

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Kilmarnock 13.08.23

It's that time of the year where games outrun programmes so by the time you read this we'll have played in Norway and are hopefully well set-up for the second-leg at Tynecastle later this week.

What I can write-up is an encouraging opening day win at Perth. The first half largely matched the weather and at times we slightly overplayed. Equally, Saints are a robust unit; difficult to break down even on their own turf; as well as being four more games into a competitive season than us. Although in the second-half we started to pass more incisively through their ranks you began to wonder if the ball would break for us to score. But there was Yutaro to make the run, control and fire home. A few long balls into the box aside we looked pretty comfortable in defence and obviously added the second in the final seconds all of which served to illustrate the impact of the new and returning players – in this case Liam Boyce – as well as get Lawrence Shankland off the mark.

Winning in Perth is a great start. That said our visitors today have long made it difficult for us either in Edinburgh or Ayrshire and after the result of last weekend in defeating Rangers we'll need to be at our best to pick up three more points this afternoon.

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Today sees me embark on my 40th campaign as a season ticket holder at Tynecastle. Obviously, I was signed-up at minus-15 years old. But mention that our new all-pink kit was partially-inspired by the design of the 1993-94 version brought the startling realisation that that was in fact thirty years ago.

Lovely though it is to reflect our history I confess that as a grizzled veteran I tend to focus more on the kits being part of two grim relegation battles under Sandy Clark and then Tommy McLean. 81 goals in 80 games across both seasons kids.

I don't remember any great fanfare around kit launches back then. And certainly, no Toby Sibbick sitting on a throne – rightly though he should. A photograph of a few players wearing the new kits perhaps made the papers but that was about it. Yet the 1990s – when football was apparently invented in England – were also when kits began to be more and more marketised and as early as 1990 Hearts launched a highly fashionable shell-suit to accompany them. The sound of an entire squad of shell-suited footballers moving through an airport lounge must have been quite something.

The kits could be bought from the modest Club Shop adjacent to the Main Stand and alongside was the ticket office. Season ticket sales were also less prominent with many preferring to pay-in at individual games. Nonetheless, renewal leaflets were handed out as the previous season ended and you could judge how sales were going if you got a copy in the post a few weeks later – perhaps accompanied by a letter from the ever-bold Wallace Mercer urging you to buy now and provide funds for transfers. These allowed everyone to scrutinise prices and I remember the collective horror that

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admission would increase to £6 for an adult in 1991-92 season. Obviously, there were no online sales so physical books were collected from the ticket office with any seat number handwritten in.

But there was no more sitting for this young whippersnapper by then. For 1991-92 brought a move to the terracing behind the School End goal. As well as a more 'exuberant' atmosphere in contrast to the Family Enclosure it also meant a wise-warning to avoid the toilets. Trickier was a vulnerability to the Scottish weather and in the first game – Scott Crabbe scoring after 30 seconds to beat Rangers – August rain duly thundered down. Typically for Scotland though sunshine followed and the remainder of the half saw supporters collectively steaming as they dried off.

To me the Shed seemed to be a daunting place to watch football and only on wet days did we venture to its' edges. On days like that capacity seemed flexible and the abandoned terracing outside looked rather forlorn in contrast, Albeit the performances in 1993-94 handily helped create plenty space around Tynecastle.

But by the end of 1993-94. The Shed was no more as indeed was terracing at Tynecastle. All seater-stadiums were the new mantra and the demolition crews took over before the season had finished. Indeed, the final few games of the campaign were played out on three sides. By the following season it was still only three sides but the huge Wheatfield Stand had replaced The Shed and the former school end was now a road awaiting the construction of the Roseburn Stand the following summer.

Unfortunately, the Wheatfield was heralded with a first Derby defeat to Hibernian in six years. (Welcome Tommy McLean!) Not the most auspicious of starts perhaps but there have been plenty better times since then. And 30 years or so later we're both still here. Even if the Wheatfield roof isn't quite as comprehensive as the old Shed.

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Speaking of which veritably it did pour down in Perth last Saturday and perhaps leaving the VAR equipment open to the elements didn't help it.

However, the rain splashing down brought back memories of an encounter with St Johnstone at Tynecastle way back in January 1993. As we arrived in Gorgie the rain began and got heavier and heavier and...well biblical. A quick run along Gorgie Road followed and we only went into Tynecastle to shelter and perhaps nerdishly see what happened when a game was postponed just before kick-off. (Note further incidences tell me it's actually a nightmare.)

It was certainly obvious the game couldn't start. The floodlights were on but only served to illuminate the rain continuing and the many pools of water lying on the pitch. The other clue was the

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referee donning a raincoat over his kit and swapping his boots for wellies for his late-pitch inspection. Whilst carrying a golf umbrella.

There we stood hearing the rain batter off the Shed as he splashed around. Yet, somehow the game was given the go ahead. A minute's silence for the late Tommy Walker preceded kick-off and the sounds of the rain lashing down amidst the otherwise silence was quite eerie.

As the game kicked off St Johnstone supporters were evacuated into the Main Stand whilst we home fans all happily stood under the fully-metal enclosure enjoying the now forks of pink lightning and rolls of thunder. The rain continued unabated and the match itself was farcical with the ball holding up regularly. Think Scotland-Georgia but where they kept going. Sensibly Hearts scored twice early on and then took to shallow waters to see the game out. That only left the swim back to Haymarket and home.

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Finally, a word on Craig Brown who sadly passed away in the summer. Craig had no links with Hearts other than picking our players for his unspectacular but effective Scotland sides. It's only now as we enjoy the relative success of the national team that we maybe appreciate how good that era was for Scotland. Equally, Craig latterly did fine jobs in stabilising Motherwell and Aberdeen. Above all though he seemed a real Ayrshire gentleman with a fine sense of humour. That is loss enough in itself.