain Stephen Craigan and ex-Celtic goalkeeper Pat Bonnar ranged from Cathro never having played football professionally therefore wouldn't have the respect of the players; being too young and would find it difficult dealing with senior players and, most bizarrely, only gained his coaching expertise through a laptop. Boyd opined that Cathro, on getting the Hearts job, hadn't been as excited since he got a PlayStation.

The former Aberdeen captain and manager Willie Miller also castigated Cathro for having the temerity to say at the Hearts press conference on Tuesday that there were no limits to what Hearts could achieve. That translated, in the mind of Miller, to mean Hearts would win the league and, therefore, he was giving supporters false hope.

Cathro was also criticised for saying he wants to work with the media in his new role. 'Hah!' guffawed Miller, 'That was naïve. He'll soon learn the press will be out to get him'.

What a load of old tosh. Willie Miller was one of Scotland's greatest players. As a manager, however, he fell somewhat short of success. Yet, he feels he knows more about the coaching side of the game than an admittedly young man but someone who has coached at leading clubs at home and abroad – more than Miller has done.



Cathro has been assistant coach at Rio Ave in Portugal and at Valencia and Newcastle United. He was part of the set-up that took Rio Ave into European competition for the first time in their history. He helped the Spaniards qualify for the Uefa Champions League. He assisted former England manager Steve McClaren at Newcastle and when McClaren was shown the door earlier this year, his replacement, Rafa Benitez, thought so highly of Cathro he kept him on. How many new managers do that?

Clearly, Cathro's impressive reputation goes before him. Except in parts of Scotland. Back in 2008, his knowledge of the game was recognised by Craig Levein who appointed him as Director of Dundee United's youth academy during the time Levein was United's manager. He was impressed by Cathro's ability and knowledge of the game as well as the way he dealt with young players – the likes of Ryan Gault and John Souttar. When Cathro left Scotland for Portugal – after a brief spell at the SFA – Levein kept tabs on his progress. It was no surprise to the big Fifer to see the Dundonian move to bigger clubs in Spain and in England. When Robbie Neilson left Hearts last week for MK Dons, Cathro was the obvious choice as his replacement – although not to some of the Neanderthals in Scottish football.

Playing the game at a high level is not a prerequisite to being a successful coach. Just ask Jose Mourinho. If anything, it may even be an advantage. Cathro played at youth level at Forfar Athletic and Brechin City but didn't make the professional grade. So, he will know how to coach and guide players to help achieve their potential. As a player, Alex Ferguson was booted out of Rangers after their defeat to Celtic in the 1969 Scottish Cup Final. Fergie was blamed for one of the Celtic goals in the 4-0 defeat and never played for the Ibrox club again. Did this prevent him becoming one of the game's most successful managers ever? Of course not. If anything, Ferguson used his rejection by Rangers as a driving force to ensure he was a success as a manager.

The comment that Cathro won't have the respect of the senior players at Tynecastle is another piece of comic genius. Only Don Cowie is older than the new Head Coach and, having been Hearts captain for a brief spell, it's difficult to envisage the midfield man doing anything other than help Cathro get his message across.

Kris Boyd's comments are nothing short of embarrassing. The Kilmarnock player was back on the offensive this morning following his ridiculous earlier statements about Cathro and a laptop when he questioned if Levein would be picking the team and Cathro would just be his underling – just as Robbie Neilson was. Boyd may have played for Rangers and Scotland but his lack of understanding about how the game is evolving is typical of the underlying thought process in Scottish football. Hearts are using a template which has been proved to be a success in Europe, particularly in Germany. The Director of Football takes on a strategic role leaving the Head Coach to do what he does best – coaching the players to get the best possible result on match day.

Those stuck in the past would probably have preferred Hearts to appoint a manager from the old boys' network. Tried and trusted – but not necessarily successful – many of them are

currently out of the game, which says a lot. But Hearts are moving forward. The appointment of Ian Cathro is innovative, ground-breaking and refreshingly exciting. Hearts supporters are not stupid. They know – as do the club – that this appointment, along with Assistant Head Coach Austin MacPhee, is high-risk. But that can be said of any appointment of a Head Coach or manager. Cathro came across at Tuesday's press conference as knowledgeable, articulate and having a good sense of humour.

Of course, he will have his own ideas of how he wants Hearts to play. Of course, he will make mistakes along the way. And should Hearts lose to Rangers at Ibrox this Saturday – where the Gers are unbeaten this season – those critics who have been quick to snipe will no doubt be queueing up to say 'I told you so'.

But Hearts will not allow such pettiness and ostrich-thinking views to distract them. The appointment of Ian Cathro and Austin MacPhee is one of the most exciting things to happen to Heart of Midlothian in recent years. This will take Hearts on a new, energising road which promises much. Yes, Celtic and Rangers are on much larger budgets. But who is to say they can't be challenged? When Cathro was in Spain, Valencia were in a different financial league to Barcelona and Real Madrid. It didn't stop them challenging. It didn't prevent them qualifying for the Champions league.

Scottish football has been stuck in reverse gear for far too long. Driven by attitudes of people like Kris Boyd and Willie Miller. Hearts now have a new driver at the wheel. And the road ahead looks very promising.