

Opinion: Hearts had no option but to sack Craig Levein

The Edinburgh Reporter's Mike Smith, a lifelong Hearts supporter, gives his thoughts on the sacking of manager Craig Levein.

So farewell

then, Craig Levein. I first suggested on this website in January of this year that

the Hearts manager should step down from his managerial duties and perhaps

revert to his Director of Football role at Tynecastle. Now, ten months later,

he has been dismissed from both although curiously he is being kept on until

the summer, as Hearts put it, 'to work closely with the Executive Management

Team to continue to develop and improve the structure of the backroom and youth operations'

It's become something

of a cliché to say football is a results driven business. But it is. And Hearts

results, particularly in the Ladbrokes Premiership throughout 2019 have been extremely

poor to say the least. Hearts have won just one league game this season – ironically

this was at Easter Road where they came from a goal behind to win 2-1. This,

and the Betfred Cup quarter final win over Aberdeen at Tynecastle a few days

later, bought Levein some time but these results merely papered over the

cracks.

It's not just the results that have been Levein's undoing. Some of Hearts performances have been brutal to watch. The persistence with the long ball lumped forward to Uche Ikpeazu has been easily countered this season by opponents. It may have had the surprise element last season when Hearts started the season so well and went to the summit of the league. But it's been nowhere near as effective this season – and has been painfully evident Craig Levein doesn't have a Plan B.



Scottish Premiership – Hearts v Rangers. Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh, Midlothian, Scotland. 20/10/2019. Pic shows: Hearts' Australian Central Midfielder, Oliver Bozanic, and Christophe Berra, clear the danger from Rangers' midfielder, Scott Arfield, as Hearts play host to Rangers in the Scottish Premiership. Photo: Ian Jacobs

Levein's

team selections have been baffling at times as have his tactics and formations.

True, Hearts have suffered a year of horrific injuries and the long-term absence

of influential players such as Steven Naismith – ironically set to make his first appearance for several weeks this weekend – John Souttar, Jamie Walker and Craig Halkett would have an adverse effect on any team. Add to this injuries to the likes of Michael Smith and Christophe Berra and it's fair to say Lady Luck has not so much turned her back on Hearts as fled Gorgie altogether.

That said, the players who have played in their absence have simply not been good enough. Jake Mulraney and Sean Clare have struggled to make any impact whatsoever. Clare, in particular, doesn't seem to know what his role in the team is. When Levein inexplicably moved the Englishman to right back in the defeat to Motherwell a few weeks ago, he was at fault for Well's third goal – and the fans leapt on his back.

Steven MacLean impressed last season but looks out of touch this campaign. Ryotaro Meshino has shown occasional flashes of what he is capable of, but the Japanese midfielder could only find a place on the substitute's bench in the 1-0 defeat at St Johnstone last night. Levein's player recruitment has, frankly, been shambolic. It's difficult to see what the likes of Aidy White and Loic Damour bring to the team while Oliver Bozanic has been brought in from the cold to little

effect. Meanwhile, two of Hearts most promising youngsters – Harry Cochrane and Anthony McDonald – have been allowed to go out on loan to Dunfermline Athletic while others such as Connor Smith and Chris Hamilton are at Cowdenbeath also on loan.

The one bright spot of the past year has been the emergence of young full back Aaron Hickey but, even at that, there have been stories linking the teenager with a January move to Manchester City.

Most worrying of all, in this writer's opinion, is the apathy that has rapidly been enveloping the club. There were less than 3,500 fans at the Tony Macaroni Stadium last Saturday for the match at Livingston. Hearts usually take about twice that number alone when they visit West Lothian. In addition, ticket sales for this Sunday's Betfred Cup semi-final with Rangers at Hampden have been disappointing. I can't remember the last time Hearts didn't sell out for a cup semi-final. It's clear many Hearts fans are deterred from going to the National Stadium as they know what happens when Craig Levein takes his teams to Glasgow to face either Rangers or Celtic. A lack of belief means Hearts are beaten before the game kicks off – when was the last time a team managed by Levein team won at Celtic Park or Ibrox? – and with the appalling performances of late

it's little wonder

Hearts supporters are simply not prepared to be taken for a ride.

Ann Budge

has taken a huge decision to dispense with the services of a man she holds in

such high regard. When the pair of them strode along the touchline at

Tynecastle in the summer of 2014 having taken Hearts out of administration,

there was real belief that Hearts were back from the abyss.

The appointment of

Robbie Neilson as Head Coach brought immediate reward as Hearts raced away from

Hibernian and Rangers to win the Championship and return to the top flight of

Scottish football. But when Neilson departed three years ago Hearts – a two-month

spell at the beginning of last season aside – began a slide that had to be

arrested.



Photo: Ian Jacobs

The departure of the manager today should be seen as a beginning of this. Craig Levein was a fantastic player for Hearts in the 1980s and early 1990s – one of the best defenders I've ever seen in maroon. During his first spell as manager in the early 2000s, he gave me some of the best moments of my life as a Hearts supporter – hammering Hibernian 5-1 at Tynecastle and defeating Bordeaux in the south of France in the UEFA Cup being two that immediately spring to mind. But his second stint as Hearts manager has, sadly, been a failure. And today's generation of young Hearts supporters will only see him for that.

I would like to think Ann Budge will appoint someone who has not had a previous association with Hearts. Someone like Stephen Robinson who has done a great job at Motherwell, for example. Whoever takes over will at least have the backing of the thoroughly depressed Hearts support – something Craig Levein ultimately didn't have. It's arguable if, given he was appointed in the aftermath of the Ian Cathro sacking two years ago, he ever did.

Just over a year after suffering a heart attack, Craig Levein deserves a break. The Edinburgh Reporter wishes him well and the best of health. The revitalisation of Heart of Midlothian begins now.