

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v St Mirren 12.03.22

And suddenly spring has sprung and what was hopefully the worst run of the season can be left behind in the darker months of winter. After three defeats in four we have now picked up seven points from nine in the space of a week and pushed further clear in third-place.

Even the dropped points at Tannadice last Saturday were something of a triumph given that we managed to lose five players to injury. That it wasn't an overly physical game compounds the surreal feeling of watching all those players – plus a bloodied United captain – troop down the trackside to the dressing room. Frustratingly, we had started well and looked well-set to record a third win of the season in Dundee; even as we moved onto our third left-winger of the first-half. The only criticism would be that we allowed ourselves to be caught cold by the equaliser at the start of the second period and then struggled to regain momentum for a while. That was, of course, largely down to trying to find a formation and blend 'in-game' to turn the tide but to eventually do so and equalise with only nine minutes left says a lot for the character of the side.

The previous midweek's victory over Aberdeen was considerably more comfortable. Recently, we seem to have recovered our energy-levels, particularly in midfield and returned to probing at sides and being a little braver on the ball. Given that we have put in two disappointing performances against the Dons this season it's good to finally get a win and an enjoyable one at that. In fact, I've rarely seen the addition of six minutes of injury time met by such a 'meh' from both sides.

Of course, the mini-revival began against today's opponents in Paisley and therefore just a few miles along the road from where it apparently went south at Ibrox. St Mirren will claim that the relatively early sending-off gave Hearts the advantage but not only had we started very brightly with chances to be ahead already; we all know that playing against ten-men can be a blessing or a curse. Or in this case cursing. All of a sudden, the pressure was on a Hearts side seemingly low in confidence to win the game. In the event we did so relatively comfortably and showed a strong

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mindset to get the clinching second goal quickly after the first. Despite the furore from the home fans I don't think the referee got much wrong. And it's not often we can say that – I mean fast forward four days, for example.

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Playing against a ten-man St Mirren side brought its own pressure as I've said. But it also reminded me of two very fine performances when we had ten men against the Buddies. In 2008 a late Eggert Jonsson header won the points in the final encounter at Love Street after Michael Stewart had (shock) been sent off and four years later as Marius Zaliukas also departed in the first-half Rudi Skacel simply took over and inspired a 5-2 win. So, playing with or against ten men is no guarantee of anything and our visitors today will have their own very painful memories of losing to *nine*-man Rangers in the 2010 League Cup Final. That's an example of not responding to the pressure that Saints won't want reminded of. So, we won't remind them.

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It was amusing to see the Dundee United programme had placed an article outlining hopes for a big, noisy support for their cup-tie versus Celtic opposite their record against the Glasgow side – namely two wins from 16. There goes the upbeat message. Hearts-St Mirren Scottish Cup ties are, in comparison, relatively infrequent but those there have been have provided some decent memories.

The tie in 1986 was the first in 25 years and I was looking on from the Family Enclosure as a terrific Hearts side challenging for the double swept Saints away 4-1. In fairness Saints lost keeper, Campbell Money early on after he collided with Sandy Clark. Although Money returned a few minutes later a short pass back betrayed that he barely knew where he was and John Colquhoun nipped into score Campbell was off once more and replaced by the old school sight of an outfield player in goal.

That it was the same player - Neil Cooper - that had provided the pass back that took over seemed just and Hearts promptly stuck three more past him before the hour. Equally Hearts defeated a full-strength Saints side 3-0 in the League just a fortnight later – so this was no one-off - this was a truly superb Hearts side.

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There was quick revenge for Saints however when they won in the Semi-Finals at Hampden the next year. This was the beginning of a Hearts run at Hampden which would rival the worst of Bert Vogts although on this occasion they were hindered by injuries and crucially the suspension of John Robertson. I remember standing on the austere open terracing of Hampden watching a suitably grim encounter which Gary Mackay seemed to have rescued with a late equaliser. The hope was that a much-strengthened Hearts side would prosper in the replay but in the event, they never got the chance with Frank McGarvey scoring a later winner.

Campbell Money was still with St Mirren when the sides next met, in 1992, this time at Paisley. And on this occasion, he was laid out by Ian Baird. With Baird sent-off both missed the replay and the splendidly named Les Fridge took over as Hearts rather huffed and puffed against relegation-bound visitors. In fact, I remember the horror of the School End in the first-half as we watched Saints hit the post and smack the rebound off the bar before Craig Levein completed a hat-trick by hitting the other post whilst clearing. Saints further helped out by having the redoubtable duo of McDowall and Charnley sent-off before Hearts finally took the lead through a John Robertson penalty. 'Robbo' then went onto complete his own hat-trick and it was a mark of the superb goalscorer that he was that he achieved the records he did despite this being his only top-flight trio.

And then we fast forward 20 years to another replayed-tie; after a 2-2 draw at Tynecastle. Hearts were stumbling through the tournament having defeated Auchinleck 1-0 and then winning in the last minute at McDiarmid Park (and yes that was last time we won in Perth). However, on this night Jamie MacDonald's early penalty save set the tone and Hearts scored a convincing win through goals from Hamill and Skacel. Hearts were headed to Hampden to face Celtic in the Semi-Finals.

Magnificent days lay ahead.

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Incidentally, speaking of injuries and specifically goalkeepers and centre-forwards colliding I recently caught some footage on YouTube that brought back some memories. The scene is Tynecastle in 1984 and Celtic's Frank McGarvey is running through on goal as Hearts keeper, Henry Smith leaves his line...and then his box...and then frankly, just cleans out McGarvey at what appeared at the time to be at least hip height. Given it was 1984 this meant only a 'harsh' booking for Henry – but full support from the home end if I recall correctly - but now it wouldn't need VAR to prompt a sending off and lengthy ban. If nothing else it also possibly underlines that keepers are a special breed.