

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Rosenborg 17.08.23

European football returns to Edinburgh tonight and once again there is excitement with a foreign club visiting under the floodlights. After the experience of eight European games last season, I am sure we all want more and to progress further.

That obviously won't be easy tonight against Rosenborg. But there were positive signs in the second-period last Thursday that we can trouble them. That said, we can't afford a repeat of a first half in Trondheim which was poor and to a certain extent repeated the opening period at Perth - with laboured football peppered with mistakes. The goals we lost were pretty awful with slack passing another problem. That said it is hard not to feel sorry for Beni who struggled and hindsight certainly makes you wonder what data declared him ready to start.

However, also like Perth the changes from the bench had a massive influence. Peter Haring shored up midfield and got the side pushed further up the park and I thought both Aidan Denholm and Jorge Grant also did some stellar work in the same area. Aidan has come a long way in a short time considering he was freed in the spring. Of course, we can also rely on Lawrence Shankland and typically despite an isolated night up front he pounced on his chance and provided what may be a crucial 30th goal in maroon.

Looking at tonight there is an immediate fillip with the 'banned' Tagawa, Nieuwenhof and Vargas in the squad. If Visas were the issue in Norway these three could be a Mastercard tonight. We probably over-estimate the importance of a big home crowd – most players have played in such atmospheres– but equally it *can* be a factor. Most important is how we play. I feel there is a balance between 'European' style and the physical and speedy nature of the Scottish game. Watching Rangers and (yes) Hibernian profit with such performances last week underlines that.

There may be no easy games in Europe – as Hibernian proved in the hills of Andorra - but we can at least play to our strengths. And if we do want to progress in European football ...well stating the obvious we need to win games against European teams.

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Last month we also had some big names in Edinburgh with the odd sight of Manchester United and Lyon playing at Murrayfield... on a Wednesday afternoon. It's a sign of the appeal of the Premier League that their clubs can stage fixtures in almost any continent and attract large crowds.

Indeed, on holiday in Cyprus in the summer we fell into conversation with the barman who asked who our English club was. I tried explaining that I didn't have one and it was Hearts-only. He seemed to have heard of us (or was being polite) and then said that he quite liked the Scottish "club with the leaves on their badge" which at the time we thought meant Celtic. But in hindsight he was *clearly* referring to Hearts and our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary badge. Incidentally on asking if he had a Cypriot team, he described local football as "sh...." well not very good. Wait till we (hopefully) draw one of them in the group stages. I fear they won't be as bad he makes out.

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So, with all that and the instantly recognisable brand it's logical that the Premier League clubs seek to monetise that appeal. Many were critical of the fixture being played in Edinburgh but around 42,000 still paid top dollar to see amongst others Will Fish. Even the SFA got in on the act when they offered discount ticket sales. It wouldn't have happened in the more austere days of Jim Farry. Older supporters will remember the 'delight' of tuning into a tasty midweek FA Cup replay on BBC One only to hear "Now here on BBC1 live coverage of the FA Cup replay between Norwich City and Arsenal ... except for viewers in Scotland who will be watching, "The Guns of Navarone" because the bold Jim had blocked transmission of the game from England as Stirling were at Forfar that night.

Regardless of holidays we probably wouldn't have gone anyway. I did take my son to see Liverpool and Napoli back in 2019 - when the former looked anything but title winners - and it was enjoyable as a novelty, but you accepted that the match was, for all the build-up, still a friendly. My son was also keen to see Liverpool in the flesh- not believing that we had played them in the Europa League.

Whilst neither Lyon or Manchester United are under any obligation to promote Scottish football it might have been nice if there had been a recognition of the city clubs and maybe some involvement. As it was the two teams presumably landed at Edinburgh Airport, took the tram to Murrayfield and then left again. Something of a very brief love-in during which neither seemed set on capturing the Scottish market – which is a good and bad thing. In Cyprus I noticed that both Juventus and Real Madrid were holding summer training camps for local kids.

Both Lyon and Manchester United were also slumming it given they swapped previous visits to Tynecastle to cross the railway line and play at Murrayfield. Lyon were here in 1996 for Neil Berry's Testimonial and proved quick on the break to say the least as they won 3-1. Neil was laid out in the opening minutes and retired with a head injury but in this case, it was "blood doesn't show on a pink, tartan jersey" as Hearts unveiled a spectacular kit for the night which is up there with the Birdman of Alcatraz in begging for a new release.

We played Manchester United twice in the eighties at Tynecastle although midweek games were ruled out for me then. The prospect of United returning for a third shot now is less likely but at time English clubs were still banned from European competition and were looking at all sorts of fixtures to fill the literal and creative gaps. Thus, Ron Atkinson brought United north in September 1986 and saw his side come from 2-0 down to draw 2-2. Holding Hearts to a draw was not enough to save his job however and he was sacked two months later.

So, when United travelled north in 1989 for a Testimonial for Eamonn Bannon they were led by a more familiar face in Alex Ferguson. This time United won 4-2 but it was the fourth season for Ferguson in Manchester, and he was still to win a trophy. The story that he was one FA Cup replay from the sack before going onto win the Final is now something of legend but there is an interesting dimension for Hearts in there.

As the summer of 1990 approached and Ferguson seemed set to leave Manchester it was strongly rumoured, he was set to take over at Tynecastle. The fact that Alex MacDonald was still in charge at the time did not seem

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to deter the ever-bold Wallace Mercer but ultimately Ferguson stayed – had a bit of success -and MacDonald was sacked the following September to be replaced by Joe Jordan. Ferguson was apparently consulted and recommended Jordan's appointment but then he also recommended David Moyes to succeed him at Old Trafford.

A sliding doors moment? Perhaps we would be regulars in the Champions League by now and facing Real Madrid in Florida each summer. Perhaps not. But we are in European football again and just like Manchester United and Lyon we want to keep on flying out of Edinburgh too.