

# Hearts Broken Too Many Times



The morning after the night before. The commute to work was horrendous. Cold. Dark. Heavy rain. Then snow. Blowing a gale. The bus to the west of the city was heaving with miserable souls. The city fathers seem to have decided to make my route to work to include as many obstacles as possible. Temporary traffic lights in Leith Walk. The interminable building site that used to be where St James Centre was at the top of Leith Street. Another one at the Haymarket where another development is about to take shape. And the endless queue of traffic on Gorgie Road.

The bus snaked past another building site – that of the new stand being built at Tynecastle. Appropriately, the walking pace of the numerous buses, lorries and cars past McLeod Street was akin to a funeral procession. Appropriate, because for the majority of Hearts supporters, Thursday morning was akin to waking up with a very bad hangover after seeing their Scottish Cup hopes for this season die.

It was an all-too familiar feeling. A little over a year ago, Hearts played Hibernian in the William Hill Scottish Cup at Tynecastle. The Maroons contrived to throw away a two-goal lead in the final ten minutes necessitating a replay at Easter Road which they lost 1-0. Then Head Coach Robbie Neilson felt the ground swill of opinion tilt against him and a few weeks later some fans hired a plane to fly over Tynecastle during a game against Partick Thistle trailing a banner which read 'No Style, No Bottle, Neilson Out'

Fast forward just over a year to Wednesday evening in Leith. Again, Hearts had been drawn against Hibernian in the Scottish Cup. Again, the first game at Tynecastle was a draw meaning Hearts faced the perilous trip across Edinburgh to the home of

their fierce and sometimes bitter rivals. There was an inevitability about the outcome. But what made Wednesday night even more bitter for the Maroon Army was the manner of the defeat.

A lot has changed at Tynecastle both structurally and personnel-wise in the last year. Neilson departed in November and his replacement Ian Cathro has divided opinion among many. After a less than impressive start, it began to look like Hearts were at least beginning to turn the corner. Cathro drafted in new players such as Tziolis, Struna, Martin, Avlonitis and Goncalves. Three weeks ago, this new-look Hearts team demolished Rangers 4-1 in the Ladbrokes Premiership at Tynecastle. They followed this up with an impressive 3-0 win at Motherwell.

But the Scottish Cup ties against Hibernian have proved this was yet another false dawn. Hearts lacked creativity and the guile to overcome their rivals in the first game at Tynecastle with the state of the pitch being used as one of the reasons why. And the replay at Easter Road on Wednesday showed Hearts fragilities like someone whose body scan shows a litany of broken bones.

Defeat is hard to take at any time. When it comes in the cup competitions, particularly the Scottish Cup, it's harder to take because a relentless Celtic team are always going to be favourites to win the league title. Their substantial financial resources, increasing year on year thanks to their participation in the lucrative Uefa Champions League, makes this so. This means the cups are the best chance for teams like Hearts to achieve success. So, when you get knocked out of the Scottish Cup by your city rivals it's a hammer blow. Particularly when it happens twice in little over a year.

What made this latest defeat bitter to take for Hearts supporters was that Hibernian clearly wanted victory more than those in maroon. Yes, there was plenty pre-match talk from

some of the Hearts players about having the better players, being up for the fight, matching the physical attributes of their opponents' blah, blah, blah. Don Cowie attended the pre-match conference and exuded confidence. Not only was this misplaced but Cowie was injured and wouldn't even play in the game.

Hearts began the game as if it were a training exercise, thereby handing the initiative to Hibernian which they were never going to relinquish, especially in front of the biggest home crowd for more than twenty years. An insipid first half saw the home side two goals ahead, a lead to which they deservedly added midway through the second half. Isma Goncalves scrambled goal for the visitors with less than twenty minutes to go was scant consolation for the 4,000 Hearts fans at Easter Road – many of them had left by that time in any case.

Gloating Hibs fans belted out The Proclaimers' 'Sunshine on Leith' at the end of the game, gleefully relishing their dismantling of their Premiership opponents and no one would blame them. Hearts were outclassed and, most bitterly of all, outfought.

I've seen many Hearts teams go to Easter Road over the years. They've suffered defeats, yes – the 6-2 hammering in 2002 being particularly painful. But, for the most part, they've always been up for the game, always fought hard even though sometimes it just wasn't their day. I didn't get that impression from the Hearts team that succumbed so meekly on Wednesday evening.

Why was this? This is what many Hearts fans are asking themselves. Indeed, Cathro himself seemed to be having similar thoughts.

"That's quite a few backward steps and we've got a lot of making up to do to a lot of people," Cathro told BBC Scotland. "Maybe the mistake has been us overestimating the stage we are

at as a team. We lost those situations earlier in the game and caused a very hurtful evening for a lot of people.”

Hearts shining light in recent weeks has been attacking midfielder Jamie Walker but even he seemed out of sorts in Leith. He told The Scotsman “Maybe Hibs have got more boys who know what it means, like myself. Maybe some of the new boys were just expecting to pot the ball around and, as you know, in a derby you can’t do that. You need to win your individual battles and I think we failed in all aspects of that.”

Does Walker’s comments hint at unrest in the dressing room? Is Ian Cathro hinting at players perhaps not adhering to his instructions? Who knows.

What Hearts supporters do know is Wednesday night’s performance at Easter Road – the one away venue above all where you want your team to perform at their very best – was wholly unacceptable. Coming as it did a year after their last woeful performance in similar circumstances at the same venue, the anger among those of the maroon persuasion is palpable.

Ian Cathro said his players have got a lot of making up to do. Given that several of them will be leaving Gorgie at the end of the current campaign – which to all intents and purposes has already ended – these sound hollow words.

Hearts may have signed international players during the January transfer window. But I suspect the fans would rather see a team full of youngsters prepared to bust a gut for their team, especially in a derby game in which Hearts recent record is woeful. Seven games without a win over Hibernian during a spell when the Easter Road club have been outwith the top flight of Scottish football makes for alarming reading.

Cathro knows that a fourth-place finish in the Ladbrokes Premiership may be enough to secure a place in the qualifying stages of next season’s Europa League – in June. It’s not even a scant consolation for another pathetic showing in the

Scottish Cup but it might be a very small step towards 'making up' to an anguished Hearts support.

Thursday morning felt hellish for most Hearts supporters. It was in keeping with the mood of the day that at the building I work the fire alarm went off meaning we all had to stand outside in the wind and driving snow for half an hour until the Fire Service arrived. As I stood there, drookit and feeling sorry for myself, I hoped there were similar alarm bells ringing at Tynecastle.

If not, there damn well should be...