

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Partick Thistle 20.08.23

It's not as hectic as last August when the World Cup loomed just a few months ahead but today we're still facing our third home game in a third different competition in a week. Given the rapid sequence of games I crafted these words in advance of the European tie against Rosenborg but hopefully we have cause to look forward to a couple more Thursday nights out after that one.

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Turning attention to the League Cup this time last year I wrote that our record in the tournament was poor. Well, a first-round exit at home to a Kilmarnock side that subsequently travelled as well as luggage for Edinburgh Airport hardly enhanced that record.

Is it unfair to single out our League Cup record given we have not exactly dominated other tournaments? Perhaps but fact remains we haven't won this Cup since 1962. In that time, we have won three Scottish Cups and appeared in ten finals – compare that relative success with a pithy two Final appearances in this tournament.

In fact, there's a schism in our recent record with five exits to Celtic or Rangers contrasting with some really disappointing defeats. Thus, we have lost to Inverness (nine-man Inverness with a minute to play – when we had the ball at their corner flag you may recall), St Johnstone, Peterhead and then Dunfermline in the same campaign and then Alloa. We can hardly afford to be snobby and dismiss such opposition, but the disappointment of these defeats is made worse by what feels like wasted opportunities.

Therefore, I am sure an almost-promoted Partick will travel east in confident mood having emerged from a group including Dundee United; perhaps also hoping for a post-European hangover in Gorgie too. For our part the (very) early season form is patchy. In all three games we've looked stronger in the second-half but generally haven't played with the intensity that we may have expected given the performances at the end of last season. Although we recovered the situation in Perth, we really didn't trouble Kilmarnock until the last ten minutes. Sides are bound to be tight and well-organised when coming to Tynecastle so we need to be able to open them up.

We therefore need to make sure we are bang on the money today and augment that with the necessary intensity to continue our quest for a fifth League Cup.

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Even less frequent than Hearts League Cup wins are matches with Partick Thistle in this competition. The last meeting came in August 1976 in the old-style groups and it's reassuring to still be able to write about something that happened before I was born.

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That said Firhill was one of the first away grounds I went to when both sides were in the old First Division. Hearts' promotion that season left Thistle behind for a decade although I do remember the Jags appearing here in the Scottish Cup in 1989 and bringing a huge support that packed the old Gorgie Road terracing.

We were preparing for the arrival of Bayern Munich in the UEFA Cup that month but Partick proved sticky opposition with the likes of John Brough and Gerry Collins marshalling the defence – all in a typically garish eighties kit. I was led to understand a midweek replay at a muddy Firhill was not a welcome prospect and we finally broke through in the second-half to win 2-0.

Firhill has changed much since the early nineties with the old away terracing and covered enclosure swept away to be replaced by two modern stands. Less so the Main Stand - which is certainly 'vintage' - and the remaining, abandoned terracing which lend to the feeling Firhill remains very much a traditional Scottish ground.

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It's perhaps hard to pull out too many happy League Cup memories. As we've established most campaigns have been disappointing and not seen us trouble the Hampden car park too often. The 2013 Final loss to St Mirren was devastating and made even worse by our coach puncturing a tyre in said car park after the game.

Final defeat had also come in 1997 but it was a good run there nonetheless. Having defeated Stenhousemuir on penalties in the opening round and then St Johnstone in extra-time Celtic arrived at Tynecastle in the quarter-finals. Those of the appropriate vintage will recall we faced that half of the Old Firm four days after having had four players sent-off against Rangers at Ibrox. Given all four now suspended were defenders Jim Jefferies played the masterstroke of unearthing Andy Todd for the night and despite Stefano Salvatori also being ordered-off John Robertson struck the only goal in extra-time. It was another of those wonderful nights in Gorgie.

We then faced off against First Division Dundee at Easter Road in the Semi-Finals and it was one of only a few occasions I can think of where we really took the game to lower League opposition and finished them off quickly and decisively. 2-0 up at half-time the late Stephane Paille crowned the win with a brilliant third goal and showed what a player he was and still could have been. Less likely was the sight of him astride the Coca-Cola bicycle awarded to the man-of-the-match.

That took us to the Final against Rangers on a horrible wintry November Sunday afternoon at Celtic Park, Given the snow and rain we huddled outside awaiting a late pitch inspection and a huge roar went up as the gates opened. But we probably wished they hadn't as Rangers quickly went 2-0 up. It

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felt like the team didn't believe they were supposed to be there and a repeat of the recent 5-1 Scottish Cup Final defeat looked very possible. But we clung on and when Steve Fulton pulled a goal back just before half-time, we suddenly came to life.

Neil McCann became tormentor-in-chief and in the second-half he was unplayable even as Rangers put three men on him. He drove at the Glasgow side constantly and it was his cross that allowed Robbo to dive and head home the equaliser. The momentum looked to have swung our way and the huge Hearts support roared the side on to what increasingly looked like a potential win.

And then enter Paul Gascoigne. Whatever you think of him he was a brilliant player and he promptly showed that with a rapid double that knocked the stuffing out of Hearts. We did pull a goal back at the death through David Weir but if watch the TV footage you see Weir running past the referee asking 'how long?' and then stopping, a look of utter deflation on his face when he's told the whistle is about to go.

Losing a classic final is no consolation particularly when trooping out of a stadium at the wrong end of the M8 and I remember despairing at what we had to do to make the breakthrough. Fortunately, it was just eighteen months away-at the very same venue. On a beautiful sunny May afternoon.