

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Ross County 30.07.22

And so, it's a welcome back to competitive football at Tynecastle. A mere six weeks since Scotland ended season 2021-22 in Armenia and just 70 days since the Cup Final, we are back in Gorgie eagerly anticipating the first League match of the new season.

Speaking of quick returns, County were the penultimate visitors to Gorgie last season for a draw that, at the time, seemed useful to the Dingwall side in their quest for European football although ultimately, they fell short. Yet County's march up the table last season underlines that this is a tough opening fixture. So, as our friends across the city noted...points off for the SPFL outrageously handing out Premiership games against another Premiership side so early on in the season.

Little else lingered in the memory from that April encounter however other than it being the 13th draw in just 23 League games between the two. So, in short, I'll take anything bar a draw or a loss today. We're easily pleased.

~~~~~  
The new season provides the optimal moment for optimism. The kits are new – with new names on the back - the weather is often less wet; the pitches are lush (well the grass ones) and everyone has managed to forget the games of a few weeks ago and stocked up on optimism – and a few other things - over the summer.

In our case we can briefly reflect for a final time on a very successful 2021-22 campaign. The Scottish Cup Final perhaps seems longer ago than just the-end-of-May and ultimately proved to be a frustrating afternoon. The grey weather overhead sort of matched the occasion and unfortunately for all the chat about Rangers being tired the deciding factor was actually the number of Hearts players that were only just ready for the Final. Unable to kick-on when it was needed the seeing-out of extra-time after their second goal was a sore one. The hope is that our summer recruitment might alleviate any such problems in future.

The strong season has had obvious rewards with the play-off for the Europa League imminent and we of course have the comfort of knowing that even if we lose that we drop into the Conference League. Teams may not fear the name 'Heart of Midlothian' (yet) but it does give valuable exposure to our club both on-and-off the field.

The season had seen us lose or finish behind the Old Firm in each competition so it's clear where the marker for the future lies. As in fact Joe Savage said last week. That said losing Finals – although hardly

## **The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Ross County 30.07.22**

getting easier – provides an increasing hunger to quickly get back there again and go that one step further.

And that is obviously a view shared judging by the sale of over 15,500 season tickets. By any measure that is remarkable but in the current economic climate it is even more so. A full Tynecastle is like no other stadium and will be of huge benefit to the team in the season ahead.

~~~~~

That feeling of positivity has rolled into pre-season with only one defeat from seven games. Clearly friendlies count for nothing come today but equally it can do no harm to fall into the habit of winning early-on. Methil, Edinburgh, Bonnyrigg, Birkenhead, Crawley, Preston and Stoke may sound like a tour The Proclaimers would undertake but the variety of opposition allowed plenty game-time as well as gradually stepping-up in quality.

Playing twice a week has also allowed a little bit of preparation for the schedule ahead and most players have now had a decent amount of game time with two sides often deployed in the opening games. Certainly, at Spartans there was the amusing sight of Hearts changing all 10 outfield players on the hour-mark. Goals have also been reasonably plentiful – Stephen Kingsley managing a hat-trick for starters! – and it all brings us back to that opening day word again – optimism.

~~~~~

Yet more hope is raised by the quality of additions made to the squad over the summer. Overall, the recruitment reflects both experience, potential and proven ability and continuity. With only John Souttar and latterly the more sidelined Aaron McEneff departing we have in-fact been able to increase overall squad size. Ironically, one of Souttar's replacements – Lewis Neilson - has also journeyed from Tannadice as something of a potential bargain and to compliment him we have Kye Rowles who is already World Cup bound come.....er November.

In midfield we have strengthened with Jorge Grant, Alex Cochrane and Alan Forrest who all bring a variety of attributes and potentially also an increased goal-threat. Which brings us to the perhaps the marquee signing of the summer in Lawrence Shankland. We have long-craved that regular goal scorer – since approximately John Robertson retired – and the 20-goal mark in a season seems elusive. So, no over-promises here but Shankland's arrival will surely provide not only more goals but options in better utilizing Liam Boyce and Barrie McKay and the aforementioned Forrest.

## **The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Ross County 30.07.22**

Perhaps the most encouraging thing to note in our recruitment is that we seem to sign our named targets. And yes, I know the 'Daily Record Exclusive' is hardly reliable nor are we likely to namecheck players we missed out on but for every target noted as in talks they seem to have arrived even when some patience and tough negotiations were required. After a few years when the recruitment strategy was questionable – if even in existence – we seem to be firmly on-track.

~~~~~

On a day of fresh starts today's programme equally forms a tribute to one man. Drew Busby. A name surely synonymous with Hearts for a generation of supporters. He was before my own time, yet I still know of his impact at Tynecastle and in particular his ability, passion, and affinity with those on the terraces. Tales of goals, defiance and a take no nonsense attitude abounded. I'm pretty certain Drew might be the only player to tackle two players in a Derby at once and still remain standing.

Yet he was clearly much more of a player than just that. A regular goal scorer in an ailing Hearts side he epitomised the defiance required in difficult times. The first time I saw 'Buzzbomb' many years later was via video of Hearts plunging towards a first relegation in 1977. Scoring a consolation goal versus Rangers, Drew pumped his fists to the Hearts support and even then, years later, I thought "there's a guy who got it." Coaxed back to Gorgie at half-time in the Bordeaux game in 2003 he was apparently surprised anyone remembered him.

Well, Tynecastle did; oh so fondly and players like he are rightly to be treasured. Drew Busby will indeed forever be 'the talk of the north'. And so much more in Hearts' history.