

Gary Locke on his two decades at Hearts

A cliché often thrown about by Hearts fans when talking of club legends is 'Mr Hearts' the term this is best suited to however is undoubtedly, Gary Locke.

As a youngster, he followed the club home and away, even bunking off school for a few days to travel on a supporters bus to Paris with his Dad to watch Hearts in Europe.

Now, he has been at the Edinburgh club for twenty years and the boyhood Hearts fan has seen it all, carrying out just about every job he could for the club he loves.

Locke, who is now the Club Ambassador at Hearts, enjoyed a modest playing career, but one that would undoubtedly have been more successful had it not been for prolonged injuries which kept him out of the 1998 Scottish Cup Final.

That cup final was a special one for a number of reasons, it ended Hearts' 42 year wait for a Scottish Cup, it was John Robertson's last game as a Hearts player, (even though he was an unused sub) and the photo of the injured skipper Locke, holding the trophy aloft with Steve Fulton is one that will be etched in the memory of many Jambos.

After leaving Hearts, Locke went on to play Bradford City and Kilmarnock before retiring aged 34.

The Bonnyrigg man was back at Tynecastle shortly after when Jim Jeffries returned as manager in 2010, Locke was appointed

first team coach, which started his coaching career.

Just three years later, Locke found himself in caretaker charge of the first team after the departure of John McGlynn. Just four months later, Hearts entered administration and it really did look like the Tynecastle doors would be shut for good.

“It was a horrendous position to be in,” said Locke.

“The day before I spoke with one of the Lithuanian directors and he told me my budget and it was not bad. I was thinking that night about targets I thought could improve the team.

“I only found out [about administration] on the morning. We’d heard rumours the club was in trouble.

“It was a worry, not for me, but for the gaffer at the time and Billy Brown. You’re sitting going: ‘Jesus, some of the boys here are on good salaries and we aren’t bringing in as much as we’re paying out.’

“Over the years, Vladimir Romanov [owner] always paid when he needed to pay. I was just hoping he did the same again, not realising that he didn’t have the money this time.”



Gary Locke

Locke recalls the difficulty of fronting up and explaining as manager to not only his players, but the Hearts supporters and the media the severity of the issue.

“All the players had been told to report to Tynecastle anyway, so it was difficult to tell them, but the most difficult thing was facing you guys in the media the next day.

“Bryan [Jackson] told me I had to get the message out to the fans about how bad the situation was. I had to sit in front of a lot of media and it was the hardest interview I’ve ever done.

“My emotions were all over the place. I was finding it difficult to talk. I was welling up a bit because I knew how bad the position was.

“Hearts fans had just given the club something like £2million through a share issue. I’m thinking: ‘Where are we going to get that kind of money again?’ It was only six months on and all that share money had disappeared.

“I had to get the message out. It was basically: ‘You need to help us because you are the only people who can.’

“If it wasn’t for the fans we wouldn’t be sitting here today. Although that was the hardest day ever, the couple of weeks that followed were incredible because of the response we had from the support.

“There were fans who didn’t have much but gave you their last £10, or wee kids handing you their piggy banks. It was incredible.”

Locke was then appointed first-team manager on a permanent basis; however, he faced an uphill struggle as Hearts started the following season with a 15-point deduction.

“It was the dream job when I got into the coaching side of it. I never saw myself getting a managerial job so quickly and I’ll openly admit that at the time, I was too inexperienced to be the Hearts manager.

“But that period was probably the worst time in the club’s

history to get the job. We had so many things thrown at us. We got the 15-point deduction, and we were in the Premiership thinking we've got to face Celtic, Hibs, some top teams, and these lads are nowhere near that level.

"My worry was we could get hammered every single game, and that did happen in the cup tie against Celtic. But I genuinely thought that might have happened eight, nine, 10 times.

"I had seen these lads in the reserves, and it wasn't like we won the reserve league, we finished about fifth. So, they weren't the best young players in the country.

"But they deserve enormous credit for the season they had, because at the end of the season we won a few games, and they showed me they had listened and improved."

Fast-forward to the present day and Hearts have guaranteed European group stage football, have sold a record number of season tickets and are attracting some top players.

As he sits in the Heritage Lounge inside Hearts' fancy new main stand, a smile comes over his face as he begins to discuss the transformation at his team in the last decade.

"Ann Budge, the fans and the other directors at the club who are unsung heroes, they deserve all the credit. Robbie deserves great credit, Joe Savage as well for the calibre of players we're now bringing to the club.

"Last season epitomised everything that is good about the club. We came up from the Championship and then finished third, which was fantastic considering we had just come up.

"But, for me, with the size of the club, we should be looking at finishing third or fourth and getting into Europe and winning a trophy. That, for me, is where I expect Hearts to be, and I think most Hearts fans expect us to be."

Now, Locke has been awarded with his testimonial match which

will take place at Tynecastle this Saturday against Stoke City.

“I was really humbled,” he said.

“I never saw it coming but I was delighted when they approached me. The fact the club felt my service deserved a bit of recognition means a lot to me.

“Everyone knows how I feel about this club.”

Not many people in the world work hard enough to grow up and achieve their childhood dreams, but 47-year-old Locke is adamant that he is one of the lucky few.

Your favourite memory Gary?

“My debut. It was something I dreamt of my whole life. My dream was to play for Hearts.”

Tickets for the match can be purchased [here](#).