

Preview of Hearts League Campaign – Expect the Unexpected



In the temporary dressing room in Tynecastle's Wheatfield Stand the famous statement attributed to Hearts legend John Cumming adorns a wall in huge letters – 'Blood Doesn't Show on a Maroon Jersey'. It has become the club's moniker although there's an argument for suggesting another statement should be on the wall opposite – 'Expect the Unexpected'.

The headline writers in the media must have been tempted to dust off that well-worn headline 'Hearts in Turmoil' following events in Gorgie in the last ten days. An embarrassing defeat by League Two Peterhead in the Betfred Cup set the alarms bells ringing and these became deafening when Hearts failed to overcome Championship side Dunfermline Athletic at Tynecastle. This meant Hearts finished third in a League Cup group behind the Pars and the Blue Toon and crashed out of the competition. Subsequently, Head Coach Ian Cathro paid the penalty and was sacked at the beginning of this week.

As if this wasn't bad enough, Hearts announced yesterday that the new main stand, due to open for the visit of Aberdeen on 9th September, is behind schedule and won't now open until at least November. Hearts will need to play three 'home' games – against Aberdeen, St Johnstone and Rangers – at Murrayfield, the home of Scottish rugby. This evokes memories of former Hearts chairman Chris Robinson's intention to move the club to Murrayfield on a permanent basis – and sell Tynecastle to property developers.

Thirteen years later Hearts move to their neighbours over the

Western Approach is on a brief and temporary basis but the disappointment of having to do so is palpable not only among the frustrated Hearts support but club officials too.

So, Hearts will start the 2017/18 league campaign without a Head Coach and away from Tynecastle -and with an away record which has seen just two victories outside Edinburgh in ten months (and one of them was at League Two side Elgin City)

It is difficult, therefore, to suggest any grounds, if you'll pardon the pun, for optimism for the season ahead. Confidence is already low due to the Betfred debacle. Two of the opening three games will be at Celtic Park and Ibrox. Hearts head to the home of the champions for a Saturday lunch-time kick-off very much in the role of Christians being fed to the lions with the home side buoyed by their victory in the Uefa Champions League qualifiers on Wednesday.

Being a Hearts fan for nearly half a century, the experience has made me a glass half-empty kind of guy. A couple of weeks ago I was quite optimistic (for me) about the season ahead. Hearts had signed real quality in Christophe Berra and Kyle Lafferty and the majority of the short-term signings made in January had left. With the new stand developing and looking more impressive with each passing week, I had a feeling a new era was about to dawn for Hearts. I was even convinced that Ian Cathro would come good, having had time to stamp his authority on the club and bring in players who had been carefully chosen rather than the fire sale approach of six months ago.

But the events of the last ten days has deflated my optimism and I can't see Hearts getting anywhere near the top four in the league this season. In fact, given the difficult start to the campaign, it would be no surprise if Hearts were languishing in the bottom six in the months ahead.

'You're all doom and gloom' I can hear you cry. Perhaps. On

the other side of the coin is that there are no shortages of experienced managers expressing an interest in the Hearts job which rather torpedoed the view that no one will work with Director of Football Craig Levein. And Hearts will have a plethora of games at the new-look Tynecastle to come so if they can glean as many points as they can from their travels in the autumn they may yet surprise many – perhaps a tortoise and hare scenario.

Last season Hearts finished sixth in the Ladbrokes Premiership after what ended up as a difficult campaign which included an embarrassing exit from a cup competition in July (to Birkirkara in the Europa League qualifiers) a change in Head Coach, an influx of new players and fixtures arranged so that the final three were played away from Tynecastle.

This season, Hearts have had an embarrassing exit from a cup competition in July, a change in Head Coach an influx of new players and fixtures arranged so... well, you get the picture.

On that basis, I would be delighted with another sixth-place finish in the Ladbrokes Premiership. No one would be more thrilled than me if the Hearts players proved me wrong.

After all, with the Heart of Midlothian, expect the unexpected...

New Arrivals: Kyle Lafferty, forward (Norwich City); Christophe Berra, defender (Ipswich Town); Rafal Grzelak, defender (Korona Kielce); Michael Smith, defender (Peterborough United, nominal); Cole Stockton, forward (Tranmere Rovers). **Loan:** Connor Randall, midfielder (Liverpool); Ashley Smith-Brown, defender (Manchester City).

Departures: Ian Cathro, Head Coach: Bjorn Johnsen, forward (ADO Den Haag, undisclosed); Callum Paterson, defender (Cardiff City, undisclosed); Perry Kitchen, midfielder (Randers); Sam Nicholson, midfielder (Minnesota United); Faycal Rherras, defender (Mechelen); Gavin Reilly, forward (St

Mirren); Billy King, midfielder (Dundee United); Robbie Buchanan, forward (Cowdenbeath); Alexandros Tziolis, midfielder; Andraz Struna, defender; Tasos Avlonitis, defender; Juwon Oshaniwa, defender; Dylan Bikey, forward; Dale Baxter, midfielder. **Loan ended:** Moha Choulay, midfielder (Stoke City).

Out on Loan: Nikolay Todorov, forward (Livingston); Ally Roy, forward (Dumbarton); Harry Paton, midfielder (Stenhousemuir); Andrew Irving, midfielder (Berwick Rangers); Callum Morrison, midfielder (Stirling Albion).