

More Tough Decisions Needed at Hearts



Now the dust has settled on another Edinburgh derby, Hearts supporters have been reflecting on their fifth successive loss at Easter Road. That's a statistic that doesn't sit easy with the Maroon Army and this latest defeat has snuffed out any lingering hope Hearts had of qualifying for next season's Europa League. Coming five days after Hearts Scottish Cup exit at Motherwell it isn't difficult to see why there is growing unrest among some of the Tynecastle faithful.

It's not just the results but the performances – or lack of performances – which is causing concern. Hearts endured a calamitous start to the season when the Ian Cathro experiment finally blew up following a failure to progress from a Betfred Cup section containing Dunfermline Athletic, East Fife, Elgin City and Peterhead. The 1-0 loss to a team in the fourth tier of Scottish football was embarrassing and the final straw. It was easy to blame the hapless Cathro for Hearts stuttering start to the season, but things weren't helped when it took the club four weeks to appoint his successor – and opted for Director of Football Craig Levein.

Levein's appointment seemed to divide opinion among the Hearts support. The former Scotland manager has a reputation for making his teams difficult to beat. After a less than convincing start to Levein's second spell in charge, Hearts gradually did indeed become difficult to beat. During December and January, they went nine games without even conceding a goal, far less losing a game although goals were hard to come by at the other end too. And it all seemed to come right the week before Christmas when Hearts astonished the football world by blowing champions Celtic's unbeaten record to

smithereens by hammering the Hoops 4-0 with a remarkable display at Tynecastle. Levein got his tactics spot on that day. But it's fair to say there have been several games since that memorable victory where Levein's tactics and team selection have been called into question.

During that unbeaten run Hearts finally got the better of Hibernian in the William Hill Scottish Cup. But, if truth be told, it was hardly a classic and it took a scrambled goal towards the end to secure a much-awaited Edinburgh derby win (Hearts first in eight games)

Levein was busy during the January transfer window with striker Isma Goncalves leaving Gorgie and Scotland international Steven Naismith arriving. The signing of Naismith was seen as something of a coup. However, those Hearts fans looking forward to the former Rangers and Kilmarnock striker linking up again with Kyle Lafferty were disappointed. Naismith has generally been deployed in midfield with Lafferty the lone striker.

It's the persistence with one player up front which has irked many. The feeling is that Levein's principle aim is not to lose the game, whereas other teams – notably Hibernian – have players who dominate midfield and create chances to win games. It's also a real cause for concern that Hearts seem incapable of playing for 90 minutes – that Celtic game aside. The cup defeat at Motherwell was a case in point. The first half was just awful from a Hearts perspective and while they did better in the second half they lost the tie thanks to a brilliant strike from xxx near the end. However, had Hearts performed to even a half-decent standard in the first half the worst that could have happened was the tie would have gone to a replay. With Motherwell awaiting the winners of the Kilmarnock-Aberdeen replay for their semi-final, a more than decent opportunity for Hearts to reach the Scottish Cup final has gone.

At Easter Road last Friday, it was an all too familiar story. Hearts stubbornness saw them to half-time with the game goalless. But they couldn't cope with Hibs midfield superiority in the second half and the better team won.

Levein's teams have a physical style of play which is fair enough as it's a physical sport. But this seems to be at the detriment of style, of using width, of getting the ball down and passing it. You also wonder about the Head Coach's temperament for the big games. It's all very well making comments about the 'natural order' of things but – and as a Hearts fan it pains me to say this – the natural order of things presently is that Hibs have better players and a better team than Hearts. Like Kilmarnock who have made astonishing progress recently under Steve Clarke, Hibs are a team who know what they're doing with a manager who knows how to get the best out of each and every player at his disposal.

Then there's the ever-lengthening injury list at Tynecastle. 16-year-old Harry Cochrane is the latest casualty, likely to miss the remainder of the season due to a hamstring injury. He joins influential midfielder Arnaud Djoum and full back Demetri Mitchell on the long-term injury list. John Souttar was out for several weeks earlier this season, whilst Djoum has only recently returned from a similar lengthy spell out. Which begs the question why do Hearts have so many injuries? Is it the training? Is it the style of play they are asked to perform?

Hearts are in serious danger of missing out on a top six finish in the Ladbrokes Premiership. However, given the team's recent form one wonders if this might prove a blessing in disguise. It's difficult to see Hearts taking any points from the other clubs in the top six after the split.

There is more talk of 'rebuilding' the playing squad at Tynecastle during the summer. Hearts supporters have heard this too many times recently. They want a settled team, one

that has attacking flair, where every player knows their role – in short, a team that entertains and scores goals.

Ann Budge has taken Hearts on a journey that, so far, has re-established the club as once more being fit for purpose with a new main stand and a promise to hand the club over to the Foundation of Hearts, the supporters group who will run things a few years from now. However, she will surely recognise some tough decisions about the playing side need to be taken in the weeks ahead. When she took over Hearts nearly four years ago, Mrs Budge showed she wasn't afraid to make some tough decisions. No sooner had she arrived than Head Coach Gary Locke and established players such as Jamie MacDonald and Jamie Hamill were shown the door.

A similar tough stance will be required this summer if Hearts are to make progress because, as things stand, they are already falling behind the likes of Hibernian and Kilmarnock. Of course, Craig Levein is a Hearts director so the chances of him leaving are minimal. But the best interests of the club must be put first. Hearts fans, through the Foundation, plough hard-earned cash into the club every month. If Hearts continue to regress, these pledges may be affected. Moving Levein back 'upstairs' and appointing a knowledgeable, well-respected Head Coach must be a consideration – and one can't help but think what a missed opportunity there was with the aforementioned Steve Clarke.

As the majority of Hearts supporters will tell you – something needs to be done. A season like this one just isn't good enough.