

A Traditional Kick-Off Time for the Edinburgh Derby? Fat Chance!



It was inevitable the forthcoming William Hill Scottish Cup fifth round tie between Hearts and Hibernian would be kicking off on a day and time to suit television. As soon as Rod 'I am Swaying' Stewart and former Hibs manager Alan 'Number 6 – no, make that number 9') Stubbs made the draw last Sunday afternoon, fans of both Edinburgh clubs knew the tie would almost certainly be played on a Sunday.

Thus, Sky Sports have chosen the Edinburgh derby for live coverage with the game now kicking off at 12.30pm on Sunday 12th February at Tynecastle. The good folk of Gorgie will have their Sunday lunchtime peace blown to smithereens.

Television ploughs so much money into football these days that the broadcasting companies can dictate games will kick-off any damn time that pleases them. There is still the Uefa ruling, of course, which says no games kicking off at 3.00pm on a Saturday can be televised live but this means the likes of Sky, BT and, to a lesser extent, the BBC can select any other time of their choosing.

Sunday lunchtime for the latest instalment of Hearts v Hibernian in the Scottish Cup – it's turning into a serial now – is not too inconvenient for the citizens of Edinburgh and the Lothians even though this does impact on pre-match drinking rituals in the pub. However, for fans of both clubs who live outside the Lothians then this kick-off time is less convenient.

I know of Hearts fans who live in Aberdeen and who regularly

attend games. The challenge for them is to make it to the capital city for about noon – no easy task if you're relying on Scotland's public transport system. Granite City based Hearts fans will realise the first train from Aberdeen to Edinburgh on a Sunday is at 9.05am – which, arriving at the Haymarket around 12.20pm (daring to assume the damn thing will be on time) would mean taking on the attributes of Usain Bolt to make it to Tynecastle in time for kick-off.

Television doesn't seem to care if some fans can't make it to re-arranged kick-off times. They've paid their money so the fans – the paying customers – will just have to like it or lump it.

The emergence of satellite television in the last few decades has transformed fixture schedules from something by which you could set your watch to something akin to a lottery of dates and times. It's a far cry from my informative years as a football fan in the early 1970s when a vital Scotland game or a big European club match couldn't be shown live on either the BBC or STV (just the two broadcasters back then) because Albion Rovers were playing Clydebank in a vital Reserve League (West) clash.

I recall Willie Allan, the then SFA Chief Executive, speak of the threat of hell and damnation if television was allowed to cover football games live on a regular basis. If memory serves me correctly, the Rangers –Hearts Scottish Cup final of 1976 was the last final not covered live on television. Had it been, Hearts might have got to the official kick-off time without being a goal down (the game kicked off at two minutes to three and Derek Johnstone put Rangers in front 60 seconds later)

Allan's critics were large in number but, given where football is now – at the behest of television and its ridiculous money – he may have had a point.

A few years ago, Hearts played a Uefa tie against VfB

Stuttgart at Tynecastle – on a Thursday evening with a 9.00pm kick-off to suit the needs of German television. Very family friendly that decision turned out to be.

There have been numerous other occasions throughout the years where Hearts and Hibs fans have faced rising at some ungodly hour to make it to Inverness, Dingwall or Aberdeen for a lunchtime kick-off. Indeed, Hearts will play in the Granite City on 18th March; a Saturday, yes, but a kick-off time of 12.15pm is far from convenient.

Hibernian are likely to return to the top flight of Scottish football next season and the Hearts-Hibs Premiership games will be back on the fixture list. But, we all know there is as much chance of the Edinburgh derbies kicking off at 3.00pm on a Saturday as Donald Trump winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Our only hope in the years ahead is for another all-Edinburgh Scottish Cup final – this is one fixture which, thankfully, remains on a Saturday afternoon at 3.00pm.

Sadly, the fans have to put up with the inconsideration of sports broadcasters. What the football authorities and clubs should remember, however, is while they eagerly snatch the large wads of cash from the television companies, some fans may give up on the game, their frustrations at having to make considerable sacrifices having reached breaking point.

However, there is one other possibility for a Saturday afternoon Edinburgh derby. Now if only Spartans could get promoted to the SPFL and Edinburgh City stay up...