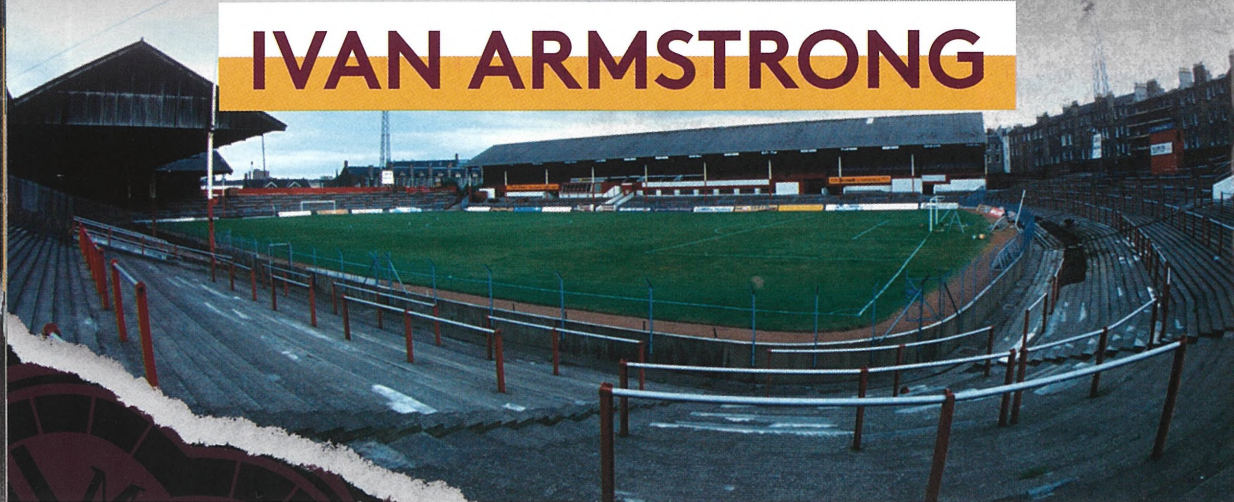


IVAN ARMSTRONG



The best decision I have ever made in life, to take a leap of faith and move to rural Japan, was also accompanied by one of the hardest that I have ever made. Giving up my season ticket at Tynecastle after a decade. While I wouldn't trade the last four years for anything, nothing is ever perfect. The absence of a Hearts match from my weekly routine does leave a hole in what I would otherwise say is an incredibly satisfying lifestyle over here, largely spent teaching English to Japanese 16-18 year olds.

The role of a native speaker when teaching English abroad is simple. Provide the chance to practice natural English communication, and to provide real, cultural context to students' learning. In my case, I'm a window into British and Scottish culture and society. The first bit of communication I get from a lot of students is them telling me that they love "Soccer", so first, I beat that out of them. What do they think "FC" in "FC Tokyo" or "Yokohama FC" means? Next, they usually say something like "Favourite team? I like Juventus, Manchester United, PSG", so I tell them, "My team is Hearts". "Hatsu? Sorry, I don't know. Liverpool is very good." "Really? I went to Anfield once, to watch Hearts! Liverpool didn't win!" We might have a similar chat where they don't understand why my favourite player isn't Messi or Ronaldo, and they apologise for having no idea who Beni Baningime is. This is one of the biggest football cultural barriers we have.



In Japan, football really took off in the 90's and relied on heavy commercialisation and financial investment to produce a product capable of rivalling the European leagues for the attention of the Japanese audience. As a result, the football culture is completely manufactured. Not long after arriving here, I thought I'd go and watch my nearest J1 league team, Vissel Kobe. Not only did they play in maroon, but they boasted a starting team featuring David Villa, Lukas Podolski and Andres Iniesta. "The team for me", I thought, but it couldn't be further from the truth. The whole experience lacked soul. The 30,000 in attendance created a tame atmosphere compared to Tynecastle on derby day or a European night. There was no legacy to this club, and no reason for it to exist other than as an extension of the Rakuten company. I couldn't relate to it at all. For me, a club needs to reflect the society in which it lies. It should serve as a second home for people and act as a community for those who claim a connection to it. I try to explain to my students, that if you take Vissel out of Kobe, not a whole lot changes. On the other hand, Hearts is Edinburgh as much as Edinburgh is Hearts. Without Rakuten, there is no Vissel. Yet, thanks to the hard work of the foundation, so long as there are fans, Hearts will never cease to exist. Japan has taught me how special a thing that really is.

It follows that one of the few things Japanese teenagers know about the UK, is how popular football is. They don't however fully appreciate just how many teams there are, and how many regular followers they have. We tell each other that we love football, but to them that means coming to school every day of the week and training. To me, spending every Saturday in school training or playing friendlies sounds like hell. I tell them how my love of the game meant spending every other week travelling across the country alongside friends and family, or having a pint in the Diggers, or walking up Gorgie Road taking in the smell of the brewery and the sight of the floodlights in the distance. Some of my best memories from when I lived in Scotland surround following Hearts. Ozturk away at Hibs was a great day out with my Dad, above all. I never got tired of the long drives with friends up to Inverness and Ross County. Especially if it featured a trip into the Mallard, full of jambos! I love football, and I love Hearts because of the power it has to so regularly bring

together friends, family, and people important to me. I'm yet to find something in Japanese society that manages to do the same thing.

Whenever I moved out of my family house and went off to university, Hearts became the main way of seeing my Dad on a regular basis. While attending matches is impossible these days, whenever a call home is made on a Sunday, we more often than not start with discussing the result from the day before. While no longer with a Pie and Bovril, I still do make an effort to watch as many games as I can, but more likely alongside some sake and sushi (if I haven't already eaten by midnight!). The midweek games are murder, and they can make or break my day before it's even begun. A couple of years ago, I distinctly remember one of my worst days at work spent half asleep, miserable after Odsonne Edouard's late winner at about 5am left me as gutted as I'd have felt if I were still in the ground, after what was a positive performance in a poor season. My neighbours probably had just as bad a day when I gave them an unsolicited wake up call after Bozanic's classic goal at Easter Road.

To summarise why Hearts is the team for me, despite being thousands of miles away, they still bring out all the same emotions as they did when I took my seat all those hundreds of times in the Wheatfield. Our football culture really should not be taken for granted. It's the envy of places like Japan in the way it unites people, brings life to a city, invokes so much passion and creates moments of both unbridled joy and crippling frustration. Hearts has already given me this in spades, and will continue to for the rest of my life. Hearts is sewn into the fabric of my hometown, and so it becomes an intrinsic part of my personality. I'm not only proud to have it as part of me, but I'm proud to be a part of it too as we proceed in the new era of fan ownership, which to sports fans in Japan is an unimaginable dream. I don't know how long I'll be here, nor do I have any major targets regarding teaching English, but if I can get just one teenager to do away with the textbook nonsense saying "I want to go to America, to eat a big hamburger", and off their own back say something like "I want to go to Tynecastle, to watch Heart of Midlothian", then I'll feel as if I've done my job.