

THE SCOTTISH SEASON 1987-88

It was another long, hard season. As the shadows gathered on the final instalment at Hampden – singularly inappropriate on a beautiful sunny afternoon – there must have been a sense of relief amongst Scottish players that their task was, at least for the time being, completed and they could relax awhile.

It is the fashion nowadays for every year to be given its name: this, then, was clearly the year of the Celtic: with a different manager and a new attacking line, the team started quietly but confidently. Led on the field by the old warhorse, that loyal and determined performer Roy Aitken, they gathered impetus and swept into the lead in the league and were never again headed; and, in the end, they garnered in, too, their twenty-eighth Scottish Cup. And this all in their centenary year. There were celebrations indeed at Parkhead, but it had all been done by a great deal of hard work, the ability to believe in themselves, and their desire to play every game for its full ninety minutes – a practice which caused frequent confusion amongst their opponents sitting comfortably on a one goal lead and with only a few minutes left to play.

But first things first. In the Skol Cup it was perhaps not altogether surprising in view of later events that St Johnstone drew first blood in disposing of St Mirren, who had finished on a triumphant note in May and now, three short months later, bit the sour dust of defeat in their next cup outing. Hamilton Accies, too, went out early to their arch-rivals Meadowbank Thistle, another significant result whose echoes bounced around till the last day of the league. Uneasy Falkirk lost to Queen of the South, and Morton were thumped by Clyde. It was all good clean fun, and emphasised yet again that the paying public does like to see a result on the spot, even if the penalty shoot-out is an unsatisfactory way of deciding a tie. By the quarter-finals the Premier Division prevailed, and semi-finalists Dundee and Motherwell were disposed of, leaving the way clear for an Aberdeen-Rangers final at the end of October. This game turned out to be a cracker: an early Jim Bett penalty was countered by a superb Davie Cooper free kick; Iain Durrant ran through to make it 2-1 for Rangers at half-time; back came Aberdeen late in the game with two goals, and they looked to have the game won when Robert Fleck stepped in, with little time left; and extra time was on. There was no further scoring, so all the tension of the penalties was exacted. And Rangers won. It was fitting that the Scottish League and the sponsors joined to present the losers with a trophy to commemorate a day when all football won.

By the time that final arrived, the League had begun to take shape: Celtic, Hearts, Rangers and Aberdeen were all at the summit; Dundee looked good, but not quite in the top bracket, whilst Dundee United had faltered and were even teetering near the dreaded relegation zone. Morton already looked lost, but Dunfermline were proving an acquisition to the division, their breezy approach spearheaded by a cheerful and outspoken manager, winning them many friends of not quite enough points. Rangers suffered the calamitous loss of their captain, Terry Butcher, with a broken leg, and after that they always seemed to be scratching about. Frequent and expensive buys failed to give them the steadiness they so wanted, and Celtic gradually inchéd ahead. Hearts played attractive football, but they slipped once or twice later in the season, whilst Aberdeen had far too many no-score draws and clearly needed to regain their inspiration. The middle zone of the division was tenanted by Dundee, Dundee United and St Mirren; United came through, though never to challenge, whilst Dundee lost their way, and St Mirren dropped into danger. In the end, Falkirk could not quite catch them, and so joined Dunfermline and Morton in the drop: with three clubs going down, it meant an entertaining finish to the season, but there were too many league games, and, with Cup, European and International commitments as well, top players were being asked for too much.

Accies led the First Division from start to finish. Eight straight wins in their first eight games put them in a commanding position, and they held on to it despite some errors, and some wobbles near the brink. They should now be ready for the Premier Division, wiser and experienced enough not to make the same mistakes as they did on their last brief venture. Meadowbank looked a sound team all through – and they were not far from creating a real shock. In the next group, Clydebank finished strongly, whilst Raith Rovers, for a long time challengers, fell away badly. It was a competitive division throughout the season, and although East Fife went almost to sinking point, they had a fine rally and only just failed to catch a singularly jittery Kilmarnock. Dumbarton, too, were in touch till the end: on the last day of the season, two of these three teams had to go down; it was Kilmarnock who just escaped with the skin of their teeth.

Ayr United, having failed by the narrowest of margins to step up last season, soon

showed that they had no intentions of letting that happen again. They scored frequently in their early encounters and established such a lead that they looked to be certain winners of the Second Division. A relaxed spell in the later months meant that in the end their win did not look quite as emphatic as in fact it was. However, if they can repeat their overall form, beware the rest of the First Division next year! St Johnstone did a workmanlike job to take second place – and that was more or less that.

The Scottish Cup saw fewer shocks than usual, and league clubs soon disposed of their lesser rivals. Poor St Mirren again went at the first hurdle, with not a goal to show in either cup competition; Clydebank, who beat them, went out after two good games to Partick Thistle, who enjoyed a fine run, and went out to eventual winners Celtic at Firhill. Raith Rovers led Rangers to a no-score draw at Starks Park but lost the replay; whilst the Ibrox side again failed to make much headway, going out to Dunfermline in the next round. Celtic, after making heavy weather of a home game against Lowly Stranraer, moved not altogether comfortably by way of a replay with Hibs to the semi-final against Hearts, where, once again, they came from nowhere to score twice in the last three minutes. Dundee United eventually joined them in the final: but it took them three games to see off local rivals Dundee, and a further three to dispose of Aberdeen. So to yet another final for United, and another defeat. There were very many who were sad that Jim McLean and his team had once again not achieved success, but the day belonged in the end to Celtic. And one hoped that the Prime Minister, who graced the occasion, noticed the good behaviour of both groups of supporters.

In the European competitions it was a rather disappointing year. Celtic were not yet quite ready for stern opposition at that stage of the season, and both Aberdeen and Dundee United went out narrowly in the second round. St Mirren, in the Cup Winners Cup, met Mechelen in the second round and, after a good first game, could not hold them at Love Street. It was all left to Rangers in the European Cup: they had a magnificent win in the first round against Dynamo Kiev; another good victory against Gornik; and then they only just failed against that excellent team, Steaua Bucharest. It was an impressive performance.

The international season provided some high spots and an unbeaten home record. Not least pleasing was the win in Bulgaria which gave the Republic of Ireland a helping hand into the European finals for the first time; but overall we did not look world beaters in a series of matches against moderate opposition. Andy Roxburgh suffered frequent frustration in his attempts to form a settled team, and the faint-hearted support from some clubs meant that his task in building was the more formidable. World Cup qualifying is not far away and, although we seem to have been good at that in the past, we are terribly short of goals, and cannot hope to do well unless the players are readily available and can gain understanding of each other's play. With the Premier Division back to the reduced number of games, and a league programme which takes note of the international dates, perhaps there will now be a real chance of consolidation and progress at international level.

Alan Elliott

Jubilant Celtic players celebrate the second half of their domestic double.



