

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Aberdeen 02.03.22

With one game left - at time of writing - February has proved anything but 'loving' with one win on penalties, one draw and three defeats. All that for two goals scored and nine conceded.

Almost imperceptibly key players have either lost form or been injured. It's hard to attribute that from the sidelines but logically either there's been a feeling of 'job done' following the win over Motherwell or the heavy defeat at Ibrox has completely fractured confidence.

The trip to Govan was described by a few as a 'free hit' since other teams had already dropped points. Unfortunately, the free hit turned out to be for Rangers and Hearts were on the ropes as soon as it went to 2-0. The team then seemed to collapse and the heaviest defeat of the season inevitably followed. As would be anticipated there were those quick to criticise the line-up, the approach of that team and then the general attitude. It's hard to say but in terms of the approach those calling for Hearts to go 'gun-ho' need to consider the damage that would be done if they did indeed open-up. There's a counter argument that you might as well go down fighting but there has to be some play-with-the-head too and in fact Hearts *were* 'going for it' when they lost the second.

The reasons we don't do well west of Harthill are numerous. But certainly, at Ibrox and in other similar games we don't get the time – and therefore composure – to play as we may at Tynecastle. As a result, we gave away cheap possession on a huge pitch and were soon stretched.

Of course, none of that reasoning should have applied to the visit of struggling Dundee. Yet there seemed something fatalistic about the atmosphere from the off; as if the worst was just around the corner. It has to be said that we were excellent for the majority of the first-half but the major failing was obvious - we hadn't made the necessary push to score a second goal. I wouldn't have been the only one thinking "seen this movie" but the way we dropped out of the game in the second period was pretty alarming. It also illustrated the fragile nature of confidence with Dundee – who had recently been woeful – suddenly strutting their stuff whilst Hearts – in decent form – crumpled. Suddenly, we looked rudderless and with substitutions having no real effect the match drifted to an almost inevitable defeat. The equaliser going in off a ricochet signaled the beginning of the end and whilst the Dundee keeper had something of a fortuitous night at the other-end we can't blame bad luck. Sometimes the issue just needs forced and in this case chances taken.

At least we had a rip-snorting Scottish Cup tie to immediately look forward to! Or not. What a strange afternoon the visit of Livingston prompted. I do think the removal of replays has added a different dimension to these games but the visitors were perhaps understandably still happy to be cautious. Hearts,

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in contrast, looked the more likely to win but seemed in no rush to do so. So, for a long period mid-way through the game nothing seemed to happen. Indeed, the only thing that could have made it worse was torrential rain ... that promptly arrived. However, after recent results the pressure zeroed in on that penalty shoot-out and credit to the players who held their nerve and saw the job through.

The break of no midweek football was no doubt welcome ahead of the trip to Perth. The UK has a better record in Eurovision than Hearts in the Fair City and so it continued with another seemingly punch-less performance in defeat. Again, the opposition would have been lacking confidence but in quickly responding to their (very) early goal we should really have dented that belief further. However, we never looked settled or effective in any area of the park. When Saints retook the lead, the writing was on the wall and although balls into the box were problematic for the home side we couldn't generate enough to score.

The changes in defence have clearly not helped but the loss of form is a bigger concern. With a visit to St Mirren still to come we have a decent chance to retain the gap in third place but can't really afford many more slip-ups. At least February will be over by.

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The long, miserable walk to-and-from McDiarmid Park prompted talk from older/less wise supporters of how the former Muirton Park was bang in the city-centre.

When St Johnstone moved in 1989 the concept of 'out of town' was novel but seen as the future. In the case of Hearts' first visit in December 1990 naively so as my Dad took instruction from a colleague to park somewhere in central-Perth and walk out as "it wasn't far". Well, it is; even more so on a cold December day and even longer back on a colder December night after a defeat.

Since then, few Scottish clubs have actually re-located and instead have chosen to re-develop existing grounds. In general those new stadiums seem just 'out of the way' and in some cases in danger of being 'out of mind' when it comes to people attending. In the case of McDiarmid Park it seems to have been designed at a time of the car being the principal transport method – although the positives of "terrific car parking" and "it's handy for the motorway" sound more like a review for a Travel Lodge than a football ground. Nowadays I think people are looking for more sustainability in their travel and are more likely to walk a reasonable distance from transport hubs.

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McDiarmid to Tynecastle was like night-and-day back in 1990 – a time when Hearts were planning a similar move. Drawings of futuristic stadia were unveiled for Straiton, Millerhill and Ingliston. Imagine us playing at those venues now (and I'm separating this from the upset of leaving Tynecastle) would crowds have remained or exceeded current levels? Would we have adopted it as 'home'? Or would it be a little soulless with us stuck driving to a retail park, combatting traffic from the drive-thru and cinema to find the football ground in there somewhere? Impossible to tell but history tells us it would have taken a lot of work and investment to get it 'right'.

Whatever, it would be a totally different experience to walking along Gorgie Road of an afternoon. That's something clubs need to bear in mind and it'll be interesting to see how tonight's visitors Aberdeen progress their own move in the years ahead. Re-development of Pittodrie seems to have been written off but the mood seems to be shifting more to a site closer to the city than previous developments. That might prove to be a lesson learned by Aberdeen.

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The trip to Perth was undertaken after a rather more enjoyable family break in London. That included a trip to the theatre and programmes costing £13! Enjoy the value of the Hearts' version folks! Speaking of which the Tube is simply brilliant for zipping around. Although sitting alongside other punters who simply stare into space, waiting for it to end with desperation etched on their faces... it did rather take me back to the Livingston game.

You have to laugh. A bit.