

Dissenting voices growing at Tynecastle

A month ago, following a dismal Hearts performance in a 2-1 defeat from Dundee, I suggested that perhaps it was time for a change at Tynecastle.

While there was no doubting the incredible amount of work manager Craig Levein has done for Hearts, the performances of the team of late, even considering the number of long-term injuries, had not been good enough. I suggested that Levein should consider stepping back 'upstairs' to his Director of Football role on a full-time basis with the club appointing another manager. After witnessing another woeful performance from Hearts on Saturday against St Mirren, I feel I am not alone in this view.

After an impressive start to the season, the wheels began to come off the Hearts juggernaut in the 3-0 Betfred Cup semi-final loss to Celtic at Murrayfield in October. Long-term injuries to Christophe Berra, John Souttar, Uche Ikpeazu, Steven Naismith, Jimmy Dunne – now returned to his parent club Burnley and loaned out again to Sunderland – and Peter Haring decimated the spine of the team. Inevitably, results and performances began to suffer.

Hearts supporters aren't stupid

and most understood the effect of not only losing players to injury, but key players would have on the team. Gradually, the absentees began to return – but the standard of performances didn't reach the heights of Hearts sparkling start to the season. Against St Mirren on Saturday Hearts had most of the players who began the season so impressively in the team. Peter Haring, so influential at the start of the campaign, returned and the Hearts support looked forward to their team pushing on once more, the aim of a top four finish in the Ladbrokes Premiership something to be salvaged from the wreckage of an injury strewn season. Defenders Michael Smith and Demetri Mitchell are now Hearts only long-term absentees and as Mitchell wasn't a first team regular in any case there were hopes Hearts could re-ignite their season.

Sadly, this hasn't happened.

Inconsistency seems to have blighted Hearts this season. They seem to follow up a decent result with a poor one – such as a 2-1 win at Kilmarnock followed by a tedious goalless draw at home to Livingston. Until recently Tynecastle was something of a fortress but in recent weeks Dundee, Livingston and St Mirren have all left Gorgie with something to show for their efforts. Such was the awfulness of Hearts performance on Saturday no one could have argued if the Paisley Saints had departed with all

three points.

However, it isn't only results which are concerning the Hearts support. The style of play is painful to watch at times. On the way home from Tynecastle on Saturday I popped into a chemist for some optical medication – my eyes were bleeding...

Aimless long ball after aimless long ball; a midfield which is more intent on passing the ball sideways or backwards than going forward; players in wide positions who can't cross a ball; forward players who are prone to a nosebleed when getting into the final third of the field. Steven Naismith's goals have been invaluable and his presence to the team is vitally important. But when the on-loan Norwich City player isn't on song – and he looked out of sorts against St Mirren on Saturday – Hearts threat as an attacking force is very much diluted.

Even the case for the Hearts defence is looking shaky these days. Take your pick of goalkeeping gaffes – neither Colin Doyle, displaced against the Paisley Saints nor Bobby Zlamal inspire great confidence while captain Christophe Berra has looked uncertain in recent weeks posing the question did he return from his injury lay-off too soon?



There are dissenting voices among the fans at Tynecastle
The number of voices dissenting against
Craig Levein appears to be growing. Oh, for a team that plays
free-flowing,
attacking football with players who at least know what they
are doing when they
venture forward. As a player, Levein was one of the finest
defenders I've ever
seen. But, in my view, Hearts need a more attack-minded
manager.

The Hearts manager does a power
of work at the club but there are many who believe it's now
time for a change. This
number may increase in the coming days as Hearts face league
champions Celtic
at Tynecastle on Wednesday ahead of a tricky William Hill
Scottish Cup quarter final
at Partick Thistle next Monday evening. Given Hearts current
form, defeat from
Brendan Rodgers' side on Wednesday would not be all together
surprising but elimination
from the Scottish Cup at the hands of a team bottom of the
Championship might
just be the final straw.

You may ask if Levein steps aside who would replace him? The answer may already lie in Gorgie. Reports suggest Steven Naismith has been contemplating a move to the USA at the end of this season. If the Scotland striker leaves Gorgie in the summer who knows what Hearts performances might be like next season without the wee fella who has become something of a talisman. Perhaps Hearts owner Ann Budge should take steps to resolve this problem – by offering Naismith the role of player-manager.

True, the former Kilmarnock and Rangers player has no managerial experience, and some may point to the Ian Cathro appointment which went so badly wrong. But Cathro hadn't played the game at professional level. Naismith has bags of experience at the top end of the game having also played in the English Premier League and having nearly fifty caps for Scotland. Hearts supporters and players alike will tell you Naismith already bosses the players on the field with his constant bawling and, er, 'encouragement'!

This move would also surely help Levein who, let's not forget, suffered a heart scare just a few months ago and his health clearly is of paramount importance. I know Levein absolutely loves what he does and going back to his Director of Football role on a full-time basis might be difficult for him to accept. And yes, I know it's the responsibility

of the Director of Football to appoint a manager! But, as owner, Mrs Budge should perhaps take a leaf out of Hibernian's Leeann Dempster who took a difficult decision to relieve Neil Lennon of his managerial duties earlier this month.

Of course, Steven Naismith might not fancy a player-manager's role and may find better opportunities may lie elsewhere. But if Hearts performances and results don't improve soon then Ann Budge may come under serious pressure from Hearts supporters – to whom she will eventually hand over the responsibility of running the club – to make changes.

Hearts will soon be preparing the blurb for season tickets sales for season 2019/20. The status quo may discourage some Hearts supporters from renewing their season ticket and if sales drop the need for change will intensify.

The customer isn't always right – but their views need to be heard.