

## **The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Ross County – 26.12.21 and St Johnstone – 18.01.22**

The games over the Christmas and New Year period often have a special atmosphere. Particularly on Boxing Day when many are on holiday and everyone hopefully enjoyed a good day 24-hours earlier. There may even be far-flung supporters home in time to coincide with a game. In Edinburgh, there is also, more often than not an Edinburgh Derby to enjoy in there somewhere too and the Festive fixtures become like a mini-series.

That said, perhaps Ross County will be slightly less ‘glowing’ about a trip to Edinburgh on Boxing Day. Obviously, someone has to travel either to-or-from Dingwall but it does seem quite a journey on a day when public transport is also limited. St Johnstone may also grumble at a Wednesday night visit to close the year but for some reason Hearts’ trips to Perth have been almost fixed as midweek fixtures for the last few years so at least we know how they feel. That said we have also been forced to travel around the country at this time of year and trips to Kilmarnock and Aberdeen (in the middle of a ‘lively’ winter storm to boot) spring to mind. As does a postponement at Dingwall just after 2pm whilst sitting in their car park. My sympathy may just have ebbed.

My own memories of Boxing Day games stretch back as far as Andy Walker missing a dubious penalty for Celtic in a 0-0 draw at Tynecastle in 1989 and a fellow supporter ‘wisely’ telling my dad and I that Walker had clearly realised it wasn’t a penalty and missed deliberately. I fear not sir. Seven years later it was a freezing cold afternoon at Dunfermline and the amusing sight of the home management team wildly celebrating on the pitch as they went 2-1 up only for Hearts to go right up the park and equalise. And go onto win 3-2.

However, the obvious stand-out Boxing Day game is the 3-2 Derby win of 2006 when Saulius Mikoliunas curled home a dramatic winner; Hibs had recovered from 2-0 down only to lose that third goal shortly afterwards. A young(er) Craig Gordon played in that game although his main memory may be the altercation that led to Hibs’ Dean Shiels being sent off after he had just equalised with a penalty. A year earlier we beat Falkirk 5-0 as the Romanov era peaked. Equally, memorable for more negative reasons was a 4-0 thumping from Kilmarnock in 2013 when the same Romanov-period had completely disintegrated.

Regardless, this is a special time of year so enjoy the games as they come as thick-and-fast as the frost. On that, an early Happy New Year to everyone and best wishes for 2022. Except Hibs. Naturally.

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It’s a well-worn programme-cliché but printer’s deadlines do indeed prevent me from commenting on last Saturday’s match at Dundee. I could have risked it all and ‘written-up’ a win but I don’t like to tempt fate

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or indeed look completely stupid. So that leaves us with the Rangers match and what an odd one that turned out to be. We started the game really positively and the visitors looked under the cosh. However – and stating the obvious – the two goals changed the tone of the game completely. And they also illustrated the difference. Rangers defended well for the whole-90 minutes and took their chances and Hearts didn't. (Stop me if I am being too technical.) It was only for four minutes that we switched off but it was crucial and (grudged) credit to Rangers for going for the killer second so quickly.

Even at 2-0 we didn't seem out of the game and it would have been fascinating to see how Rangers would have reacted to losing a goal. Instead, we hit the bar twice, missed an almost open goal and saw a few more saved. It all just left that nagging feeling that it wasn't to be our day. We can also argue over a potential penalty but given that Alan McGregor was doing a 'Gordon' I think we may know how that would have gone. (Incidentally, we can only hope that Alan has managed to take that last goal kick in time for today's match to go ahead...)

Similar to the recent match at Celtic Park though there is no reason to be too downhearted and also like that match the key is to follow-up a decent performance in defeat with positive results.

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One match I can comment on though is the recent women's Edinburgh Derby at Tynecastle. The result may not have gone their way but Hearts were unlucky enough to come up against an excellent goalkeeper. Regardless, the match attracted a new home record crowd of 3,508 and they enjoyed an open match with the women's game often retaining a refreshing positivity in how it is played. Things may not have always been easy for the Hearts squad especially in the top-flight but their dedication, discipline and sheer guts are both admirable and hopefully gaining reward and recognition. Making the cold nights training at Oriam all the more worthwhile.

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Recently, I was fortunate enough to attend a Q&A session with John Robertson. Now Robbo seems to get a mention in almost every article I write but as record League goal-scorer, bona-fide legend and 'Hammer of Hibs' he has that right. On this occasion Robbo was joined on stage by Billy Brown, Gary Locke and John Colquhoun (sitting wide left but cutting into great effect.) The evening was, of course, a misty-eyed reminiscence of Hearts in the eighties and nineties and there were appreciative nods and laughs from the audience to every story. It only struck me afterwards, however, that John Colquhoun was arguably the unluckiest member of that panel given that he wasn't involved in a major trophy win. Of course, like so many others he came so close. That he also only won two Scotland caps is a mystery and he undoubtedly deserved more from a career where he was one of the most exciting and redoubtable players in Scottish football in the 80s and 90s. Yet he evoked the spirit of the night when he spoke of what Hearts means to

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him and everyone else associated with the club and how important it is to have that. The shirt might not be untucked at the back anymore but John is still a legend at Tynecastle and personally I will always be grateful for his winner at Pittodrie in December 1995. Just the 26 years ago now. Memories, eh?