

HIBERNIAN HEROES

**THE TEAM THAT ENDED
114 YEARS OF HURT**

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Chapter 1

Rock Bottom

A damaging rot starts to take hold at Hibernian Football Club, where a growing manager merry-go-round threatens stability, leaving the team facing the possibility of relegation from the Scottish Premiership.

IT'S HARD to pinpoint exactly when the decline at Easter Road began, or what caused it. The symptoms of an ailing Hibernian side started slowly, with missed opportunities, defensive errors and dwindling attendances. They were the kind of little pains that wouldn't send you running to the doctor. By the time the symptoms inflamed into a chronic disease, the cause and cure were even tougher to obtain.

At the turn of the century, Hibs fans had plenty to cheer about. The teams of the early noughties went through swashbuckling phases and dips. While inconsistent, they were never bad. By the end of Alex McLeish's reign as manager in 2001, they were decidedly good. A few years later, Tony Mowbray's players scored goals almost for fun. John Collins delivered a disappointing league campaign in 2007 but won Hibs their first Scottish League Cup trophy since the 1990s.

That cup win – a historic 5-1 demolition of Kilmarnock at Hampden Park – had all the signs it could be the catalyst to turn Hibs into Scotland's third force. The team had a good blend of youth and experience, had given the fanbase something to cheer about and had experienced winning. The team, however, failed to take the chance, instead churning through a dizzying number of managers at an ever-increasing speed.

Collins resigned barely half a year after his League Cup win. He managed the club for just 54 games. Former player Mixu Paatelainen came in next – he managed 62 games before moving on. John Hughes followed, taking his seat in the increasingly poisoned dugout. He squeezed 23 goals out of striker Anthony Stokes, who was then sold to Celtic, and finished fourth. Then Hughes himself moved on, ending a run of three managers in less than three years.

Colin Calderwood came in after Hughes and didn't even manage 50 games before departing. Cue Irishman Pat Fenlon to have a go.

People were noticing. 'Hibs have earned themselves the reputation of being quick on the trigger, hiring and firing managers at a rate unequalled by any other club in Scotland,' a 2011 article in *The Scotsman* observed.²

During that time, it wasn't necessarily obvious the effect the instability could bring to Easter Road. Hibs finished sixth twice and then fourth. The goals began to dry up and murmurs of frustration could be heard.

Ian Murray, who came to Hibs as a youngster in the late 1990s, rejoined the club just after Collins moved on. He'd played with a superb McLeish team and he felt the

difference when he moved back. The team he joined in 2008 wasn't as good as the one he left in 2005 – 'simple as that'.

'I'm looking around thinking, "What am I doing here?" Murray remembered. 'We had a massive squad at the time ... I knew it was going to take us a couple of seasons if we wanted to be that third force. We could have done it maybe once – but, consistently, that level was going to be difficult.'

They almost managed it, once. In 2009/10, Hibs finished fourth. They didn't get close again and by the next year, the bubble really burst.

Hibs finished tenth in the league under Calderwood and conceded more than 60 goals across 38 games in the process. The next year, they finished 11th and won just eight games. Each bad result brought a worse atmosphere to the stadium, more mistakes on the pitch and growing consternation in the boardroom.

The executive panic was something George Craig – who worked as a matchday representative for the Scottish Football League at the time – saw first-hand. As a representative for the league, he visited clubs around the country to ensure games ran smoothly, keeping half an eye out for chairmen in crisis. Those were people who might need help from the football consultancy business he ran on the side.

'I don't think Rod [Petrie] would mind me saying this, but every time I covered a Hibs game at that time, he seemed to have his head in his hands,' Craig recalled.

Over a period of months, Craig became something of a therapist to Petrie. During a series of coffee dates, he

listened to the problems at the club, suggested solutions and worked on launching a structure to help the team.

The two men – an accountant and an old-school, working-class football specialist – were unusual bedfellows.

Craig had masterminded years of success at Falkirk Football Club, turning the youth academy into a factory of talented footballers and keeping the relatively small team in Scotland's top flight – with the help of manager John Hughes – for years.

Petrie had been running Hibs for roughly a decade without ever being a football man. He was an accountant by trade and had agreed to step in at Easter Road after Sir Tom Farmer, a local businessman, saved Hibs the club from bankruptcy. Petrie had backed his managers in many of their decisions, while keeping a close eye on the finances and – at times – pushing for changes in how incoming and outgoing transfers were handled.

Without a football background or structure, Petrie handled the numbers and the finances. He largely left each manager to get on with the football, from scouting to sports science or promoting young players. The departure of each manager meant a mass exodus of staff and a total reset of knowledge – a purge that was becoming more regular.

