

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v Hibernian 07.10.23

Sometimes the rapid-fire nature of fixtures in Scottish football can help you and after losing at Paisley two weeks ago we suddenly hit form in the six days that followed. It still feels like a work in progress – and the whole League apart from a couple of teams is in a general state of flux – but it's also plain progress. Our performance at Paisley was not the worst this season – faint praise – but at Kilmarnock and Ross County we dug in to record two very good victories. Goalscoring is still a concern with just five notched but with a reasonably solid backline we hope that comes with settling down. One goal more than Hibs will do today but another irony of the recent run is that a team that struggles away from Tynecastle now has better results on the road. Something else to sort out this afternoon.

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It seems a long time since the last Derby – in relative terms anyway given an average of one every two months or so during a season. But it's now four months since the two met at Tynecastle on May 27<sup>th</sup> and fought it out for automatic European football and a place in the 3<sup>rd</sup> qualifying round place in the Conference League. Which ultimately helped Hearts little. Nonetheless that day saw a real backs-to-the-wall performance from a ten-man home side that frustrated Hibernian for over an hour and secured the required draw.

Of course, the fight took on a different meaning after the game with scuffles aplenty. Although it did look like veritable 'handbags' for the majority and at risk of riling the authorities it can be amusing to see so many players wading in without actually doing much. Even then however Hearts showed their tactical mastery by deploying our goalkeeper coach and soon-to-be former substitute keeper to the front-line – negating the inevitable suspensions afterwards.

A suggestion at the time of the new fixtures' announcement was that the good people of the SPFL had deliberately delayed this fixture to maximise the gap and allow matters to cool. That seems unnecessary. In reality any game and especially a Derby can 'kick-off' without any historic catalyst and with the high number of personnel changes these days grudges are less likely to be held over. Well, we'll soon see anyway.

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I was fortunate in that I first started going to Tynecastle as we returned to the Premier League in 1983 - leaving the seventies and a poor Derby run behind in the process. We commenced an immediate 17-game unbeaten run in Derbies before taking a year out with three defeats and a draw-or-two. We then went 22-games undefeated or as I know it my entire Academy education. And yes, I stayed till sixth year. As I am sure you can tell.

Yet Hibs have also won the odd Derby down the years and of course fondly proclaimed that Robbie Neilson won the Scottish Cup for them. He didn't but did win one with Hearts so good of them to namecheck us in their moment of triumph. Yet his managerial spells at Tynecastle were undoubtedly haunted by that replay defeat in 2016. That says a lot about Hearts and our attitude to the Derby. Incidentally, less well remembered is that Ian Cathro suffered similar the following year but I think he was just haunted.

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History tells us we have done pretty well in this fixture -often under the pressure of being favourites. And of course, Paulo Sergio captured that brilliantly with his “If you believe that losing puts pressure onto the other team that wins more times, okay, you keep losing.” line ahead of the 2012 Scottish Cup Final. It reflected the suave self-assurance of the Portuguese.

Yet typically we Scots tend to be a little more reticent ahead of any game. And I tend to agree. The nerves and heart-rate will be pounding ahead of and even more so during the game and deep-down outward bravado masks that horrible internal fear of losing. Draw it is then.

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Technically, there's been two changes of management in Edinburgh this season already albeit Nick Montgomery's appointment at Easter Road was more decisive than the swap-a-round at Tynecastle. As with any change we'll soon see if either is likely to be a success and it's often arguable who gives a manager less time these days; a board or supporters.

But there's one thing I often find difficult to understand with managerial changes – the timing. Now Lee Johnson was probably more popular at Tynecastle as Hibs manager than he was as a player here. But joking aside he's a prevalent example of the seemingly illogical timing of such decisions. Many Hibernian supporters I know/tolerate wanted him 'gone' at the end of last season. Yet he remained in charge, oversaw pre-season and presumably the tactical and structural set-up as well as making signings and allowing others to leave. Yet a month later he is sacked.

And Hibs are hardly alone even in the Scottish game. Michael Beale left Rangers last weekend after less than a year in charge. Scott Brown signed a new contract at Fleetwood in the summer but was then sacked within two months. Now there may have been clauses in that contract that meant it was performance-based or something but ultimately it means a complete volte-face for that club. Similarly, last month Inverness sacked Billy Dodds three months after he signed a new contract leaving 'Hammer of Hibs' John Robertson temporarily in charge before Duncan Ferguson landed (himself sacked by Forest Green during pre-season after less than six months as Manager). And of course, to complete the merry-go-round Lee Johnson was pulling on his Fleetwood tracksuit before Hibs had a new manager.

Football is a business. But a passionate one and often viewed through a short-term lens. Contrast between how 'senior management' exit a business and a football club. I'm not advocating anyone being sacked – especially quickly – but it does feel the ideal time is probably at the end of one season and not just into a new one.

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Regardless of Easter Road, Hampden or Tynecastle – when the first whistle blows – only the win matters in a Derby. But later this month a new book on the Edinburgh Derby is released as author James Stephen unveils, 'Auld Foes'. It rightly reflects the 150 years of history that is this fixture and its importance to Edinburgh. It would be fascinating to travel back in time to the Meadows on Christmas Day 1875 and witness the first ever Derby (a Hearts win). Then just 21 years later ride out to Logie Green and take in the 1896 Scottish Cup Final between the

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two (yes, a Hearts win). I am sure none of the 22-players that lined up for the Christmas friendly envisaged that Hearts and Hibs would emerge from the many Edinburgh football clubs of the time to be still competing against one another almost 150 years later.

It's a mind-blowing history and as the book bills one that is entwined with Edinburgh itself. Since 1875 where there has been Hibernian there has been Heart of Midlothian. We may see each other's misery as our own pleasure but there is something quite special that generation after generation of supporters have checked the new fixture list for the first Derby of the season and then a few weeks later walked to either Tynecastle or Easter Road to take it in.

Above I spoke about the history of this fixture in terms of results. And wins and losses are undoubtedly the biggest thing. But as we build-up to the game it's worth considering that today's battle is just the latest in a titanic tussle that has united and divided a city right back to the very foundation of football in Scotland in itself.