

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v PAOK

We could get used to this. A week after our pulsating victory over Rosenborg we're quickly back at Tynecastle for a little bit more. And it's an even bigger night now with group-stage European football one step away but to be earned the hard way with a final two-leg tie. All of which does enhance the frustration of not finishing third last season ... but we move on.

Cliché but true - there are no easy games in European football. There are no lower-League sides like you might encounter in the domestic cups. Each side in the draw is a 'name', in the top 5 or 6 of their domestic League. No one is a pushover and as Hibernian ably proved in Andorra even the smallest opponent can bite you. Yet all of the that can also be said about Hearts. We are in the top group of our League and shouldn't be a pushover to anyone having accounted for Rosenborg already.

Maybe clubs like Hearts aren't meant to be in European group stages. We're small fry from Scotland. We don't have a big European track record. We're not a name. Well, we are Heart of Midlothian and tonight is another opportunity to enhance our reputation. We want to be in European football every year and we want to succeed. So, where Bayern, Bologna and Braga have fallen before we now seek to add PAOK.

Arguably being at home first doesn't suit us or any Scottish side but with the removal of the away goal rule it is less significant. Against Rosenborg we showed the best of the Scottish game with powerful attacking football that frankly ran the Norwegians into the ground. It might be less gun-ho tonight but we need to focus on making our Greek opponents worried about their own home tie next week.

So, we can certainly defy expectation again and get through this tie. In short, it's all shaping-up to be another big night of European football at Tynecastle. Make it happen.

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Perhaps our European record is relatively modest. Certainly, I can only remember a single occasion when we have failed to win the first leg at home but still progressed. That was way back in 1988 when Austria Vienna held us to a 0-0 draw at Tynecastle but famously we won the return 1-0 thanks to a Mike Galloway goal on an apparently freezing cold night.

Equally, there's only tie I can think of where we won the away leg first and still went out. A memorable 1-0 win in Bordeaux possibly surprised us as much as the locals but our lack of European experience and defending a lead cost us as we slipped out 2-1 on aggregate.

Away goals proved both good and bad for us on those nights – and historically a real burden to us - but with that rule removed we can remove all fear and go for it tonight.

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Of course, the draw that became tonight's fixture was made three days before we had even started the last round tie with Rosenborg. Such is the scale and demand of European competition nowadays.

So, when the draw was made there were actually three teams to consider and it became like one of those old-fashioned Scottish Cup-ties with multiple postponements leading to almost as many 'ors' in the hat as teams.

We hadn't played Norwegian opposition in my time and the next draw made me realise we hadn't played Greek or Croatian teams that often either – just once each. Ironically the two sides we have faced – AEK Athens and Dinamo Zagreb were due to face each other in Champions League qualifying the same week as our trip to Norway but violence and a resultant death meant the game was postponed until Saturday past.

In 2006, Hearts were attempting to qualify for the Champions League – yep! – having finished second and claimed the Scottish Cup the season before. This was the time of peak-Romanov investment with Fyssas, Bednar, Pospisil and Jankauskas supplemented by the home-grown Gordon and Pressley. And the match was moved to Murrayfield to accommodate a crowd roughly twice the capacity of Tynecastle as had been the case in the previous round against Bosnian side Siroki Brijeg. The Bosnians had been comfortably dispatched, but AEK were a significant step up in class. From the off were not only on the ropes but under and through them. Yet completely against the run of play and possibly natural justice itself we took the lead on the hour when Saul Mikoliunas slid home a loose ball after Bednar's effort had been saved.

An absolutely unjust but miraculous victory looked possible but ironically AEK then delivered two sucker punches as they equalised with two minutes left and then won the game in injury time.

With all those apparent riches in the squad it was perhaps odd to see Jamie Mole start up front in the return leg in Athens as Hearts sought the (at least) two goals required. Whilst the young Englishman had an early chance in truth the game disappeared with the sending off of Julien Brellier on the half-hour. Initially booked for wearing an earring his second rapidly followed and the shambles that was to become Hearts in the years was perhaps betrayed. Neil McCann was also sent-off on the hour and with a seething injustice at the referee at least - AEK promptly rubbed salt into Hearts' wounds with three goals in the last eleven minutes.

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European football didn't return to Tynecastle – literally – until 2009 and this time in the Europa League. Hearts were now a more modest club. There were still some big names but it was evident all was perhaps not well and Romanov's investment and interest had ebbed. This time out we took on Dinamo Zagreb with the first leg in Croatia. It turned out to be a horrendous night and within five minutes we had lost a goal. Three more followed by the hour and the coverage afterwards highlighted with some merriment that Christian Nade had barely left the centre-circle. Tactical discipline or too warm to run?

The return-leg promised to be a low-key affair therefore and it hardly helped when a generator fire before the match took out one of the floodlights – adding to the literal gloom. But the irony was that we played really well and ultimately came close to pulling the tie back. Michael Stewart scored on 17 minutes and we fairly pummeled the visitors who suddenly looked extremely vulnerable. However, the second goal didn't come till just before the hour and Hearts' momentum dropped shortly afterwards.

We featured briefly in Europe twice more under Romanov losing to Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool in successive campaigns. However, our return in the last year feels considerably more stable whilst equally demanding to kick-on. To do that we need to overcome Greek opposition for the first time. More history to be made.