

Hearts feel the pain of another end-of-season calamity

Few Hearts fans who were around in the 1980s would recall the 1985/86 season with any fondness.



It hardly needs repeating that their team lost the league title in the final eight minutes of the season when Dundee's Albert Kidd score two late goals to deprive the silver-shirted Hearts players of the league title.

A draw at Dens Park would have been enough for Hearts to lift their first league title since 1960. But those final eight minutes proved fatal.

If thinking back to that game is still painful more than 34 years later (and it is) then think back to a few weeks earlier to the end of February 1986. Top of the table Hearts visited Celtic Park defending a lengthy unbeaten run in the league. When Maurice Johnston put the Hoops ahead it seemed that run would come to an end and the chasing pack would close in on Alex MacDonald's side and the title dream would be seriously threatened. But striker supreme John Robertson – who else? – equalised and served notice that Hearts title bid was serious indeed.

There were eight games left to play in the league. Hearts were three points clear of Aberdeen and five ahead of Celtic – at a time when only two points were awarded for a win.

Which leads to me to think of a classic what if scenario? What

if the coronavirus, which has devastated so many lives across the world this year, had surfaced in 1986?

What if the Scottish Football League had decided that, as lockdown was imposed, the season would need to end then – and declared Hearts league champions? Can you imagine the furore?

Aberdeen, Dundee United and Celtic would be up in arms at being denied the chance to win the league. Celtic, in particular, would be overflowing with rage – especially as they did go on to win the league overcoming the five-point deficit and inferior goal difference.

Of course, such a scenario didn't happen in 1986 – it happened in 2020. Hearts weren't three points clear at the top of the league – they were four points adrift at the bottom. The only similarity between these two situations is that there were still eight games to play.

And the controversial vote among the SPFL clubs to 'call' the 2019/20 season – Dundee changing their crucial vote well past the deadline – meant Hearts were demoted to the Championship despite there being 24 points still to play for. Partick Thistle – only one point adrift at the foot of the Championship and with a game in hand of the team immediately above them – were cast into League One. Stranraer were also demoted to League Two.

Hearts, as you might expect under the chairpersonship of Ann Budge, have not taken this decision lying down. They and Partick Thistle challenged the SPFL, arguing a decision to call the league with almost a quarter of the league campaign still to be played was grossly unfair. They took their case to the Court of Session where Lord Clark ruled that an independent tribunal should hear the case, as intimated by Scottish Football Association rules.

The arbitration hearing – a panel including a QC selected by both Hearts and Partick and the SPFL and an agreed chair –

upheld the relegations. The three-strong panel ruled the SPFL were entitled to act as they did, a decision which left Hearts and Partick bitterly disappointed.

Former Hearts chairman and one of Edinburgh's top lawyers Leslie Deans believed Hearts had a strong legal case. He was of the opinion that clubs in the SPFL have a duty of care to each other and that for clubs to be, in effect, ejected from their league is a breach of that care. However, the arbitration hearing didn't share that view.

Hearts and Partick said in a joint statement that they did not regret taking this course of action as "it was the right thing for them to do."

Hearts will now prepare for a truncated season in the Championship which is due to begin on 17 October.

They may have lost the war but, in the eyes of many, they won the argument.