

Just Another Saturday...



This doesn't happen very often. But I must confess that – for this week only, mind – I'm rather envious of those fans who profess to 'hate Jam Tarts and hate Dundee'. Now this is nothing to do with Hearts struggling of late and the dismal results for the Maroons in the last couple of weeks or so. It's more to do with Hibernian's William Hill Scottish Cup quarter final tie with Ayr United at Easter Road this weekend. For it is the only one of the quarter final ties to kick off at 3.00pm on Saturday.

The other evening, I attended a splendid talk at the National Library of Scotland by the brilliant writer Daniel Gray who was speaking about his book Saturday, 3pm. It's a superb tome and well worth a read (that's another pint you're due me, Dan) The author spoke about some of the delights of football past including traditional kick-off times (hence the name of the book) which have been very much at the whim of television companies for many years now.

This is highlighted by this weekend's Scottish Cup ties. The quarter final stage is when the tension increases a notch with a place in the showpiece final ever closer. This is recognised by the television moguls who, between them, will cover one game on a Saturday lunchtime and two others on Sunday afternoon. And to hell with any inconvenience this may cause the fans.

In a couple of weeks Hearts will head to Aberdeen in the Ladbrokes Premiership. Kick-off time – 12.15pm. Not entirely convenient for the travelling Maroon Army but ideal for BT Sport who are broadcasting the game live. Given Hearts form of late, it will be interesting to see how many Hearts supporters will head to Pittodrie, although I know there are a number of

Hearts fans who live in the Granite City.

Ridiculous kick-off times are just one of the many foibles – to lapse into cliché mode – of ‘the modern game. I grew up following Hearts in the late 1960s/early 1970s and that era now seems a world removed from the present day. The internet, satellite television and money have changed the game – and not always for the better.

The days of the crumbling terracing and turning up to pay your cash at the gate have long gone (for top-flight clubs in any case) Now I certainly don't miss standing on an open terracing with the ice-cold wind, rain and sometimes snow cutting through you. Or the stream of urine trickling down the sloping terracing, particularly during the 1970s when taking cans of beer to the games was not just permissible but almost obligatory at some grounds. It's easy to forget those days when we sit in all-seated stadia, perhaps in the family stand or the new concept of a ‘singing section’.

Standing under The Shed at Tynecastle in years gone by, there was no need for a ‘singing section’. We took our place there and on the terracing behind the goal just before kick-off, having staggered out of the pub just moments before. Invariably on a Saturday. At 3.00pm

But it's not just Saturday, 3pm kick-offs for big games that are disappearing faster than Raith Rovers goalies on a Tuesday night in Ayr.

Bovril. Half-time scoreboards. Football programmes that didn't cost an arm and a leg. And, in the 1980s and 1990s, fanzines. More crudely produced but much cheaper than the official programme with content that was actually worth reading –and not plastered with adverts.

Of course, if you were in any way interested in what was happening at other games and didn't fancy carrying a transistor radio on your person (ask your parents, young ‘uns)

for fear some burly police officer might refuse you entry to the ground, you would need to purchase said programme. Lurking within its contents were the fixtures for other games that day with a large letter next to them. This correlated with the aforementioned half-time scoreboard. I still recall the poor chap at Pittodrie in October 1971 (I was living in Aberdeen at that time) getting pelters from the home support when he put up the score 4-0, being the half-time score at the Scottish League Cup final between Partick Thistle and Celtic (yes, back then league games were played on the same day as cup finals)

'Ye big feel' came the cry from the locals, 'That's nae richt – it's the ither wye aboot'

(translation from Aberdonian to English: 'I say, my good man, I believe you may have made an error and got the score the wrong way round')

But the poor harassed fella was correct. Partick Thistle were leading Celtic 4-0 at the interval. Such stories are no longer possible today thanks to the internet and the instant communication we demand and expect. It's a result of this (if you'll pardon the pun) that we no longer have the football results 'bible' of a Saturday evening – the Evening News Pink Paper. In Aberdeen, it was the Green Final. Many a Saturday tea-time was spent loitering around the door of the local newsagent anxiously awaiting the van which would screech along the road, hoying a bundle of tied-up Pink Papers from its door, the bundle thumping the pavement as it landed. I got my first job at the age of 16 in a furniture store which meant working until 5.30pm on a Saturday. I had no radio or mobile phone in 1978 so, upon finishing work, I spent a fraught few minutes waiting for the outcome of the Hearts game that afternoon.

Hearts 1 Aberdeen 4. August 1978. That was my Saturday night ruined before it had even started.

Of course, there were darker elements to those days. Sectarian

chanting and singing was commonplace, not just at Old Firm games. Racist taunting and homophobic abuse were also unwanted frequent visitors and quite often the football authorities would turn a blind eye to this, much to their shame. And some of the chants from the terracing advocated violence, particularly when the away team had the temerity to open the scoring, equalise or, worse, score a late winner.

As you heard the net make a swishing noise as the ball was fired past Jim Cruickshank or Kenny Garland (insert the name of your own goalie here) there would be a stunned silence before the strains of 'you're gonna get your ****ing head kicked in' rasped from The Shed. You don't hear that at Tynecastle any more – nor its cousin 'you're going home in a ****ing ambulance'. Gone too are other ditties such as Gorgie Boys, Gorgie Boys, laced up boots and corduroys. It's magic, you know- there's gonna be Gorgie aggro.

You can blame Daniel Gray for all this mindless reminiscing. For Hearts fans like me, the 1970s was a miserable decade bringing, as it did, two relegations, two cup final defeats, a New Year hammering from our neighbours at Tynecastle and a financial situation akin to the collapse of the banks three decades later. Much of that decade was a time I have been trying to forget so regression may have its drawbacks.

Bur, rather like Nokia have just gone retro by re-issuing their 'classic' 3310 phone, a wee look back can rekindle fond memories.

Most of which, like Hibernian's exception to the Scottish Cup rule this weekend, were on a Saturday afternoon between 3.00pm and 4.45pm...