

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Dundee – 09.02.22 and Livingston – 12.02.22

The recent trip to East Ayrshire for the Scottish Cup-tie with Auchinleck provided a refreshing and different experience for a Saturday afternoon. It was evident from arriving in Auchinleck that ‘cup fever’ had indeed struck with houses and businesses liberally decorated in black-and-gold and a general ‘buzz’ around the village. The welcoming locals seemed genuinely excited at the prospect of seeing Hearts - which let’s face it is not always a claim we could make. Equally, it’s not often you’re at a game where the attendance exceeds the population of the place, you’re in. Beechwood Park is certainly small – but perfectly formed - and in a reverse of the norm was actually smaller from first-hand than I had thought from watching some of their previous cup games on TV. However, all the best grounds are hemmed in by property and Beechwood is no different with housing afforded an excellent view at one end.

Equally, you know a pitch is tight when the ‘ball persons’ have to stand on the terracing with the fans and in fact I am pretty certain that the attack Auchinleck mounted in the opening seconds was down to the ball rebounding off the perimeter wall fast enough to allow a throw in before Michael Smith realised what had happened.

Nonetheless, I couldn’t honestly say I ever felt we were in danger and it was pretty evident early-on we would be able to exploit any spaces we created. The officials did their best to delay the goals but once Andy Halliday had headed us in-front, I think both sides realised that the tone had been set for the afternoon. Liam Boyce then stood up for us follicly-challenged chaps with a penalty and ‘slap-head’ celebration to counter the taunts of the home support before the interval and three further goals in the second-half demonstrated a thoroughly positive and professional afternoon from Hearts.

It was tempting, on walking out of the ground, to think “well we won’t be back here too often” but given three ties with Auchinleck in 10 years we should probably anticipate we will be. Personally, I wouldn’t resort to the cliché of branding it a return to ‘real fitbaw’ – as some media reports did - as that’s a little patronising to Auchinleck who, on this evidence, have the attitude, set-up and delivery of professional clubs several tiers higher. They did after all provide a superb hosting experience for both the 3,500 fans in the ground and the BBC cameras for those at home. However, it was a definite throw-back to older grounds and a little of the origin spirit of the Scottish Cup when Hearts found themselves playing ties in South Queensferry, Beith and Broxburn amongst others - and all the more welcome for it.

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The Cup draw that Saturday night handed us this all-Premiership tie with Livingston which is more of the ‘norm’ and similarly League fixtures have come thick-and-fast recently. The defeat to Celtic was, not for the first time even this season, frustrating. A passive performance in the first-half gave us a lot of work to

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do to recover but in a game of two halves it was also a game of two teams with Hearts making three tactical and two enforced substitutions. The move to the 'front foot' worked though and had Liam Boyce converted his penalty then we may well have been favourites to win. As Celtic subsequently found with a last-minute winner versus Dundee United it really is often 'fine margins.'

It was perhaps a similar story at Easter Road when we only really came to grips with midfield in the second-half of a hectic 90 minutes and then mounted some sustained pressure on the home defence. As well as some chances well-saved by Hibs' debutant keeper – well they had to find an effective one eventually – we also had two strong penalty shouts and although you can sort of see why the referee said 'no' equally you wonder what we have to do to get the big decisions sometimes. It can't be often you wait till February for a first-visit-of-the-season to Leith and it maybe didn't prove wholly-worthwhile, however, whilst a draw is extraordinarily frustrating a point in an away Derby is a still a decent result.

In between those two games was perhaps our most decisive performance of this recent-mini-series with the visit of Motherwell and although they had their fair share of possession, we were comfortable winners in the end. With the squad rotated slightly it was really positive to see we could still defeat the team immediately below us and of course gave opportunities to the likes of Atkinson and Simms. The pair have made a really good first impression and it was good to see Ellis top it off with what felt like -and proved to be - a decisive second goal.

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Enforced working from home at least allows a little more freedom in the sounds you can stick on (it being generally frowned upon to have AC/DC or Calvin Harris blasting out in the office a-la-Tynecastle, for example). However, assuming I can get off Zoom it also provides the odd opportunity for a podcast or two and it has to be said Hearts are really well-served with a number currently available. I've always enjoyed 'Scarves Around the Funnel' though and the recent double-header with my all-time-Hearts hero, Henry Smith was just brilliant. Henry was pretty-much the first-choice goalkeeper from when I started going to Tynecastle and then so for the next 15 years. A stalwart of the side that recovered the club's pride and stature in the eighties it is quite something to consider he left the mines behind to eventually play for Scotland and as such was arguably the last 'old school' goalkeeper at Tynecastle.

I think all of us of a certain vintage has a favourite Henry memory (and yes, maybe the odd nightmare moment too) and I am no different. So, I was right behind his save at Tannadice (literally as my Dad had to get tickets for the United end due to Hearts selling out); I saw him defy Tommy Coyne at Tynecastle and then single-handedly do the same to Hibs the following year at Easter Road. So, chants of "Henry, Henry" always provoke nostalgia for me and take me back to a terraced Tynecastle. And when I say the game has

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changed kids; I also remember one afternoon at Tynecastle when Henry turned round and shouted to my Dad to ask how long was left to go in the game. No electronic boards or announcements in those days.

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Speaking of 'those days' judging by the wincing and leg stretching of fellow supporters at Auchinleck people are no longer quite so used to standing on a concrete terracing to watch football. Yet Beechwood Park was a welcome throwback and a fantastic little ground. You're apt to forget that seating has been in place for around 30 years but equally some of the stadiums that it replaced were often less than salubrious and the mind casts back to the antiquated 'delights' of the likes of Brockville, Kilbowie and Broomfield where basics like toilets, lighting and safe exit arrangements were not particularly prevalent. So, as the possibility of standing at top-flight football is mooted once more it's important to remember the lessons of the past to provide an experience that many would wish for - safely.

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It can't be often that a player who managed just two appearances in a 5-month-spell is as lauded on his return as Toby Sibbick. The former Barnsley man was really unlucky with illness before but even in his pair of games he looked a strong addition so it's no shock supporters are affording him a warm welcome back.

He was also undefeated in a Hearts jersey given that he played in a win over Rangers and then a 3-3 draw at Perth, the following week. As I recall, the latter saw a slapstick second-half as St Johnstone finally clocked-on-to the fact that Hearts were pressing with a line so high they were practically touring Culloden. As a result, Joel Pereira was left pretty exposed (with obvious ramifications) and I seem to remember he was just about chipped from the half-way line as Hearts almost-pathologically attempted to press en-mass in the opponents' half. Sean Clare did equalise at the death and we then had a great chance to win it only for Donis Avdijai to promptly hook a free-kick straight out of play.

Only two years ago - and still room for improvement - but boy we've come a long way since.

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One thing noticeable at Easter Road was the terrific atmosphere. Isn't it admirable how Hibs fans retain their optimism? The big screens really helped and contributed to the positive-intensity around the stadium. Tynecastle is perhaps a little more squeezed for space than Easter Road but it's maybe something we could look at for two of the corners as they obviously allow both football videos but also further advertising. (I once successfully attached a TV to wall in the house so if I can help let me know.) As for the singer with his guitar pre-match – well I think he got his feedback pretty quickly from the away end.