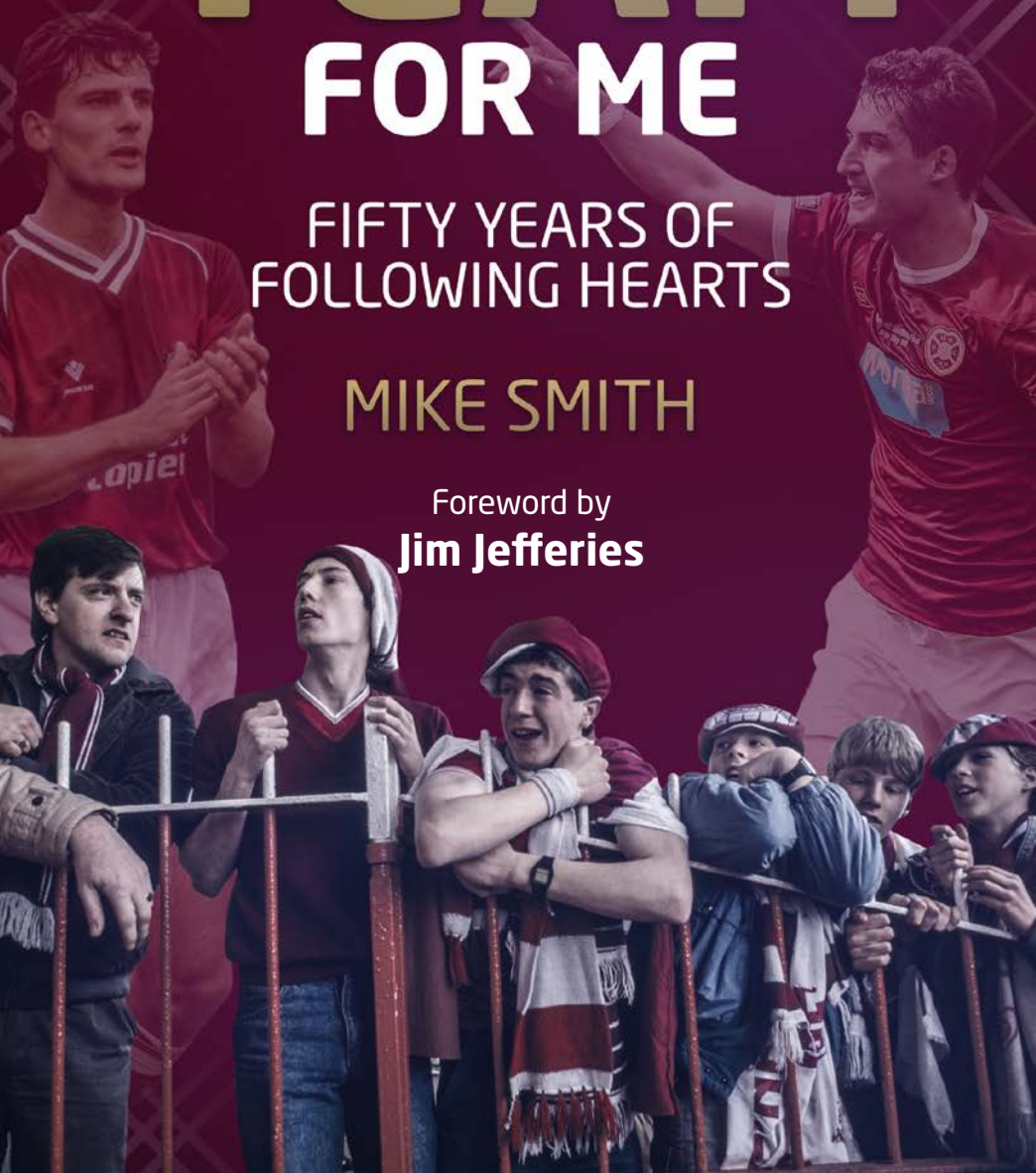


THE TEAM FOR ME

FIFTY YEARS OF
FOLLOWING HEARTS

MIKE SMITH

Foreword by
Jim Jefferies



THE **TEAM** FOR ME

FIFTY YEARS OF
FOLLOWING HEARTS

MIKE SMITH



Contents

Foreword by Jim Jefferies	7
Acknowledgements	9
1. Saturday Mornings	11
2. Going to the Game	15
3. Grounds I Love Going To	19
4. Grounds I Would Rather Not Go To	23
5. Browsing Through Old Football Programmes	27
6. Seeing a Player Away from the Game.	31
7. Passing on Tales of the History of the Club	35
8. Collecting Football Cards as a Child	39
9. Seeing Your Team Win a Trophy	43
10. The Despair of Losing	47
11. Leaving a Game Early	51
12. The Post-Match Pint	55
13. Seeing the Same Faces.	59
14. Travelling To Away Games	63
15. Badges and Scarves	67
16. Watching Your Team on Television	71
17. Watching Old Games on YouTube.	75
18. Arguing About Games From the Past	79
19. Reading Saturday Evening Sports Papers	83
20. Half-Time Scoreboards	87
21. Waiting For the Fixtures in June	91
22. The <i>Wee Red Book</i>	95
23. Transfer Windows	98
24. Beating Your City Rivals	102
25. Beating Celtic and Rangers.	106

26. Flirting With Another Team	110
27. Reading a Match Report You Disagree With	114
28. Football Chants.	118
29. Checking the Progress of Former Players	122
30. Crying at Football Games.	126
31. Being a Team Mascot	130
32. Playing Subbuteo.	133
33. Away Fans	137
34. Watching Football Results on the Teleprinter . . .	141
35. Big Team, Wee Team.	145
36. Aw, C'Mon Referee!	149
37. Signing a New Player	153
38. When Favourite Players Leave.	157
39. Club Owners	161
40. In the Snow, Wind & Rain (and Occasionally Sun)	165
41. London Hearts and Memory Lane	169
42. European Ties at Home	173
43. European Ties Overseas	177
44. The International Break.	181
45. International Self-Interest	185
46. Penalty Shoot-outs	189
47. Selling the Jerseys	193
48. Breaking the Ice	197
49. Meeting Your Heroes	201
50. For the Love of the Game	205

1.

