

Hearts Teenage Dream So Hard to Beat



It's fair to say this hasn't been the happiest of seasons for Hearts. The ill-fated tenure of Ian Cathro as Head Coach ended in bitter fashion when many Hearts supporters were still sunning themselves on beaches enjoying their summer holidays. Elimination from the Betfred Cup – coming third in a section containing lower league sides Dunfermline Athletic, Peterhead, East Fife and Elgin City was nothing short of embarrassing for a club of Hearts standing – was the death throes of the Cathro experiment. His appointment a year ago was lauded as a brave one – not least by this website. Sadly, it didn't work out.

It seemed to take Hearts an age to appoint Cathro's successor. Many names were linked to the role, some of whom were well-known (former England manager Steve McClaren for example) After four weeks of much soul-searching, Hearts appointed their Director of Football to the post of Head Coach. Craig Levein was now carrying the can for performances on the pitch as well as appointments off it.

The much-anticipated opening of the new main stand at Tynecastle was postponed. Not once but twice and when it eventually did open there were the inevitable teething problems.

On the pitch, Hearts struggled to score goals and, consequently, win games and with Christmas on the horizon the team slid towards a relegation battle. The players were under fire. Levein was under fire. Even Ann Budge did not escape criticism for the first time since she took ownership of the club three and a half years ago.

With Hibernian making a decent fist of challenging at the top

end of the Ladbrokes Premiership following their promotion after three seasons away, the world of the Hearts support was looking quite dark, perhaps the darkest since the near total eclipse of the club during administration in 2013.

There is, however, a shaft of light which shone at its brightest at Tynecastle on a cold, dark Tuesday evening in mid-December.

With injury and loss of form affecting several first team players this season, Craig Levein has turned to Hearts promising youngsters to help steady what has been a rocky ship in the last year. Jamie Brandon (19), Euan Henderson (17), Aidan Keena (18), Lewis Moore (19), Daniel Baur (18), Alex Petkov (18) and Harry Cochrane (16) have all featured in Hearts first team at some point this season. This growing list of teenagers progressing to the first team from the youth academy was added to on Tuesday evening by, arguably, the most promising of them all – 16-year-old Anthony McDonald.

Few Hearts fans expected the name of the attacking midfield player to be on the team sheet to face Dundee but with Jamie Walker out through injury, Levein gave the Kirkcaldy born youngster the opportunity to step up to the plate, to use industrial terminology. Those Hearts supporters who closely follow the club's Under 20 team already knew what McDonald was capable of, with many believing he was the most talented of all the club's youngsters. On Tuesday, he demonstrated to the rest of the Hearts support and the Dundee players just what he can do, setting up Hearts first goal thanks to a powerful run from midway inside his own half, culminating with a superb chipped pass to Isma Goncalves who fired Hearts in front. McDonald also delivered the corner kick which fell to captain Christophe Berra who sealed victory with Hearts second goal near the end of the game.

McDonald's overall display was impressive. He was always looking for the ball, taking responsibility (and not every

Hearts player can honestly claim that during this difficult season) and displaying a maturity which belied his young age. Little wonder many Hearts supporters stayed behind at the end of the game to give McDonald the standing ovation he fully deserved. He was the last player to leave the pitch and clearly revelled in the acclaim. As McDonald said himself on social media last night he was 'absolutely buzzing' to have played such a major part in Hearts victory.

Over the years I have seen a few 16-year-olds make their Hearts first team debut. Some have promised much but delivered little. Some have found the occasion too much to handle and have disappeared. Others, though, have made a positive impression. I recall Hearts legend Gary Mackay making his competitive first team debut against Ayr United back in 1980. He, along with fellow teenager David Bowman, were seen as the future of the club during more dark financial times in 1980. Then manager Bobby Moncur turned to the youngsters to help salvage the club from the effect of two relegations and near financial catastrophe. Mackay and Bowman were the most promising of the young lads and they were soon joined by another who would go on to become a Tynecastle legend – John Robertson.

In the early 1990s, Hearts manager Sandy Clark was faced with a similar scenario as Hearts were faced with redeveloping a crumbling Tynecastle Park. With little money for new players, Clark blooded youngsters such as Allan Johnston, Kevin Thomas and Gary Locke. 'Lockie' would go on to captain Hearts in the Scottish Cup final of 1996, aged just 21. 'Magic' Johnston was a winger in the best Hearts tradition and famously scored a hat-trick at Ibrox in a famous 3-0 win for the Maroons, also in 1996.

There's a certain pride supporters of any team experience when they see youngsters make an impression in the first team. A sense of being in it for the long run, of commitment, not like some journeyman who sees joining the club as their last big

pay day or as a last resort because no other club has come in for him. The youngsters come through the ranks and relish the chance to make the most of breaking into the first team.

The supporters recognise this and are willing to forgive a misplaced pass or being caught in possession as it's part of a 'learning curve' and giving support to young players is crucial for their progression to established first team players.

Hearts are one of the leading clubs when it comes to giving youngsters their chance. Craig Levein's side has struggled for much of the season but lads such as Moore, Cochrane and Brandon have not let the team down. If anything, the youngsters who have been drafted into Hearts first team have been the highlight of what has been, thus far, a dismal season for those in maroon. Anthony McDonald may have played just the one game for Hearts first team but his performance on Tuesday has been one of those highlights. Yes, it's just one game and, true, Dundee weren't the most troublesome of opposition. And it's unlikely McDonald will be thrown into the Tynecastle cauldron when the 'invincibles' Celtic come to Gorgie on Sunday.

Nonetheless, his impressive display on Tuesday was a bright light on a long, dark season for Hearts. As The Undertones famously sung, a teenage dream's so hard to beat. Hopefully, McDonald, Cochrane, Moore, Brandon and others will prove this will be the case.

Whatever happens to Hearts this season the future of the club, if young McDonald, Moore, Cochrane and Brandon is anything to go by, is brighter than it's been for some time.