

## **The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Ross County 30.04.22**

I tell you what. To win two Derbies in a week; clinch third-spot, European group-stage football and a place in the Scottish Cup Final *and* put Hibs in the bottom six. That is some week.

On reflection, my biggest concern ahead of the Semi-Final was that logically, to win back-to-back Derbies was a huge ask. There are just so many variables beyond the plain ninety minutes in these fixtures. In fact, Hibs arguably had an advantage after being convincingly beaten in the League. They made a number of changes at Hampden and had significant room for improvement. At Tynecastle they had started the better side and taking the lead seemed a natural outcome at that point – albeit their goal was slightly fortuitous. However, I still felt that we had something to overcome rather than being in trouble and that actually Hibs had maybe ‘shot their bolt’.

We slowly started to impose our own game and the goal just before half-time was pivotal. Tynecastle erupted and it felt like a winner for Hearts and set the tone for the second-half. The way that Hearts ascended and took a thorough grip of the match was hugely impressive.

A week later Hibs seemed intent on increasing their physical presence to win their perceived battle. We actually looked a little edgy in the opening minutes but two moments of class set us on our way. Standing behind Ellis Simms’ shot it went like an absolute rocket and had the bonus of knocking Hibs out of their stride. And so, we struck again. With any free-kick from anywhere on the right Stephen Kingsley is called upon to step-up but this one seemed too far out. So, knock it forward, take it back and then send in a shot that bent like a banana into the top corner. Simple.

At that early point we already had a foot in the Final. So, to lose a goal within a minute was ‘unfortunate’. Had we kept the game at 2-0 or had Liam Boyce even stuck away that chance on half-time it would have become a different game. Instead, Hibs had a way back. Yet despite having plenty ball how many saves did Craig Gordon have to make? Two? One was world-class – naturally – and in a way broke the opposition as much as any goal at the other end. The sending-off – probably only the second worst foul of the day - actually didn’t change the match that much and sort of evened-up our suffering in central-defence where already-absent Smith and Souttar were now joined on the sidelines by Halkett. Yet Taylor Moore did a fabulous job when he came on and helped calm things down a little. As did Cammy Devlin later.

“Much more nervy sitting watching than actually playing” was Michael Smith’s verdict on Twitter afterwards and that’s reassuring! Yet, as the clock ticked-down I felt that we had managed to start closing the game out. Even with eight minutes’ injury time I think Hibs knew the game was all but up.

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The atmospheres at both matches had been electric. And although the win at Hampden proved a little more tense the celebrations at both final whistles were joyful and fully-justified.

Hearts are going back to Europe and the Scottish Cup Final. What a week. What a narrative.

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A family holiday meant I missed the win at Tannadice but with four trips to Dundee this season there can't be much left for us to find in the 'City of Discovery'.

A few sessions of beach tennis and volleyball confirmed it's increasingly difficult for us 'veterans' to get to the trickier shots so I feel even more in awe of Craig Gordon!

To some extent its job done for Hearts in the League this season. Clinching European football before the split means that we can now fully-focus on the Scottish Cup Final versus Rangers. Yet, there is a balance between form and the necessary resting and healing of players. So it was pleasing to achieve a battling win on Tayside with key individuals missing and keep a very healthy run going. We'll look to continue all that against Ross County today.

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The Premiership split appropriately enough, still seems something of a divided issue amongst supporters. Introduced in 2001 it is essentially the compromise that allows a 12-team top-flight and thereby expansion from the more workable ten. And when I say 'workable' older fans may remember the marathon 44-game seasons of the eighties and nineties when 12-teams played each other four times. Unimaginable now it probably sums up Scottish football that having tried it from 1986-88 they reintroduced it 1991-94 with all the nuances of cancelled and increased relegation to make it happen.

I recall Craig Levein (first Managerial version) saying the split created artificial pressure and I get that. The positive is that Hearts have usually been good enough to make the top-six – only behind the Old Firm in success rate - and have thus been involved in meaningful fixtures whether as onlooker or in a 'race for Europe' (cliché alert). Yet the title race and often also the European places normally take place well within that top six. There is also the possibility this season that a side could be drawn into a relegation-battle merely because they fell out of the top-six at the last minute. (Well...fingers crossed.) Equally, fixtures can be unbalanced and we've been forced to travel three times to the same venue on a few occasions now.

My own preference would be for a larger top-flight of 16-or-18 teams and thereby a maximum-34 fixtures. Yet older fans than I will immediately counter that this previously led to a number of meaningless

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games as teams found a haven in mid-table. However, it would mean one visit a season to each club (and surely most now realise that the Old Firm supports are not the cash cow they once were). So, you can imagine supporters lapping up trips to Arbroath and Kilmarnock over a second-trip to Celtic, for example. Also, a major blocker to a non-old-Firm side challenging for the title has been playing Rangers and Celtic eight-times-a-season. Those games can be a massive swing no matter how good you are. Imagine if that were reduced to four fixtures and points were potentially more winnable elsewhere?

Of course, it's a tricky balance and actually I've always felt that because there is no perfect, all round-satisfactory solution the best plan may be to change the format semi-regularly (every ten years or so) to keep it fresh. Whatever the format the most important thing is that Hearts make the top-half and preferably top-quarter. We've achieved that in spades this season and can now look forward to the (slightly) more conventional organisation of European football.

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By the time you read this another Hearts side will have played at Hampden with the U18s having taken on Rangers on Wednesday night in the SFA Youth Cup Final. The pathway to the first-team is the most important thing but equally there is a strong desire to see any Hearts side do well.

I remember being at Ibrox when we won the 1993 Youth Cup and nine of those players subsequently played for the first team. There was palpable excitement at winning a trophy and we took over 3,000 fans through to Glasgow so desperate were we to see Hearts succeed.

With Robbie Neilson (1998) and Craig Gordon (2000) also winning the Youth Cup the landmark nature of these occasions will be well-known at Tynecastle. As I said, progress to the first-team is the most important thing but that feeling of being in a Final at Hampden at an early age can't be a bad thing.