

# Hearts Aim To Keep Flying High



September 2005. Hearts had made an unexpectedly brilliant start to the season after a summer that had seen sweeping changes at the club and a host of new players arrive at Tynecastle. However, new manager George Burley had his team playing in a swashbuckling style and those new players not only gelled quickly but appeared to relish the way they were being asked to play.

Hearts had won their opening five league games of the season and sat proudly at the top of the Premier League. Game number six in the league came against Livingston with a potentially difficult trip to West Lothian. However, Hearts – with owner Vladimir Romanov sitting with the Hearts support in the Almondvale Stadium stand – did as they had done to others in the league early that season and swept aside the Livvy Lions to win 4-1 with the inevitable goal from talisman Rudi Skacel opening the scoring.

The question on many fans lips was ‘could this be Hearts season?’ Playing with a style not seen since the all-conquering side of the late 1950s, Hearts were putting opponents to the sword and scoring goals for fun. After the

demolition of Livingston Hearts were five points clear at the top of the league with Celtic lagging behind in second place. On the Hearts substitute bench that day was a young defender, Christophe Berra, of whom much was expected.

History relates that five weeks later manager George Burley was relieved of his duties and the wheels came off Hearts title juggernaut. The Maroons did finish in second place in the Premier League, thus entering the qualifying stages for the following season's Uefa Champions League and won the Scottish Cup but the feeling was – and still is – that Hearts passed up on an opportunity to win their first Scottish League title since 1960.

September 2018. Hearts have made an unexpectedly brilliant start to the season after a summer that had seen sweeping changes at the club and a host of new players arrive at Tynecastle. However, manager Craig Levein has his team playing in an attacking, high-pressing style and those new players have not only gelled quickly but appear to relish the way they are being asked to play.

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The Hearts team of season 2018/19 – just like its counterpart of 13 years ago – has got many people talking about a long-awaited and much-needed challenge for the league title. Craig Levein began recruiting early in the close season and no fewer than 18 players have arrived at Tynecastle following a hugely disappointing campaign last season. The former Scotland manager hasn't recruited just for the sake of it. The likes of Uche Ikpeazu, Olly Lee, Steven MacLean, Peter Haring, Ben Garuccio and Zdenek Zlamal – known to all as Bobby – have all made an immediate impact and all have played their part in

Hearts impressive start to this season.

But, arguably, it's two players who were part of last season's campaign who have been the biggest influence on this season's roaring start. John Souttar and Steven Naismith have been hugely impressive this season and it was no surprise to see them both play key parts in Scotland's 2-0 win over Albania in last week's Uefa Nations Cup.

There are inevitable comparisons with this season's team and the one of season 2005/06. That George Burley side tended to spring out of the traps like a team possessed at kick-off although there was a tendency to run out of steam towards the end of games. There's an intelligence about the 2018/19 side that is particularly impressive. It's well documented that last season Hearts relied far too heavily on youngsters such as Harry Cochrane and Anthony MacDonald. This season the experience of Naismith – who is such a huge influence on this Hearts team – Souttar, Michael Smith, Steven MacLean and, prior to his long-term injury, Christophe Berra is a major factor on Hearts results. They know what to expect and drive the team forward. Hearts are now playing with style, focus and determination once more. Last season Craig Levein's team showed what they were capable of when they hammered Celtic 4-0 the week before Christmas but a lack of consistency and a disjointed approach to many games was their undoing.

This Saturday Hearts will attempt to make it six league wins in succession against Livingston, just as they did back in 2005. Christophe Berra watched from the substitute's bench that day in 2005. This week the injured captain will watch from the stand. The fans will expect another win for the Maroons this weekend just as they did 13 years ago. But Gary Holt's team will provide stiff opposition on Saturday and Berra knows better than anyone how difficult it will be to maintain Hearts impressive start.

The feel-good factor back in 2005 was huge as it's becoming

again this season. And, once again, Hearts fans are dreaming of a title challenge even at this very early stage of the season. This time round they've already defeated Celtic and there's stability and a common-sense approach off the field which certainly wasn't around in 2005.

Could this be Hearts season? No one knows what will happen in the weeks ahead. For now, just as they did in 2005, Hearts fans are dreaming and there's nothing wrong with that. They know Christophe Berra will keep them right.