

Tynecastle Prepares to Bid Farewell to its Grand Old Lady



So, farewell, then, the Grand Old Lady of Tynecastle. The 'main stand' as it was called even when the rest of Tynecastle Park was mostly terracing, will take its final bow this Sunday when Aberdeen come to Gorgie on Ladbrokes Premiership business. The demolition team have been hovering round Archibald Leitch's creation for several months now and when the Old Lady is finally laid to rest on Sunday the creation of a brand new, purpose-made stand will begin in earnest with the new structure due to open in September.

I've been coming to the old ground since 1968 and I regale my 12-year-old grandson Jack with tales about memorable games that have taken place there. The 5-1 triumph over Lokomotive Leipzig in 1976; the 3-2 win over Hibernian in 1983; the 4-2 Scottish Cup triumph over Rangers in 1995, the 5-1 hammering of Hibernian in 2002. All memorable Tynecastle occasions. And there have been many, many more. There were two in particular, however, that I remember making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

First off was February 1989. Season 1988/89 had been a peculiar one for Hearts. It had begun with an unfamiliar Hearts line up as legendary striker John Robertson had left Tynecastle for Tyneside and wore the black and white stripes of Newcastle United. Iain Ferguson had been signed as his replacement but Hearts league form was patchy and inconsistent. In the UEFA Cup, however, it was a different story. After wins over St. Patricks Athletic, Austria Vienna and Velez Mostar, Hearts found themselves in the quarter-finals (no group stages to the forerunner of the Europa League then) Alex Macdonald's side were paired with German giants Bayern Munich with the first leg at Tynecastle.

I was living in Aberdeen at the time but there was no way I was going to miss Hearts biggest ever game in Europe so I headed for Tynecastle on a wet Tuesday evening – along with more than 26,000 other fans, mostly bedecked in maroon and white. Tynecastle in 1989 was quite different to the fine all-seated arena it is today and most of the huge crowd stood on the slopes of the terracing. My mate and I stood in what was affectionately known as The Shed and watched with pride as Hearts took the game to their illustrious opponents. A tense game was goalless ten minutes into the second half when Hearts, shooting towards the school end, were awarded a free kick twenty-five yards from the Bayern goal. Tosh McKinlay rolled the ball into the path of Iain Ferguson who smashed an unstoppable shot beyond the despairing arms of Bayern keeper Aumann into the net to give Hearts the lead.

Tynecastle erupted in a way I had not witnessed before. We were sent sprawling down several steps of the terracing as grown men danced and leapt on each other in joyous bedlam. The cacophony of noise was quite deafening and one could sense the Germans were rattled. Bayern may have been old hands in the European game but it's doubtful they had experienced anything like Tynecastle before where the fans were nearly on top of their highly paid players.

Hearts hung on for a famous 1-0 victory – it could even have been 2-0 had Dave Macpherson converted a glorious chance near the end – but, inevitably, lost 2-0 in the return leg in the Olympic Stadium in Munich a couple of weeks later to go out 2-1 on aggregate.

The second Tynecastle occasion to bring a lump to my throat was on 3 May 2006 when this weekend's visitors Aberdeen came to Gorgie for a SPL match. But this wasn't just any old match. It was the tail end of a memorable season where Hearts, initially under George Burley then Graham Rix and then carried on by Valdas Ivanauskas had taken Scottish football by storm. Victory over The Dons meant Hearts would secure second place in the league – not only would this result in splitting the Old Firm but would elevate Hearts to the qualifying stages for

the following season's Champions League.

A full house of more than 17,000 packed into Tynecastle on a Wednesday evening and the atmosphere from start to finish was tumultuous. Expectant Hearts fans belted out the club anthems all evening but a determined Aberdeen side seemed intent on spoiling the party. The game remained goalless at half-time and Hearts fans contemplated the prospect of having to go to Ibrox the following Sunday needing to avoid defeat to realise their dream of sitting at European football's top table for the first time since 1960.

However, like the aforementioned game against Bayern, Hearts made the breakthrough ten minutes into the second half when Zander Diamond handled Roman Bednar's goal-bound header. A penalty to Hearts which Paul Hartley duly converted. From my vantage point in the Wheatfield Stand, I thought the roof was going to come off such was the noise from jubilant Hearts fans. In fact, I felt sure I felt the stand sway as the delirious home support celebrated. There was no further scoring and Hearts duly took their place in the qualifying stages of the Champions League. I felt a lump in my throat that evening and, I don't mind admitting, fought back the tears. I never thought I would witness such an occasion and it seemed neither did the majority of the ecstatic home support. Even some Aberdeen fans of my acquaintance commented that the atmosphere at Tynecastle that night was the best they had ever experienced.

This Sunday, Hearts supporters of all ages prepare to say farewell to the famous Archibald Leitch Stand. It promises to be an emotionally charged occasion. The old stand is almost as much an iconic feature of Hearts as the club badge. In a few months, a new modern stand will rise and a new era for this great club will begin.

I hope there are more occasions like the games mentioned above to savour. When Tynecastle Park is full and Hearts triumph there is no more atmospheric stadium in the country – as fans of Aberdeen and Bayern Munich will testify!