In 2011, as Petrie and Craig started talking in earnest, Fenlon was the unfortunate character saddled with the job of Hibs manager. He guided the club to an 11th-place finish, followed by a surprise push towards the top six the following season. Fenlon resigned the next year. When he left, relegation was technically a possibility, but it was far from likely.

During his two years in charge, Fenlon rang the changes, just like managers before him had done. He had worked in Ireland before moving to Easter Road, so – without a structure in place – he went back to the pool of talent he knew. His first transfer window in January 2012 was a busy one. He brought in a slew of new players, including several fleeting loans. It earned him the nickname ‘Pat Fen-loan’ from fans on the other side of the city.

His scattergun, short-term transfer plan was almost policy at Easter Road at this point. The formula can be summarised as a rinse and repeat: sack the manager and let his staff leave; hire his replacement and ask them to form a backroom team; give them a budget to put together a new team; and set them the target of getting Hibs back on track. When that didn’t work, it was time to start again. What this meant was that insufficient summer signings were bolstered with mid-season journeymen or disinterested loans from the English Premier League or Championship.

The teams at the time didn’t necessarily have bad players; they just had the wrong ones. No manager could clear out an entire squad – and many were sacked mid-season – so every squad had hangovers from the previous boss, talented but raw young players on loan, and a select few favourites the manager had brought in. It wasn’t working.

The recruitment of right-back Matt Doherty to Hibs in 2012 is perhaps the epitome of how badly the engine at the centre of the club was sputtering. The defender was not quite ready for Scottish football, had a link to the manager and came in on a short-term, low-commitment loan. Doherty himself was a talented footballer, as proven by

the fact that he has gone on to enjoy a successful career in the Premier League with both Wolverhampton Wanderers and Tottenham Hotspur, but things didn't work out at all in Edinburgh.

He was one of Fenlon's early signings, having managed him at Bohemians in Ireland. Doherty joined the club on loan in the January and played 17 times. After a terrible league campaign, Hibs snuck into the Scottish Cup Final by beating Cowdenbeath, Kilmarnock, Ayr United and Aberdeen. Hearts met them there, fresh after an impressive 2-1 win over Celtic in the semi-final. That brutal 5-1 derby defeat followed for Hibs, with Doherty displaying one of several abject performances from a team that looked to fans like it did not remember how to care.

The 2011/12 season was Murray's last at the club, and he could feel the difference. 'The squad was worse, there's no question about that,' he conceded, saying the players were young and inexperienced rather than bad.

The next year, the decline continued. The cup final hammering against Hearts had done major damage to the already-fragile relationship between the players and the fans. By then, it was in tatters, and Petrie was under growing pressure from success-starved punters.

Hibs made it to another final, losing to Celtic. The Scottish Cup Final came with a European place and, because Celtic had already qualified through the league, even defeat gave Hibs a rare chance to compete in the UEFA Europa League. It looked like a minor miracle for the club. European football meant a feel-good trip to the continent for fans, the potential for lucrative television

coverage and games against glamorous international opponents. But qualifying for Europe wasn't a miracle; it was a cruel mirage.

Hibs were drawn against Swedish side Malmö FF and contrived to lose 9-0 over two legs, setting the record for the worst aggregate defeat for a Scottish club in any European competition. That was in July, and a painfully long season was still to come.

In August, Hibs had a chance to exact a small measure of revenge against Hearts by winning the Edinburgh derby. They didn't, losing 1-0 at a delirious Tynecastle Park. The players traipsed off that day to shouts of joy from the Hearts faithful, finding out how six fingers could be used to summarise their failure. Around the stadium, fans gleefully raised both hands to the pitch, five fingers open on their left and the index finger of their right raised, taunting Hibs fans and players with the memory of their cup final drubbing.

It was clear Petrie was failing in the recruitment of managers, players and results on the pitch. It was a juxtaposition to the wonders he and Sir Tom had worked on the club's infrastructure. Prior to the turn of the century, the north and south stands were rebuilt to boost the capacity of Easter Road. During the first half of 2010, the East Stand was demolished and replaced with a grand, imposing and modern renovation.

Yet, football fans don't crave new stadiums; they dream of wins. When Fenlon came to the club, Hibs had arguably the best stadium and training centre in the country, outside of Celtic and Rangers. Both were beautiful and state-of-the-art. The opposite of the product on the park.

As humiliation was piled onto failure and mixed together with underachievement, the fans started voting with their feet. The beautifully renovated Easter Road stands were half-empty most weeks and those who turned up were furious.

‘It wasn’t a great place to be,’ left-back Lewis Stevenson remembered. ‘There was a big divide between the players and the fans, and even probably the board and the management staff and everything. The whole atmosphere was terrible.’