Saturday Mornings

DEPENDING on what you've been up to the night before, Saturday mornings are the best time of the week. Unless you work Saturdays, of course, in which case you'll be thinking I'm talking absolute nonsense.

For football fans, no matter which team you support, Saturday mornings are sacrosanct. True, in this age of satellite television with games being switched to Sunday lunchtimes, Monday evenings and, more recently, Friday evenings there are some Saturdays during the football season where this may not apply.

But this only usually affects top-flight clubs. When I'm not watching the famous Heart of Midlothian, I may be at Ainslie Park in the north of Edinburgh watching either Edinburgh City in League Two or The Spartans in the Lowland League. And these weekend games are invariably on a Saturday with the traditional 3pm kick-off.

Generally, Saturday mornings are a time of hope. It may have been a tough week at work; there may be family issues to contend with; the cat may have been sick on the carpet (again) and the hangover from last night's drinking session may be refusing to budge. But it's the time of the week when you wake

up naturally – no alarm screeching at 6am demanding you rise from your slumber for another day of torment.

As I rub the sleep from my eyes my conscious mind kicks in. I stretch, I yawn, I look to see if my wife Marion has arisen (she usually has) and I contemplate whether Harry Cochrane will be in the Hearts team that afternoon. These considerations (and not always in that order) are undertaken before I push my stiff limbs out of bed.

Hope is a good thing to have but it can also be a burden. It can occasionally be accompanied by expectation (although not often if you're a Hearts supporter) and these feelings are enhanced if your team is at home that day. Grunting as I push myself out of bed, I have a quick look at the time and a quick calculation as to how many hours it is until kick-off.

