

## **The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Livingston 19.03.22**

A weekend 7.45pm kick-off might have seemed a pain when announced but after a fabulous 90 minutes of cup-tie football I am now in full-agreement with Whigfield on the benefits of a Saturday night.

Secondary to the win it was a great game and huge plaudits to a Hearts side that did so despite being without six first-team regulars. As a club we have been more familiar than most with injuries until recently so it's credit to our strength-in-depth that we were able to field a strong side despite the absence of Smith, Souttar, Devlin, Ginnelly, Mackay-Steven and Cochrane. (And then Craig Halkett suffered a head injury in the opening minutes!)

The midfield area was key for me with the balance of Haring and Banningime complimented by Woodburn and Boyce dropping back and linking up. That in turn allowed us to really use the wings and by the second-half Nat Atkinson seemed to be constantly hitting the by-line. Of course, at that stage we had lost a two-goal lead – and what a strike that was – but even having earlier lost a goal before half-time I still felt pretty confident, we would see the job through as we were playing well.

Indeed, Hearts looked to be getting stronger over a wilting Saints side. Of course, Aaron McEneff's introduction proved immediately dramatic and set the tone for the remainder. There's not been much playing time for the Irishman this season and his game maybe doesn't always suit the midfield we generally deploy but hopefully he can gain more involvement in the weeks ahead.

Weeks ahead that now include a return to Hampden. Bring it on!

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Call me a traditionalist (I've been called worse) but I can never get used to seeing Hearts in all-maroon. For me it's maroon shirt, white shorts and maroon socks but

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we have deployed all-maroon to some success in Scottish Cup-ties over the years and so, frankly, I won't be grumbling if maroon shorts are second-up the steps on Scottish Cup Final day.

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Unlike last Saturday's visitors St Mirren, Livingston are still something of a new boy at Tynecastle albeit they have been frequent visitors since their initial promotion in 2001. Their close proximity to Edinburgh means there is something of a derby feel to the game similar to the likes of Falkirk and Dunfermline.

It's certainly a more frequent fixture than Livingston's previous incarnation of Meadowbank Thistle who were of course, for a long time, Edinburgh's third club. The two only met in national competition once, in 1988 and even then-with Meadowbank Stadium deemed unfit to host the tie the match took place, inexplicably, in Falkirk. Now Brockville could hardly be deemed a stadium with mod cons and as gloom descended the Hearts players had to request that the other half of the floodlights be switched on as one side of the park was getting rather dark. For the record Hearts won 2-0 and six months later would be beating Bayern Munich.

Although Meadowbank were a relatively successful outfit and latterly challenged for promotion to the top-flight it's probably unlikely, they'd have reached the heights that their successor now has. Secondary tenancy at Meadowbank Stadium was always a hindrance to the club - tales of games being called off for pet shows and the like abounded - and rightly or wrongly the decision was made to move out of Edinburgh.

Livingston certainly had an energy from the start and with a spanking new stadium in place set about moving up the Leagues. Although the two clubs met in the League Cup a couple of times it was 2001 before the regular jousts occurred as Livingston reached the top-flight. At that point there were several connections between the two with John Robertson playing for the Lions after leaving Tynecastle and Craig Levein commencing his coaching career there amongst others. However, any perception of

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'favourite wee club' was swept aside when Livingston promptly cuffed Hearts four-from-four in that first season. With Hibs also struggling the 'Evening News' happily mixed it further by declaring Livi' as the biggest club in the Lothians.

There was a particularly feisty encounter in January 2002 -and by "feisty" I mean "near riot" - as referee Dougie McDonald (ah... remember him?) had a lively afternoon. Amongst other things he sent off Hearts' Alan Maybury and then had to separate the returning Levein from taking on the entire Livingston dugout in the aftermath.

When the following season opened with a 1-1 draw at Almondvale - in which a certain Craig Gordon debuted – it made it five without a win for Hearts. On trooping back to the bus, a Livi' fan leant out of his car window and shouted, "You'll never beat the Livi" which somewhat grated at the time but fortunately since then we have dominated the fixture with only three defeats (and two of them in cup competitions 'de-prioritised' at the time.)

So, we can afford to quickly brush over the 5-0 defeat at Almondvale in December 2018 (when I think only the cold stopped the way support going into shock) and instead recall we had Vladimir Romanov sitting amongst the crowd in 2005 as we won 4-1 and thanks to the same man 7,500 Jambos travelling west at Christmas nine years later to see us win 1-0 on the way to the Championship title.

That the ground still wasn't full that day underlines the problem of building and retaining support at a new dub especially in a small country like Scotland. However, credit needs to be given to Livingston for continually bouncing back and punching way above their weight. Accordingly, today will be another tricky fixture but maybe there is something in treating it like a Derby; after all we have a pretty decent record in those.

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In a sense Edinburgh City are the true successors to Meadowbank in that they remain in the city and relatively-prosperous aside Hearts and Hibs. Currently, sharing at Ainslie Park they ironically (finally) move back to Meadowbank next season. It's quite something to look back in history and realise that Edinburgh used to have several more League clubs in the original Edinburgh City and more established Leith Athletic and St Bernards. Thus, Hearts would find themselves playing not only at Easter Road but also in Portobello and Stockbridge. Yet Edinburgh, in modern-times, has never managed to truly support more than the two big clubs (well one...) and the success of the smaller ones tends to have come in non-League. That was, of course, Edinburgh's route into the League and with a sprinkling of former Jambos it would be good to see them step-up at least one tier and plot another point on Edinburgh's football map.

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To round off the Livingston connection it was good to see ex-Lion and current-Heart Andy Halliday sign a new contract recently. I know he sometimes has his critics amongst the support but actually he strikes me as what the side often needs; experienced, versatile and willing to graft. Witness his superb 90 minutes at left-back versus St Mirren or his roles of right-back, left-back, left-wing-back and centre-midfield - all in one-half at Tannadice. He also seems - how can I put this? - a bit of a 'grumpy' guy on the park which is actually a desire to win and to cajole teammates to the same. Every side needs such players and Andy's retention augurs well for the strength-in-depth of the squad.