

It's been a while since I've felt as annoyed and frustrated as I did after the defeat to Motherwell. We best not rake over it too much but the performance was really poor and horribly betrayed our lack of goal threat. (Three blanks versus two League goals says it all). In other words, it largely repeated what we saw against Dundee and Kilmarnock. The odd defeat we can perhaps handle but the manner and performances of those losses? No.

Afterwards there was talk of the tolls of European football contributing to defeat. Well, we coped (far better) last year but regardless that's over now and we've also had an international break to address issues. Victory over Aberdeen in May not only set the standard but was probably a successful audition for our 'new' manager, Steven Naismith. The uncertainty over the coaching positions hasn't helped (and also left us open to criticism) but with that long-term clarity the emerging rot has to be stopped before this season gets away from us. A big afternoon awaits.

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Today sees two historically, fairly evenly-matched teams meet; often under the banner of fighting for 'third-place or the slightly disparaging 'best of the rest' But last month as Hibernian were vanquished by Aston Villa there was much discussion about an unbridgeable gap between the haves and the have nots. Figures on income and expenditure speak for themselves and Villa are reportedly the biggest net spenders in Europe in the last year. We all know SKY...I mean why but a similar gap exists in the game here. Hearts, Aberdeen and Hibs all spend a decent amount of money on transfers and wages to be in or around the third biggest – dwarfed by the Old Firm but in turn outspending most others beneath them.

Yet for all that major clubs often spend badly providing some leeway for the smaller clubs. Football has been about money since the first player struck upon the idea of asking for payment but If balance sheets ruled the day, then there would be nothing but a formulaic procession determined by money spent. That's not always how it works and if we accepted that it was then why are we here today?

Relatedly, Aberdeen will – like Hearts last year – be massive underdogs in the Conference League. And it does strike me that the Conference is perhaps still too strong a competition.

When it was first mooted, I had thought the Conference League might be a competition for the 'lesser-nations' of Europe rather than simply the 7<sup>th</sup> biggest club in England or Germany instead of the 5<sup>th</sup>. West Ham United winning the competition last season was unheralded but equally it wasn't a fairytale either

On one hand having clubs from the major countries guarantees TV revenue and interest but on the other it goes against the spirit of something like UEFA's Nations League which sees countries play similar opponents and hopefully work their way through in a natural progression as Scotland have.

Perhaps there's room in European competition for smaller nations to have their say too. Money talks and often wins out. But I think we'd take a few seasons of a fourth-tier competition if it meant potentially longer runs and increased experience before stepping up to face the slightly bigger boys.

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Meetings with Aberdeen often have the feel of a Derby despite the obvious 125-mile gap between the two. Indeed, for a long-time the trip to Aberdeen seemed to me to be of epic proportions and almost unfathomable to my young mind. It was so far that the players often stayed overnight before the game and supporters arrived back late at night. Having been to Dundee I could barely believe you had to travel the same distance again to get to Pittodrie. I thought Dundee was the end of the earth (insert your own punchline). So, TV highlights therefore had to suffice and showed Pittodrie as an unfamiliar but seemingly small stadium. And there was also the rare but glamorous sight of Hearts in an away kit.

Of course, Aberdeen in the eighties were also hugely successful and carried that reputation - albeit fading a little - by the time I eventually persuaded my Dad to drive north in March 1990. That season had already seen a comprehensive 3-1 win for the candy-striped Hearts and then a last-minute equaliser in a 2-2 draw. We were therefore truly fortunate to pick a Scottish Cup-tie where Hearts slumped to a 4-1 defeat. The next visits resulted in a 6-2 defeat with ten men and then a 3-1 opening day defeat in 1994. Travelling north that day I remember being astonished to see a few players waiting to meet the team bus at South Queensferry. A three-hour coach journey seemed odd preparation for a football match but then it was just a few days after Craig Levein had laid out Graeme Hogg in a friendly at Kirkcaldy so maybe a night of team-bonding in a hotel wasn't a good idea either.

Therefore, God Bless John Colquhoun for nabbing me a first win in the far north in December 1995. In fact, just God Bless John Colquhoun. Having already set-up Allan Johnston's equaliser, John calmly executed a late volley at the Beach End to win the game. Sitting at the side we had a splendid view of the ball bulging into the net and all in that fabulous blue, white and maroon Pony away kit. Suddenly, you had the flipside of a very happy - and prior to this not experienced - three-hour journey back down the road.

Pittodrie itself has not changed that much. That first visit brought the incongruous idea of sitting out in the open aside the Beach End - an area which sadly I never sampled. Since then, our generally large support has been restricted to part of the same, side enclosure. Albeit away allocations are a hot topic for some clubs. But add in toilet facilities in a ramshackle portacabin outside, a view in line with one goal and seats that neither work for sitting nor terracing beneath that allows a comfortable stand and it hardly fits the 21st century. Rather like the remainder of the ground; apart from the (as it is colloquially known) 'Big Dick' behind the goal which seems modelled on the 1990s Subbuteo stands of the same ilk. That was seemingly the first-and thus far last-stage of rebuilding Pittodrie. For as Aberdeen fans will appreciate more than anyone the irony is that it became one of the first all-seater stadia in Scotland yet now lags well behind.

But it is one of my favourite grounds.

There still feels that boyish challenge to get there as if it is an incalculable distance away. Even if my days of buses and "which food and drink?" have been replaced with the more refined "how to get the best deal on Ticket Split"

Set outside the city centre the walk out to Pittodrie can be tricky as you hit the coast and then the winds hit you back harder. 'Fresh' is one word for it. The game takes up all day or even the weekend and there is that real sense of commitment when you travel north. That is amplified with any win and that terrific feeling as you leave the ground.

If it is ever replaced by a new stadium elsewhere then I would miss the place. And I've gone a few times now thinking "might be the last time we're here". Yes, at least three sides need rebuilt - which looks tricky - but until Aberdeen can come up with a funded-replacement that meets the needs of their club it will have to do. And I quite like that.