Now while Tynecastle is my temple, Saturday is the one day I can get away without having a shave. I can relax, dress casually although, if I recall correctly, Hearts won 4-0 the last time I wore a particular pair of socks so it's a quick rummage through the sock drawer. Damn, they're in the wash. I do hope this won't affect Kyle Lafferty's fragile confidence.

Match day at Tynecastle on a Saturday lifts the mood (before kick-off at any rate) and it doesn't really matter if it's teeming down with rain or there's a gale blowing. The Hearts are playing and I'm off to Gorgie, that's all that matters. Pre-1998 when I had given up on ever seeing Hearts win anything, we used to joke when we heard that oft-used cliché 'conditions aren't conducive to good football' that this would suit Hearts down to a tee.

Being a 50-something, it's good to see so many women go to football these days. Watching Hearts in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the crowd was very much male-dominated. But the aforementioned Marion has little interest in football other than checking the score around 4.45pm to ascertain

what kind of mood I'll be in when I get home. As Saturday morning dawns she'll ask the inevitable.

'Are Hearts at home today?'

'Aye.'

'Are ye going?'

That rhetorical question never fails to astound me.

'No, I thought I would stay at home and help you paint your nails.'

This elicits a response which infers that sarcasm doesn't become me and that I am of dubious parentage.

It's a reflection of the internet age we now live in, where instant communication is not only expected but demanded, that the Saturday morning newspapers are now but a dim and distant memory in the Smith household. Far better to log on to Twitter or Facebook or Instagram or even the official club website to get the latest news. So, will Don Cowie be playing? Alarm bells ring in my head when I see a link to a BBC story on Twitter which says, 'Christophe Berra took a knock in training yesterday but hopes to be fit enough to play.' Now there's a seed of doubt sown in my mind and my joyful Saturday morning has been soured somewhat. What if Berra doesn't make it? Who will take his place? Will Hearts revert to a flat back three? (Flat sometimes being the operative word.)

Breakfast comes and goes with the Hearts captain very much on my mind as I devour a bacon roll. First the unavailable lucky socks, now this. It's entirely fitting that the glorious sunshine which greeted me when I pulled back the curtains a couple of hours ago has disappeared and has now been replaced by ominous clouds.

But when the time comes to head for Gorgie, my thoughts become more positive again. When Hearts are playing Hibernian, Celtic, Rangers or Aberdeen the excitement is

tangible even though the very nature of these fixtures means the likelihood of a 3pm kick-off on Saturday is becoming more and more of a rarity. The anticipation. The exhilaration. The thrill. The atmosphere which these games always produce at Tynecastle. Games against the smaller clubs are still eagerly anticipated but the aforementioned teams always bring a big support which enhances the atmosphere (although some of the songs belted out from the Celtic and Rangers contingent poisons this atmosphere).

Saturday morning is a time when your troubles can temporarily be forgotten. It's match time. No matter what team you support the match is the focal point of the day, the occasion around which the whole of Saturday revolves.

Yes, the spare room needs decorating. Yes, I know I've said I would do it for several weeks now. Yes, I'll fix the shelf in the bathroom tomorrow. I'll see you when I get back. It's Saturday. I'm off to the match.

2.

Going to the Game

BEING a Hearts fan, I feel I'm entitled to crack the old joke about enjoying going to the game – it's when it kicks off that I become melancholy. But no matter which team you support, going to the game is part of the ritual of following your team.

A few years ago, when my first marriage broke up, I moved from the heart of Midlothian (do you see what I did there?) to live in Leith. Yes, home to Hibernian, one of Edinburgh's other teams and a place which, for Hearts fans if not those of the green persuasion, will always be in the shadow of Gorgie. A Hearts fan in Leith? Yes, I'm a Jambo abroad.

Previously I had to travel from Dalkeith to the west end of Edinburgh by bus, a journey which would take at least an hour. Now, living in the cultural citadel that is Leith, my journey to see Hearts has been reduced but I still feel the adrenalin flowing as soon as I leave the house to head for Gorgie.

