

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Celtic 21.10.23

A draw that feels like a defeat is another great football cliché. But all too true from the Derby two weeks ago.

On one hand we were excellent for over an hour and better going forward. Yet defensively we contributed to our own quick fire downfall.

As we know dropping two goal leads to Hibs can use up a lot of managerial credit. Equally it feels like the club and current squad should be ahead of a 'work in progress' especially since the choice of an inexperienced manager was the club's. Regardless the run into the end of the year feels significant.

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When the new fixtures came out there was a perception that we'd been given a favourable start with trips to Perth and Dundee and home games against Kilmarnock and Motherwell. Now personally, I never subscribe to such theories as this is a 12-team League and with the frequency of fixtures the opening few fixtures quickly give way to playing all 11 teams.

Regardless, it's reasonable to say that our opening period of the season hasn't been quite as we hoped. And now we face a tricky treble-header against Celtic and then Rangers at Ibrox and Hampden with Livingston in between. Logically if we're not tearing up the rest of the League then we shouldn't be able to trouble the big two.

However, that's not how football works and today gives us our best chance to see off Celtic given we're at home and hopefully relatively fresh after another successful international break. Our historical record against the Glasgow sides is probably enough for prosecution but each attempt gives us a fresh effort at improving it. If we can count on Tynecastle as an intimidating atmosphere for European games then we can do so here today as well. "History is written by the victors," said Churchill. Well tables can be turned to make new winners.

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There's no doubt that Celtic Park is quite the stadium. 60,000 capacity, baying home support contrasting with the modern-day pocket of resistance that is the away following in the corner. Appropriately enough then our record there is poor. On my first-ever visit in 1989 we lost in the last minute and it set the trend. It took a couple more visits to register a win; in January 1992 when Scott Crabbe and John Millar scored within a minute to give us a 2-1 win. Incidentally, John was a much-underrated player for Hearts and the sort of goalscoring midfielder that we'd still love right now. Even more impressively (to me anyway) I used to see him at university as he prepared for life after football and he's probably done better at that too.

Early visits to old Celtic Park were very often eye opening for our wise men from the East. In fairness any ground where you are heavily outnumbered will be. But it was always 'interesting' to walk up from the buses parked on what is now housing and the Emirates Arena.

That victory in January 1992 was the last I recall at the old-style Celtic Park which had cavernous terraces and in hindsight was very similar to the old-style Hampden. Credit then to Celtic for rebuilding it in a much better manner. I recall visiting around 1995-96 when mid-build and being perched next to what seemed a very long

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drop protected by not very much as the stand behind the goal waited to be built and adjoined. Strangely at that time Celtic also took to posting leaflets to away support encouraging them to come along for a warm welcome. Given our record there it was clearly a cunning trap.

However, there have been victories to reflect on and in 1999 when we came from 2-0 down to win 3-2 that pre-empted a certain midweek match for Celtic against Inverness Caledonian Thistle when they truly imploded. I do like to think we lit the fire though.

Since then, it's been lean pickings with a typically random Romanov-era 3-1 League win in 2007. A couple of seasons later we drew 0-0 on the final day and helped deny Celtic the win they needed for a chance at the title. Understandably emotions were contrasting on the exit from the stadium and various insults and threats were traded through the fence separating the two groups. Until in comedy fashion the fence stopped and everyone got to meet in person. Joined by Police on horseback. I'm a lover not a fighter so I just headed back to the bus to see how many spare seats we might have for the journey home.

Similarly, we recorded successive League Cup wins in 2007 and 2008. The latter of those was also not well received by the locals and our buses were eventually moved out of Glasgow under Police convoy amidst various threats of making them al-fresco for the journey home. Memorably Glasgow's finest came on board and told me to get all our coach lights off – including headlights- for the drive out. As if our buses would simply disappear into the darkness like phantoms.

If nothing else the flashing blue lights at the start of the line probably gave us away.

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What is quite satisfying to see from Celtic is that former manager Ange Postecoglou is doing so well at Tottenham. He debuted at Tynecastle as we won 2-1 on the opening night of 2021-22 but unfortunately for everyone else, he improved and did rather well at Celtic. But when various cries of 'pub league' or 'League Two' are thrown at us north of the border it's good to see someone from the Scottish game cross the border and take it on so well. There have been plenty of failures so successful missionary work is very welcome.

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Just over a year ago Celtic won a breathless encounter 4-3 at Tynecastle but the early kick-off also meant it was the first-ever Scottish game to be played under VAR. So where are we a year later? Wait there whilst I check.

It's settled down from the initial pantomime drama that surrounded every referral and times to get decisions seem slightly quicker in some case. Albeit at Paisley the other week it somehow took three minutes to decide a St Mirren goal was offside – surely the most binary of decisions. And even then, it seemed incorrect. At that point it didn't seem to matter if it was 1-0 or 2-0 but given Hearts promptly had their best chance in the 'added' time - it did.

The continuing lack of communication to supporters as to what is happening is also a problem. (I can't tell if it's better for the players or they just accept the delays.) However, all too often the referee is stood with hand to

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hear and waving players away and no one knows what they are checking for. In the fast-paced Scottish game it could be the foul just gone or the three before it. Not every club has big screens but it wouldn't do any harm to consistently show or announce what is happening. And how about announcing the 'why'?' at some point? It surely wouldn't be difficult?

No supporter wants poorer decisions but looking back at some it's hard to understand how they were reached. In Seville last week it wasn't clear to anyone why Scotland's goal was ruled out for example. And that leads to doubts. There still seems a significant element of VAR stems from initial error and then falls into one of two people deciding he or she is right. Perhaps the expectation of VAR as being 'technical' and thereby free from human error and indecision was too much. But given the investment and potential of modern technology right through to AI it feels like VAR should be giving more.