

The Final Word – Heart of Midlothian v St Johnstone 251123

Victory at Fir Park two weeks ago provided a positive end to what was undoubtedly a difficult period. It was hardly a surprise to hear criticism following two losses to Rangers. Those saw perhaps three halves of controlled performances yet all was undermined by individual mistakes in giving away penalties; then losing goals quickly afterwards - with the loss of the second goal in the Semi-Final killing us off. At 1-0 we would have had a chance to equalise at some point but suddenly it's over-and-out. We can't afford to collapse like that in any game never mind in Glasgow.

Given one Cup victory against the Old Firm in the last decade we may not be expected to win these games. I think that's completely wrong but conversely, we should definitely be anticipating wins over the likes of Livingston and Motherwell if we want even relative success.

Both victories suggested partial progress and better use of possession. Livingston frequently just gave us the ball back in an odd performance so we did well to control the match when an early goal didn't come. And at Fir Park we took that on further to dominate possession at a ground we've found tricky. On another day VAR alone may have enabled a more comfortable victory.

Nonetheless, with 12 games played; 5 wins, 5 losses, 12 goals scored and conceded it feels like a 'neutral' start to the season. Today provides another opportunity to step on although it won't be easy with football fate deeming that Craig Levein undertakes his first away game as St Johnstone manager at Tynecastle.

His may not be an overly-popular return but Craig played his part in rebuilding Hearts following administration. However, his second spell as Manager ultimately set Hearts on the road to disaster. Sacked after defeat at Perth in October 2019 the side looked 'wrong' from day one. Yet undefeated under Levein Saints will be looking to move on further. Levein of all people will know the importance of Tynecastle to Hearts. But it would be good to remind him.

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I think it fair to say that despite five-star accreditation for Hampden for fans at least it's hardly the best stadium. Atmosphere yes but with largely poor views from converted terracing, limited infrastructure and poor transport options it's a ground you don't really want to be at. But ironically are desperate to get there.

The window to redevelop Hampden properly seems to have been missed with costs much higher and public funding not so readily available. On holiday recently we took a tour of the El Dragao stadium in Porto. Now any stadium called 'Dragon' has me already sold but in truth on rolling up the venue was a little circumspect. With slightly drab concrete exterior and flats overlooking it, it reminded me of well, Hampden. However, inside is a different story and with two towering stands and all four close to the pitch it's the template for what Hampden should be. Walking down the tunnel – where Ronaldo and co would follow three days later for Portugal's match against Slovakia – underlined what it must be like to play in stadiums like that.

And it set me thinking about the best stadiums I had seen Hearts in. Now very often we remember the worst and reminisce over trips to Alloa or Cowdenbeath. Equally, modern stadium developments have often led to identikit stands and grounds.

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Not having seen Hearts abroad too often I am maybe restricted in my choices, but Anfield was quite an experience back in 2012. At that point it was surprisingly crammed in amongst houses but standing there hearing 'You'll Never Walk Alone' playing out as Hearts emerged onto Anfield isn't something I will forget.

Similarly, Tottenham's old White Hart Lane was a closed-in ground that created a great atmosphere. And visits to grounds for other occasions like Old Trafford and even a gig at Wembley brings home the scale of these venues. To play at such stadia every week must be amazing but it takes bravado to play at grounds like that too; to not lose composure when going a goal down and maybe 60,000 home fans are celebrating. For example, Celtic Park is perhaps not a 'great' stadium in terms of design but being up against it lays down the challenge to take them down a peg. We rarely do of course but it should set the mood and jaw alike.

So as an away supporter you often have to stand there and take it on the chin too. But these grounds with towering stands are fantastic atmospheres and cathedrals of football. They are inspiring in themselves and having walked out into an empty El Dragao it re-emphasised perhaps the relative scarcity of such grounds. But also, conversely how good it would be for Hearts to play on these stages more often.

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Next Saturday sees the draw for the Finals of the European championship. Of course, Scotland qualified ages ago. Before my time and then as I grew up Scotland regularly qualified for World Cups at least. But European football was different back then. For example, in 1986 we finished second in our qualifying group behind Spain and ahead of Wales and Iceland. That meant a successful play-off with Australia to send us to Mexico. And obviously back again after the group stages. However, then there were 32 countries in UEFA. Now? 55. And with due respect the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union has meant many of those countries emerging at a similar level to Scotland (and we undoubtedly regressed too). In short, the end of Communism meant the unforeseen downside that qualifying for football tournaments became a lot more difficult.

So, to do so for successive European Championships is quite something. And to do so by such a good start to finish ahead of Norway and aside Spain is fabulous. It's been so long since we had a successful national side that we probably aren't quite sure how to comprehend it. But firstly, we need to enjoy it. And at Tynecastle reflect proudly on the involvement of players like Shankland, Gordon and Clark. This doesn't look like a one-off or (with all due respect) even a golden generation rather it's the culmination of incredible work at moulding a squad by Steve Clarke. Let's face it Ryan Porteous looks like Baresi in a Scotland jersey, and we even had to 'import' a goalkeeper for this campaign. This is a strong squad returning the maximum and the desire now is to go further than simply group stage football. That's a tough ask given the evident gaps between us and thus far France and England however.

I was still on holiday for the international break so watched Spain v Scotland in Portugal. With that ill-deserved defeat, we moved to awaiting Spain's trip to Norway the following Sunday and with no mobile at signal at sea I ended up finding out we'd qualified from the Sky News tickertape the following morning.

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I don't know about you, but I walked taller that day. The game here needs a strong club set-up and a strong national side that can act as ambassadors for our game. It's often difficult to have both at once but that our teams are still largely often struggling in European competition means even more credit to Steve Clarke for success with Scotland. We can surely be proud of our national side and look forward with excitement to next summer.