

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Livingston 011123

Two contrasting performances but the last two games have served up only a pair of deflating defeats. Having struck early at Ibrox we looked reasonably calm and controlled only for that to desert us in the final minutes. Certainly, it was an improvement on the previous week when Celtic strolled to victory here. Despite the tiresome debate over ticket allocation, you could hardly blame people for leaving early.

On paper this is a good squad albeit carrying some key injuries. But equally we haven't settled at all this season and seem well off the output and identity that was proclaimed during the summer. It's results we need and the League table has a few bald truths with just three wins seeing us 7th with just nine goals in ten games and well off third-place. Right now, you are left to questions which is the bigger game – tonight or Sunday.

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There is something of the parent-child relationship when it comes to football supporters and their club. Like kids, football clubs require constant nurturing, love, and attention and not least money. Parents and supporters also firmly believe they know best and will often wax lyrically how things were better in the past. Performance is closely monitored amidst injury and illness scares. Ultimately you hope it's all rewarding. (And if it's not you keep taking them to games as punishment.)

Anyway, the parallel struck me most recently when a family holiday meant missing the Edinburgh Derby. Now the pragmatist in me immediately appreciated that my own Derby record would only improve with a win and a loss would be best missed. In fact, leaving the country after defeat seemed reasonable action. Yet it felt like leaving the child behind. Of course, things would be fine; others would look-in but still there was a nagging concern something would go wrong.

Now as it happened this holiday was a first-ever cruise and thereby meant leaving from the nearest Scottish port of...Southampton. (Bring back Rosyth, eh?) The holiday was booked in February and given it partially coincided with an international break it felt a decent gamble. So, there was 'disappointment' when the fixtures came out. Short of a switch to the Friday night a 5pm sail in Southampton meant it unlikely I could stay till the final whistle. Especially given VAR

So, I was resigned to missing the game from early on and sucked it up with trade-off of two weeks' holiday in the sunshine, new places to see and copious food and drink. Brave soldier that I am.

Of course, as we crossed the border into the beautiful English sunshine it was in fact pelting down back in Scotland. As doubts and rumours grew about the game going ahead the thought did cross my mind that I might score here. Massive disappointment for 19,000 other supporters so I can go? Heck yeah. My child is most important after all. Anyway, I then remembered that I had sold our seats via the exchange and thereby faced the distinct possibility of being free for the game but not having a ticket despite being a season ticket holder. That'd be ironic.

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On arriving at Southampton docks around 2pm the line-up was carefully digested. Frantic refreshing of X followed and then just as we entered security Alan Forrest scored the opener. Zippity do-dah. Scan me as much as you need to baby.

My half-time analysis from on-board consisted of “need a second” – yes you can still be pessimistic from 700 miles away - but I could tell we were playing well. Then just as we moved up on deck it went to 2-0. Own goal? Alex Lowry? Who cared? Going on holiday, 2-0 up in a Derby Louis Armstrong might as well have serenaded me onboard with “It’s a Wonderful World”.

It turns out ships have a detailed safety briefing which involves gathering people together at their muster station. In our case the large, indoor theatre area. Of course, I skipped into this and having seen ‘Titanic’ knew that you pretty much only needed a lifebelt, a door and plenty patience to be rescued. Except the mobile signal had gone. Cue slight sense of dread. But still 2-0 up, playing well and with an hour gone.

The signal returned as we walked back up the stairs and as my phone vibrated, I had (yes) a sinking feeling. Opening the messages some of the adjectives from the first half were now distinctly repurposed and yes it was 2-2. I may have resorted to the language of a sailor myself at this point.

Suddenly we had a problem. Everyone around me was happy, the sail away party was starting, and drink was flowing. Cast adrift in the Channel I began to question if we could get it back to 3-2 or if the momentum was with Hibs. More frantic refreshing and messaging only made clear it was going to end as a draw. Deeply unsatisfying for us but apparently a veritable champagne to the hull for our neighbours.

So, the sail out was briefly reflective. But much better days lay ahead, and I was safe in the knowledge Hearts weren’t due to play again. But it proved once more than you can never quite trust them when you’re away.

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It was another European week last midweek and once again Scottish clubs failed to win. Particularly when the Old Firm (especially) enter Europe there is a lot of defensive chat about the financial gap between them and the opponent that night. That talk doesn’t seem to be as common here where the relative gaps are arguably even more significant. After all, Celtic and Rangers probably spend at least ten times on wages alone compared to some other Scottish clubs.

However, the disparity is real even down the Leagues. Last month I took a midweek trip down to Berwick to see our B team in the Lowland League. Berwick are, of course, one of a clutch of clubs that have fallen out of the Scottish League and not really come close to a return. (A fifth-place finish last term being Berwick’s best). It might be questioned if there is a huge attraction in returning to League Two but financially it’s undoubtedly a bigger deal.

Shielfield is a pretty traditional set-up dating back many years albeit it’s still slightly unusual to see the football pitch surrounded by a speedway track. And a slope to both that looks inspired by the Cheviots. Alongside is ‘Old

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Shielfield' currently used by Tweedmouth Rangers and behind one goal a sinister looking factory with the East Coast railway line completing the enclosure of a ground that gives it a distinctly 'old school' feel.

It's also odd to hear Geordie accents so prevalent at a Scottish fixture. On the night there were vocals aplenty as the home side's experience saw them surge 2-0 ahead but the young Hearts side held in there and eventually pulled it back to 2-2 to share the spoils of a cracking game.

What wasn't obvious then - in all senses - was that Berwick had been heavily investing to try to get back to the Scottish League. Subsequently losing in the Scottish Cup to Brora Rangers (hmm) meant potentially lucrative income disappeared. With incidents of vandalism at the ground too the club reported an annual loss of £115,000. That seems a huge amount at non-League level. Key players were immediately made available for transfer and the focus is now on stablising in the Lowland League with more modest spending. A 6-0 spanking from Hearts in the return fixture won't have helped mind you. Both Hearts and Livingston know all about overspending to their detriment. Yet even from the Lowland League it's another reminder that spending doesn't always means success.