Usually when Hearts are at home Hibernian are playing away from the capital but there will still be the remnants of green-and-white-clad Hibeers heading for supporters' buses to take them to see their favourites. I have a sense of superiority

when I see these poor unfortunates, although while the bus remains within the boundaries of Leith I keep my maroon and white scarf tactfully under my jacket so as not to invoke the ire of the locals.

Having been a Hearts supporter for half a century, I have grown to expect the worst. The events at Dens Park, Dundee in the last game of season 1985/86 (more of this later, I'm afraid) taught me this most bitter of lessons. So, my pre-match ritual will very much depend on what happened the last time I saw Hearts win well at Tynecastle. Well, it was good enough then.

In recent years my grandson Jack has accompanied me to Hearts games. At the risk of being a damaging influence on him, I purchase his season ticket during the summer months when all is well, and anticipation is high for not only Hearts fans but supporters of most clubs throughout the land. After picking him up, we alight the bus at the junction of Dalry Road and Gorgie Road. Sometimes the waft from the nearby distillery is making itself felt.

I love that aroma. It brings back memories of when I came down to Edinburgh from Aberdeen during the time I spent resident in the Granite City. Getting off the 9.55am train from Aberdeen at Haymarket station, there would often be that unmistakable waft from the distillery. It meant I was 'home' after a two-and-a-half-hour train journey. It meant I was in Edinburgh, Auld Reekie by name, Auld Reekie by nature. And it was a glorious feeling; all was well with the world, no matter what was troubling me 130 miles north. But that's enough reminiscing.

Back in the here and now our pre-match ritual usually follows a similar pattern. A quick pint for myself and a fresh orange for the laddo in the heaving confines of the Caley Sample Rooms in Angle Park Terrace or the Ardmillan Hotel around the corner sets the scene. Although Jack is in

his early teens the Caley Sample Rooms lets children in to the bar provided they're accompanied by a responsible adult (although Jack's mother disputes whether her father is a responsible adult by virtue of the fact he takes her son to the pub before the game).

It's all part of the initiation process of 'going to the game'. A pre-match pint is a necessity to calm the nerves and, in any case, the imbibing of alcohol is a necessity to watching Hearts as Jack will discover when he's old enough to buy his ageing Papa a drink.

I cast my mind back to Hearts' previous victory at Tynecastle, the cuffing of Hamilton Academical. A quick checklist to ascertain everything today has followed the same pattern as that day:

Same socks – check.

Same underwear – check.

(I should clarify that said undergarments have been washed since the Accies game).

Same jacket – check (true, it was pouring with rain that afternoon and today the sun is shining brightly in Gorgie and it's quite warm. But you can't take any chances).

Same pub for pre-match pint – check.

Leave the pub at the same time, 2.25pm – check.

Inside Tynecastle, buy a pie for self and hot dog for Jack – check.

There, we're all set. This procedure worked perfectly for the Hamilton Accies game so there's no reason why it shouldn't work again today. I've done my bit Hearts, now it's down to you. So, don't let me down.

If nothing else, this pre-match ritual builds your confidence. Not the players' confidence, of course. They couldn't care less what underpants you're wearing or where or if you've had a pre-match pint. But it does make you feel

better and when you feel more confident this transfers itself to your support for the team.

You're more likely to shout 'c'mon the Hearts, let's get intae them' if you're confident about winning. (Although, I must confess, having a couple of pints of Caledonian Best does help in the confidence stakes. On the morning of the 2012 Scottish Cup Final against Hibernian I was a bag of nerves but four pints of foaming ale for pre-match lunch in a pub near Hampden did the trick and I was oozing confidence at kick-off. As were the players.)

Tynecastle's stadium announcer supreme Scott Wilson (the best in the business) cranks up the atmosphere as the teams come on to the field at a minute to three. The roar of the crowd – encouraged by Scott to 'get right behind the team and make some noise' as the game kicks off – ensures we're ready to witness another glorious performance from the mighty Heart of Midlothian. We've followed our pre-match ritual to the letter. The fans are in their seats, the atmosphere is at fever-pitch. What could possibly go wrong?

Then the game kicks off.