

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Motherwell 03.09.23

Eight games across three competitions in the opening month perhaps doesn't provide enough to judge the season ahead. However, although these notes were written before the return in PAOK be that Greek triumph or disaster the focus today has to be very much on a return to domestic League matters.

For despite the relative highs of excellent home performances against Rosenborg, PAOK and then comprehensively defeating Partick Thistle League form has been underwhelming and most problematically undermined by the slow patterns of play where we haven't used the ball well enough to threaten the opposition.

Certainly, that message was rammed home from the sell-out traveling support at Dundee. And in non-technical terms if you're going to wear an all-pink strip then you need to back that up. Whilst it's too early to panic – and yes Hibernian I include you in that – the biggest concern is that we have dropped off from the higher-tempo performances of last season's tail-end. In reality, four of those seven were at home but if that was our template then we urgently need to find a version that deals with away games and defensively minded teams. Regardless of midweek and progression or otherwise the need to reassert our League form and start the path to European football next season begins today.

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One unheralded bonus of our recent victory over Rosenborg was that the article I'd had to write should be we get through wasn't wasted. With the ties drawn home then home again it meant writing up an article for either PAOK or Hajduk Split despite losing 2-1 in Norway. Had we lost I may have found it difficult to shoehorn in 900 words on Romanov and European ties in Athens and Zagreb into a programme versus say, Ross County.

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However, the gamble paid off and so, it was a case of final edits to the article on the way home from the Rosenborg win and then sending to Hearts that night. I was certainly glad I wasn't starting afresh then. Regardless, the importance of commemorating another big European encounter with a physical souvenir remained foremost in the minds of everyone involved.

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A significant story right now is the series of huge money transfers sending players to Saudi Arabia. Neymar was arguably the highest-profile but others such as Jordan Henderson and Roberto Firmino are joining Cristiano Ronaldo in the east. The Saudi's lavishing money on sport is not new but their relatively recent focus on football feels like a concerted effort to step onto the world stage as they have done before in the likes of horse racing.

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Regardless of the field many would argue that it is also something else - sportwashing. But I'm pretty sure that Saudi values the returns from power and wealth well above their international reputation. The fact that two Saudi internationals will be hosted at Newcastle in the next 11-days suggest they feel no need to 'read the room'. Money sets both the agenda and focus and unfortunately always has.

Saudi being oil-rich is not new but the move to attract bigger names on outrageous wages has ruffled a few European feathers at least and specifically in England. But let's face it the problem there mainly arises because even English clubs can now be outspent. There didn't seem so much fuss when Manchester City laid out £100m for Jack Grealish or Chelsea £115m for Moises Caicedo and paid them Lord knows what. By the way that means a £111m profit for Brighton in two years. And with even the Championship apparently hosting eight-figure annual wage bills English football - fueled by SKY - has long been able to disproportionately attract top talent and sometimes less-so at inflated prices and wages. And they will continue to do so - perhaps £2b spent this summer - and still collectively outspend even Saudi. But now they seem put out when others threaten that power.

Implicit in that is a snobbery about competitions other than the Premier League and Champions League. Anything else is termed a 'backwater' and as such it's an apparent individual admission of failure to even look at playing anywhere else. Nobody is pretending the Saudi league is as good as England's but equally when the Premier League proclaims itself the best in the world it should be remembered that is a temporary, often financially-determined - and therefore fragile - title that in reality can be judged across a variety of factors.

Yet many seem to forget the obvious fact that much of the world's population live outside of Europe and of them a lot also like football. So, it would hardly be surprising if a new truly powerful League emerged to rival or usurp the relative success of the MSL or Japan's J-League. Saudi's 'new' club football is still a fledgling set-up and hiring a majority of players that are over thirty won't provide longevity but it is a strong start and if it can be maintained and capitalised upon (in both senses) then younger signings will increasingly see it as an option.

We often hear about the failure of the short-lived North American Soccer League which also attracted veteran stars on high-wages including Pele, Beckenbauer and Moore. But that was an ill-managed exception and the truth is that football has found roots and attracted levels of interest and investment-in almost every country in the world. China is perhaps the modern-day exception but then perhaps it was never primed to accept the rampant capitalism and commercialism of modern-day football.

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And that brings up the second point. The players who are taking the money and going. The moves have brought individual criticism but again I think it's fairly simple - given no formal barriers – it's up to them.

In time the Saudis will hope that younger players will join and stay longer than the current batch of veterans. Perhaps also more cheaply although that may be a lesser concern. So, the wages currently offered are loss leaders at worst; reflecting the players' position as potential trendsetters. Neymar is perhaps a partial exception to that although you also get the feeling that PSG were happy to give it the French equivalent of 'nae mare' at the same time. Regardless each player will obviously want to make even more money and enjoy, I am sure, a lavish lifestyle whilst doing it.

Even those on huge contracts in Europe will massively increase their wealth by moving. Equally the majority won't move right now and will prefer to stay on this continent for the peak of their career at least. Witness Kylian Mbappe turning down an apparent billion-dollar offer.

With any investment guaranteed for Saudi the longer-term depends on their intent. Are they content with short-term glory and a host of big names travelling east to see out their careers? Or do they want to establish a potential new League on the global stage? Given reported ten-year plans and four clubs now under the ubiquitous Public Investment Fund it seems very much the latter.

But will Saudi become a viable secondary market alongside say the USA or will it push on to rival those major European Leagues? The Asian Champions League is already a major competition but money talks and often very loudly. And when it does FIFA inevitably listen. We've had a World Cup in Qatar so what price adopting Saudi into pan-continental competition if a major League is successfully established?

The Saudi's spending billions may not impact Hearts too much; although we've seen the reported links to Lawrence Shankland. But there will be a trickle-down effect just as with the emergence of the Premier League on our border. Short-term headlines or longer-term stories for Saudi Arabian football? Either way we should be observing keenly.