

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Rangers 14.05.22

It's pretty exciting to finish a first season writing for Edinburgh's-only Premiership programme by looking forward to a Scottish Cup Final. The Final is a fine way to round off a hugely positive season at Tynecastle and of course next week we will have the opportunity to move it from 'positive' to 'legendary'.

Yet there is final League business to take care of today and perhaps unusually we also face next week's opponents this afternoon. Of course, we have very recent experience of facing up to the same opponent in League then Cup and we'd take the same outcome right now!

Today's game therefore becomes a bit of shadow boxing; almost a little bit of a distraction before next week. With domestic League placings confirmed, a Final to come and Rangers looking to their midweek Europa League Final both sides may seek to mix it up. As such neither side will openly regard it as form for the Final but equally there is a chance to lay down a marker.

We've lost two and drawn one of the fixtures versus the Ibrox side thus far this season so what better time to even that up?

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The last day of the League season is a reflective one too of course and at Tynecastle we can afford to look back with a great deal of satisfaction. It's a bit of a cliché but we *have* come a long way from even the tail-end of last season.

Part of the success has been from a subtle but successful transformation in the squad. That's come for two distinct reasons really. Firstly, the augmentation of the promotion squad which means we've said farewell to players such as Armand Gnanduillet, Steven Naismith and Loic Damour as well as Jamie Walker, Euan Henderson and Mihai Popescu on-loan. Yet, in essence the first-choice eleven may have been tweaked rather than overhauled were it not for a fair number of injuries. Against Celtic on opening night only Alex Cochrane and Beni Baningime were new to the squad yet by last Saturday we were without an entire first-choice defence and only Craig Gordon, Peter Haring, Liam Boyce, Josh Ginnelly and Gary Mackay-Steven of the starting XI were here last season.

That ability to generally keep winning despite the loss of key players is testament to those such as Cochrane, Taylor Moore and Nathaniel Atkinson who have come in. And add in that we have both gained and lost the brilliant Beni Baningime this season. Further forward we have really strengthened with the mercurial Barrie Mackay providing the magic for Ellis Simms and a less-over-worked Liam Boyce.

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That all points to successful and targeted recruitment and crucially a high success rate in signings. (In contrast till this season the signings seemed numerous and the success rate ...well...somewhat lower.)

There are obvious standouts in any squad but it's a huge relief to see that injuries have not crippled as they previously have. In fact, it's increasingly a true squad effort. Nobody is denying we'd rather have a full bench and a first-choice starting XI but that's equally unlikely to happen so it's a huge boost that we have the characters and abilities to step-up when required.

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Needless to say, there have been plenty of highlights this season not least in April. The opening night versus Celtic proved to be pretty memorable. Although the capacity was hugely reduced the atmosphere was as if-full and walking along Gorgie Road after almost 17-months away was truly like returning home. My son and I were fortunate enough to secure balloted-tickets for the game and ended up right in line with John Souttar's winner.

The 5-2 win against Dundee United at Tynecastle in November was one of the games of the season and it was a joy to see Hearts in full-flight and completely over-running a close-rival. In fact, all four games against United have made a great series and the comprehensive win at Tannadice in August seemed to confirm that we were 'back.'

Similarly, the Scottish Cup-tie versus St Mirren saw Hearts go up the gears in a strong encounter and in fact I firmly believe that the win against a ten-man Saints' side in Paisley the previous week - ending a disappointing February-run - was pivotal in regaining form at a crucial time.

Key has been consistency in picking up points. We can all look at points dropped and wonder why – for example the defeat in February versus Dundee (Equally, after last Saturday's 13th draw from 23 games with Ross County we all now need to accept that all these games will end in a draw - even when we win.)

But in the majority of cases dropped points have been followed by wins and overall, we have demonstrated a consistency that has seen us draw well-clear in third-place. Repeating that success and indeed perhaps closing the gap on the top two is a bigger ask of course but for now we can look forward to the justified rewards that this season has brought.

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Speaking of next-season I am sure everyone is already looking forward to the draw for the Europa League play-off. And who knows maybe some others are even dreading seeing 'Heart of Midlothian (SCO)' coming out against them!

On holiday in Majorca recently we passed by the Real Mallorca club shop in Palma and pleasingly for those who remember the 1998 ties I can confirm that their premises do indeed lie on a slope. Currently the club itself is struggling to stay in La Liga however. Similarly, it's a shock to see Stuttgart and Bordeaux - where we enjoyed so much in 2003 - looking likely to plunge out of their respective top-flights. (I am sure my French counterpart was writing with similar disbelief about us two years ago). Liverpool appear to have learnt better from our draw in 2012, however.

Regardless, these are isolated highlights from a relatively poor European record over the years. For me, part of the problem has been that we have not been able to play much more than maybe four European games a season. In short, we never get the chance to learn. In fact, overall, all-too often across recent years non-Old Firm Scottish Clubs have been out of Europe before they have started and as such not really been able to draw anything from the experience.

So, the brilliant news is that regardless of which European competition we end up in next season we are guaranteed a minimum eight games. To put that into perspective that's two more games than we've played in Europe in the last 10 years. And we will be playing to a schedule more in line with our own domestic game than starting two months before as previously.

We've always craved a consistent presence in European football and this gives us that in one season and thereby a terrific opportunity to adapt, learn and prosper in quick time.

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And so, to close The Final Word for this season by returning to the Scottish Cup Final.

For any of us fortunate enough to have seen Hearts bring home the Scottish Cup we know what the day can bring and how life-long memories can be made. However, there's a game to be won first and that's clearly going to be no easy task.

Yet, reality starts from dreams and with a sea of maroon at Hampden, a top-class talented squad and positive preparation time there lies ahead a terrific opportunity.

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We in the stands will be as one with the players. This is Heart of Midlothian. Let's do it.