The stadium was a cathedral built to celebrate what Hibs could potentially be. The sermon, however, was lousy, most of the congregation had stopped attending and those who did turn up no longer believed. No God could make them watch this.

In the background, the conversations between Petrie and Craig were growing dire. The former understood that the way he was running his club wasn’t working and was ready to start handing over the reins. Craig was plotting out a fresh structure to bring stability, helping with the search for a new chief executive officer to take control at the very top.

Craig’s plan involved a complete overhaul. He would enter Easter Road as the head of football operations, with a series of smaller departments beneath him.

Heads of departments like fitness, youth or scouting would all report to him, with even the manager technically coming to the football operations head for final approval. By the autumn of 2013, the discussions between Petrie and Craig had evolved to the point where they were ready to

pull the trigger. Craig would come in with Fenlon still as the manager and start putting his system into place in the background. The Irishman would remain in charge of the playing side. When Fenlon eventually moved on, Craig would play a key role in recruiting his replacement.

Then, just as the two were putting the finishing touches on their plan, Fenlon suddenly and unexpectedly handed in his resignation. On the back of another defeat to Hearts, the Irishman decided he had had enough. 'One minute we're all set – Rod and I are all set, Pat's in post, everything's going to happen,' Craig said. 'Next thing, they've got a managerial vacancy. Which is where I would want to get to as the head of football operations, but not before I'm even in the building.'

So, the restructuring was put on ice, and Craig remained only as an advisor on the side.

Unsurprisingly, the Hibs fans were losing patience with Petrie, fast. Fan clamour and media speculation told him he had to make Terry Butcher his next appointment. The former England captain had been enjoying a fantastic season managing Inverness Caledonian Thistle and was the obvious choice. Petrie took the hint-turned-threat from some of the club's more influential supporters and gave Butcher a three-year deal. The contract was longer than any Hibs manager had served for in the 21st century. Still, Butcher had Inverness playing infinitely better than Hibs on a far smaller budget.

Appointing him was a logical move, with catastrophic consequences.

Midfielder Kevin Thomson, who had come through the Hibs academy as part of its 'Golden Generation' a

decade earlier, had returned the year before. Like Murray, he knew things weren't the same as when he'd left, but he found Butcher's arrival even more disquieting.

'When Terry took over, it was probably the one time when the style and the expectation of the team were different,' he said. 'When Terry came in, he had his own ideas, which had obviously been successful for him at Inverness, but in my humble opinion, that style wouldn't work at Easter Road.'

The new manager's techniques were unusual. Players at the state-of-the-art East Mains training facility were told gym sessions would be optional for them, all their work would be done by running drills and playing matches. Some kept going to work out, but others stopped altogether and the sports science department essentially ceased to exist.

Danny Handling was a youngster, coming through the Hibs academy for the first time. He hadn't had a lot of managers, and was grateful for the lack of enforced gym sessions, but concerned nonetheless.

'It was just a weird season, the things we were having to do,' he said. 'I've not seen it since then and I don't think I'll ever see it again.'

Butcher's training was old school and his motivational techniques were unique. During one team talk, the players were told to think of a historic character who they wanted to embody and write it on the board. Handling chose Martin Luther King Jr. Another time, there was a bonding game where everyone had to share a fact about themselves nobody knew. On a different day, each was given a balloon, told to think of a negative thought and pop the balloon to banish it.

‘Things like that were happening and you had to do them because he was the manager and it was his way or the highway,’ Handling recalled.

Before a crucial derby against Hearts, youth-team striker Jason Cummings was told to give the team talk. The youngster, who at that point was yet to score a senior goal, stood in the changing room in front of his senior team-mates and told them to play like they were on the astroturf with their friends.

‘I don’t know if it worked, I think we still got beat,’ Stevenson remembered. ‘Probably one of the better team talks we got that season.’

The unorthodox methods may have worked miracles in Inverness, but the style didn’t translate to Edinburgh, nor did Butcher’s form.

At Hibs, he won just four league games. The team ended the season on a 13-game winless run and fell into the newly created relegation play-off spot, where they would have to play a team from the league below and win to stay up.

The sudden threat of relegation was one few had seen coming either inside or outside the club. Paatelainen, a club legend who had managed Hibs for two seasons barely five years earlier, watched from the edges, struggling to comprehend how the team he took to two top-six finishes was tumbling down the table.

‘We were nowhere near that, we were all the time looking up and trying to be better,’ he said. ‘No, no, relegation didn’t come into my head.’

Relegation would be considered a catastrophe from almost every angle. Financially, it would mean less television

revenue, a smaller prize pot and far lower attendances, leading to shrunken ticket sales. The media move on to cover other teams, European games are a distant memory and talented players can be harder to attract.

