

Time for a change of Hearts?

Some players are synonymous with Hearts. When you think of the likes of Willie Bauld, Alfie Conn, Jimmy Wardhaugh, Freddie Glidden, Drew Busby, Jim Cruickshank, Jim Jefferies, John Robertson, Gary Mackay and many others too many to list here you immediately think of Heart of Midlothian FC. Another of those players is Craig Levein.

Back in 1983 when Hearts manager Alex MacDonald signed the tall gangly 19-year-old from Cowdenbeath, he said he was 'one for the future' before throwing the big Fifer in at the deep end in a game against Rangers at Ibrox just days after. More than 35 years later, Levein is an integral part of the structure at Tynecastle. If ever there was such a thing as a 'Hearts man' Levein is it.

When Ann Budge rescued Hearts from the abyss in 2014 and promised to transfer ownership of the club to the supporters

group the
Foundation of Hearts after five years, she turned to Levein to
help her and
created the role of Director of Football. With Robbie Neilson
appointed as Head
Coach the new regime began in spectacular fashion coasting to
the Championship
title in a league that also contained Hibernian and Rangers.
But when Neilson
left for MK Dons in 2016 the first building block of a now
solid foundation (if
you'll pardon the pun) was slackened.

Hearts turned to Ian Cathro as Neilson's replacement but, as
good a coach as Cathro is – and he's now a vital part of the
set-up at
Wolverhampton Wanderers who have made an impressive return to
the English
Premier League – his inexperience as a manager was obvious to
all. Cathro was
sacked and Hearts hummed and hawed before appointing Levein as
manager in the
autumn of 2017.

For a while, Levein steadied the ship but Hearts soon
developed a reputation as a strong, physical side with a
direct style of play
i.e. lumping the ball long and high to the striker. Levein is
something of a
protégé of Alex MacDonald. 'Doddie's approach to the game was
to get the ball
forward to the front three – ah, the more attack-minded days
of the 1980s – as
quickly as possible. Many a time centre half Levein would
launch a high ball to
striker Sandy Clark who would nod the ball down to the two
Johns – Robertson and

Colquhoun.

Last season was seen as something of a salvage operation following the Cathro 'experiment' which went badly wrong. In the summer, Levein revamped the Hearts squad after being forced to play too many youngsters too soon last season. Steven Naismith returned to extend his loan term at Tynecastle while the arrivals of Peter Haring, Uche Ikpeazu, Olly Lee and Steven MacLean were intriguing. This intrigue turned to excitement for the Maroon Army as Hearts stormed to the top of the league at the beginning of the season playing some great football and claiming a win over champions Celtic at Tynecastle in August. Hearts were five points clear at the top of the league at the end of September and there was even talk of a title challenge from the Gorgie boys. Then, calamity struck.

Captain Christophe Berra sustained an injury during that win over Celtic that would keep him out for the best part of four months. He was followed on the long-term treatment table by Uche Ikpeazu, John Souttar, Steven Naismith, Peter Haring and on-loan defender Jimmy Dunne. The spine of the Hearts team crumbled and, unsurprisingly, results suffered.

Berra and Naismith are back now and Souttar came on as a second half substitute against Dundee on Wednesday evening. However, Hearts are a pale shadow of the team that started the season so well. They are one-dimensional, route one minded but the attacking players – Steven Naismith being the notable exception – don't appear to know what they're doing. In midfield Arnaud Djoum blows hot and cold – when he's good he's one of the best midfield players in the country but when he's off form he can be anonymous. Olly Lee has got

ability and his brilliant winning goal against Hibernian just after Christmas elevated his cult status with the Hearts support even higher. But far too often the game just passes him by.

The signing of English forward Sean Clare was heralded by Hearts as something of a coup as they had apparently fought off a couple of notes of interest from English Premier League clubs. Granted, Clare scored a fine goal against Livingston in the Scottish Cup last weekend but, for the most part, it just hasn't happened for the player. He lacks presence on the field and seems shorn of confidence.

Hearts have been awful in too many games of late. The 5-0 thrashing suffered at Celtic Park was painful and seemed to sum up Levein's mentality. He doesn't give the impression he believes his teams are good enough to win at Celtic Park and Ibrox (and, until late last month, Easter Road) His natural cautious approach in the big games, particularly away from Tynecastle, doesn't inspire the players or the supporters who part with their hard-earned cash to follow their team by bus and car.

Another 5-0 thrashing in December – this time to Livingston, a team who, 18 months ago were in League One – rang alarm bells louder than ever. The fact the game was goalless with just 20 minutes left told its own story. In Levein's own words, the Hearts players 'chucked it'.



Hearts fans are increasingly unhappy
Hearts have also lost to the bottom two teams in the league.
An awful performance against St Mirren in Paisley resulted in
a 2-0 defeat. And
on Wednesday night, bottom club Dundee notched just their
third league win of the
season when they defeated Hearts 2-1 at Tynecastle. And a
thoroughly deserved win
it was too. What alarmed many Hearts supporters was that a
team which has
struggled all season appeared to want the win more, were first
to most 50-50
challenges and played with more spirit than the home team. A
Hearts team that,
frankly, were clueless and resorted to lumping the ball
forward aimlessly in
hope more than expectation.

It just wasn't good enough.

Craig Levein has been a great servant to Hearts both as a
player and manager. His health scare earlier this season
concerned many, not
just Hearts supporters. But perhaps it's time he concentrated
on his Director
of Football role and let someone else manage the team. Hearts
need fresh ideas on
the park, a different more entertaining style of play, one
where every player knows
exactly what he should be doing.

The wins over Hibernian and Livingston papered over the
cracks in this Hearts team, a team who started the season so
well but may yet
struggle to finish in the top six in the league. Hearts appear
to be no better
than they were this time last year and for this Craig Levein
has to take full

responsibility. Other clubs would view a 5-0 thrashing from Livingston and defeats from St Mirren and Dundee as a need to take decisive action. Hearts owner Ann Budge isn't afraid to act (as some Hearts supporters in Section N of Tynecastle Park will tell you) There's no doubt Levein loves his job as Hearts manager but perhaps it's time for a change.

A step back to his Director of Football role would be the first step with Hearts appointing an experienced manager – someone who will provide the long-suffering supporters with entertaining football – the next. Hearts surely missed an opportunity when Steve Clarke was available at the time Ian Cathro was sacked but Kilmarnock snapped him up. And look at the brilliant job Clarke has done at Rugby Park with a far smaller budget than he would have had at Tynecastle.

One thing seems certain. More abject Hearts performances such as the one on Wednesday night will only see the call for change intensify from an increasingly disillusioned Hearts support. A support that will be running the club in the not too distant future.