

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Dundee 230124

Do we still say Happy New Year on January 23rd? No probably not but it seems longer than 24 days since the last game at Tynecastle. During the break the gap was filled with idle (or otherwise) speculation about various players' futures. The continued line up of pundits to opine on player transfers is as tiresome as it is empty – after all Dexter Lembikisa arrived under the radar - but equally probably illustrates the lack of activity in the Scottish market.

Regardless on the field we ended 2023 and started 2024 pretty well. Albeit this is written before last Saturday's trip across the city to face Spartans. But in the League the win against St Mirren a month ago neatly followed up the superb triumph at Celtic Park and consolidated confidence going into the busy Christmas and New Year period. The good form then largely continued with the 1-0 win at Easter Road albeit the game itself wasn't the greatest and seemed to have 0-0 written all over it until Lawrence Shankland's late (and frankly glorious) intervention.

Having played well against them at Tynecastle but given up a 2-0 lead there was a certain need to re-establish our grip on the fixture. Perhaps if either of the early penalties had been converted then the game may have opened up but inevitably the fear of losing creeps into a Derby the longer it stays 0-0.

Of course, Zander Clark had already played his part in that with an excellent save from the penalty spot. And he was involved in the winning goal too; a kick to Shankland bearing down on goal in a moment which seemed to flash by. However, after that, from our angle there was a beautiful milli-second when you realised the trigger had been pulled and the ball was heading in. Next thing the next bulged and we were flying. Contrasting feelings for Martin Boyle perhaps who (in a great spot on 'X') was shown in a still at the half-way line with his hands on his head as Shankland drove through. Finished with an allegedly weaker foot for the second goal in a row it shows the quality of the player that 'weaker' seems an irrelevant term. In short it was the sort of top-level finish I occasionally produce on FIFA entirely by accident.

Understandably the match against Ross County was a flatter-affair. The players looked tired and were unfortunate enough to come up against a side who hadn't played in two weeks. That said our changes - enforced or otherwise - led to a difficult afternoon and the lack of a 'foot on the ball' in midfield allowed County to really press and attack. But, if we can draw from 2-0 down, when we're tired, not playing well and lacking key players ...well it's not all bad. If you're not going to win then don't lose. It might have been a pragmatic ending but one that we wouldn't have made a couple of months earlier.

We'll set VAR aside for another day.

And speaking of digging it out we closed out the period with a fighting win at Livingston. Our record there isn't quite as bad as portrayed but equally it's evident we don't like playing on their artificial pitch. I can understand that when you observe the roll and pace of the ball played close-up and if nothing else the shiny green surface, yellow home kit and pink away kit resembled a set of highlighters.

We hadn't started well and the subsequently disallowed goal gave us a bit of a wake-up call. Second-half we were shaped more decisively particularly in the wider areas. Having forged 2-0 ahead we looked comfortable

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but the concession of a penalty meant a different type of performance against an ever-increasing number of six-foot attackers.

Tonight, we pick up the reigns once more in our game in hand against Dundee -as part of a quick double-header against them. It will be another difficult night especially given the precedent of a poor performance at Dens earlier in the season. However, with an advantage to press home – and lessons hopefully learned from collapsing last term - we undoubtedly want to keep pushing on from 2023.

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Similar to wishing a 'happy new year' it may be a tad late for New Year's resolutions. In fact, according to statistics I recently saw shared 66% of people will be close to giving them up by time you read this. However, my hopes for Hearts in 2024 are hopefully something we can stick to.

First-up it was a difficult and often divisive 2023. From late-January something went awry and it's been difficult since. But by the end of the year there was a semblance of positivity returning. The rendition of 'Merry Christmas Everybody' against St Mirren was a genuinely happy moment and summed up the rapid change in mood that had followed the win at Celtic Park. So, the first hope is for more positivity at Tynecastle.

Obviously, that depends on results but neither am I am advocating the so-called 'happy clappy' nature. Instead, when it is needed or arises then let's embrace what we have. It's easy to be happy when we win but more difficult when a game isn't going as planned. As an example, during the recent game against Ross County a supporter behind us frequently bellowed, "no point in beating Celtic and then dropping points here.". Fair point but it was 0-0 at the time so if in doubt get behind the team and exhibit that positivity. Worst case scenario you get to be 'I told you so' if we lose but more likely it might just help get the team over the line. There is undoubtedly huge pressure at Hearts but we need to channel that positively.

Similarly, the recent plans announced from the Foundation of Hearts for increased engagement and better use of technology bode well and suggest an undoubtedly long-standing need is starting to be addressed.

Like many of us I've binge-watched the two series of 'Welcome to Wrexham' and marvel at the apparent positivity that emanates from that club. OK they have Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElheney and no doubt an array of Hollywood spin but it can't be denied that club is *alive*. To an extent that is down to success on the park but they didn't get promoted first time nor do they seem to expect to be in the Premier League in five years' time. Rather the supporters are happy to see their club finally restore pride and be representative of them as they collectively move forward in a positive direction. With the foundations (no pun intended) that we have already in place at Tynecastle we should be feeling similarly already. But I don't think it's happened enough.

We have a marvelous story to tell here but it needs to keep developing. From the Board and Foundation, we need a restored sense of collective purpose and drive. Communication is huge within that and can go a long way to bringing owners-in-the-stands who perhaps feel anything-but back into the fold. We don't expect to be in the dressing room deciding tactics but equally there is a collective voice out here and it needs listened to and engaged. For the good of the club.

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Football is a result-driven business but hopefully 2024 is a year in which we can stride forward positively, re-unite and drive on.