For fans, it's the ultimate humiliation, heading to work or the pub bracing for jeers and taunts. The hammer blow relegation brings can keep clubs away from the top flight for years, or even decades.

That was the fate Hibs were fighting to avoid when they headed to Championship side Hamilton Academical in May 2014 for the first of two games. Hibs won the opening leg 2-0 and looked comfortable throughout. Could it be the saving grace at the end of a miserable year?

'Hibernian cast aside their insecurities to take the advantage in the Premiership play-off final first leg against Hamilton at New Douglas Park,' the BBC observed after the game. 'They were expected to struggle against Accies, but it was the Championship side that flagged after goals either side of half-time by Jason Cummings, the first two goals of his career.'³

Years later in an interview, Cummings would remember how confident he felt after scoring his first professional goals. 'I thought, "Saved the Hibeers here, not a problem,"' he said.⁴

All Hibs had to do was head back to Edinburgh to repeat the performance in front of their own fans – technically they could even lose at home, as long as it was only by one goal.

Playing at home is generally considered a sporting advantage, but by the end of the 2013/14 season, that boost

had evaporated in Edinburgh. Arriving at Easter Road was a miserable experience for fans and players alike.

Nonetheless, when the home game dawned, 18,000 Hibs fans put a brave face on, crossing the muddy, graffiti-covered Crawford Bridge that connects Easter Road to the stadium itself and pushing through the heavy metal turnstiles that guard its entry. They trudged up the stairs of the towering east stand, sitting down with a sigh in the uncomfortable plastic seats screwed onto concrete terracing.

Watching Hibs was a duty at this point. It was a chore like cleaning the car or doing the laundry, except the laundry can't get relegated and it's hard to lose while cleaning the car. Cheering on Hibs was as unappealing as household tasks, with sky-high stakes that the fans technically couldn't control.

Dread and tension were palpable in the stands on 25 May 2014, as the game edged closer. Try as it might, the upbeat music blasting from the tannoy system couldn't mask the bubbles of stress and insecurity emanating from all four corners of the stadium.

You'd be forgiven for forgetting Hibs were 2-0 up and 90 minutes away from preserving their place in Scotland's top flight.

'There was a fragility within the group. Probably the demand that was placed on the players mentally through Terry's demands. I think a lot of players found it quite difficult. It certainly didn't help the morale or the confidence of the players within the group,' Thomson said.

'You end up on a slippery road really. When the bottom becomes closer and closer every week, there is a lot of

animosity within the group. I think that's probably the most anxious I've felt as a football player.'

The anxiety Thomson felt was seeping down from the stands and into the dressing room. The players who didn't pick up on the subtler signs learned how the fans felt soon enough, as individual and carefully personalised abuse rained down.

'There was this stage where it was like, "Oh no, we're at home again,"' Stevenson said. 'You almost got a relief playing away because when you went to Easter Road, the fans had been starved of success.'

Once the game got underway, it only took 13 minutes for the anxiety to hurt Hibs, as they conceded the first goal. But it was 2-1 on aggregate and if they didn't concede any more goals they'd stay up.

Through a thickening fear from the stands, the team looked like they'd survive an onslaught from the opposition. Then, 90 seconds before the full-time whistle, in the 93rd minute, Hamilton scored, sending the game to extra time and then onto penalties.

Huddled in the centre circle, the players decided the order they'd shoot the five spot kicks in.

'I'm taking the fifth pen, I'll score the winner,' Cummings told Butcher, his manager.

'Are you sure?' the young striker remembers the big Englishman roaring down at him. 'Are you sure? Are you sure?'

Cummings thought, 'Fucking hell, well, not now. Fuck me.'⁵

A blur of nerve-racking individual shots followed the end of extra time, with Hibs on the back foot. Hamilton

didn't miss any of their penalties. Hibs buried a few but a nervy attempt from Thomson was saved – advantage to the Championship side.

In the end, it came down to Cummings, the teenage striker who had scored his first ever professional goal the week before.

The 18-year-old walked towards the net where Hamilton goalkeeper Kevin Cuthbert stood, the Famous Five Stand behind him filled with sickeningly anxious home fans. The grass was muddy by the end of the game, with a big patch of bald ground just in front of the keeper. Wearing bright yellow boots, hands by his side and looking every bit like a child asked to do a man's job, Cummings stood with the ball at his feet.

He started a short run up, glancing at the last second to the right of the goal. He struck the ball with a shaky left foot. His shot stayed low and on target, but well within reach. Cuthbert dived and his hand met the ball. It stayed out, the Hamilton players exploding in celebration while Hibs fans slumped lower into their plastic chairs.

Cuthbert's save confirmed what had been coming for years. Hibernian Football Club were relegated; they had finally hit rock bottom.