

Handwritten signature: D. Higgins



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CELTIC V ST MIRREN

SCOTTISH PREMIER LEAGUE

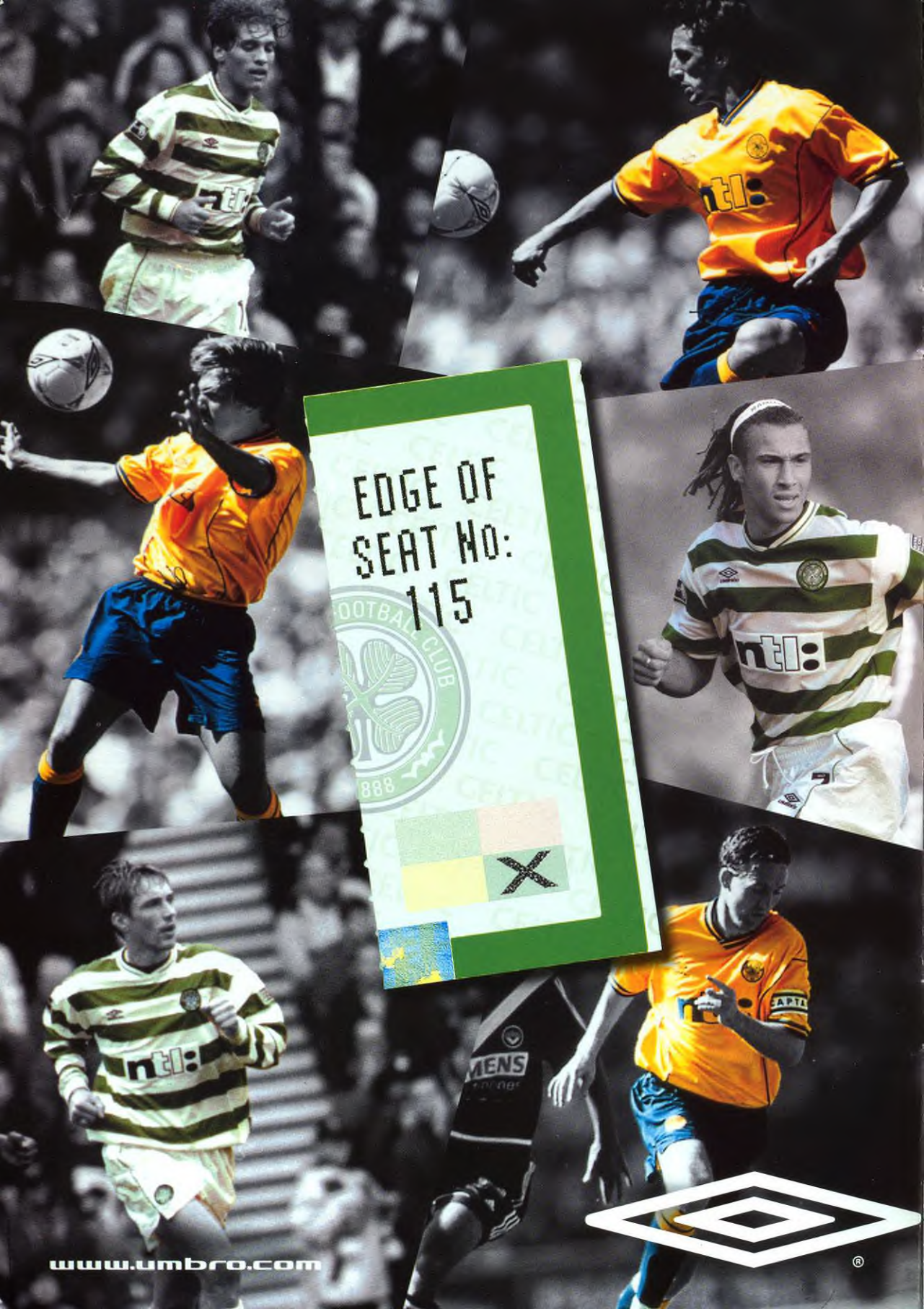
CELTIC PARK

SATURDAY, APRIL 7, 2001

KICK-OFF 12.55PM



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WELL, here we are in a position most of us would admit was beyond our wildest dreams back in August.

The league trophy may not yet be in our possession but, having spent most of the season desperately avoiding the mere mention of the word 'title', even I would have to admit it's now within touching distance.

Just one more victory will see us crowned champions - that is the simple reality. Then again, any of you who were here on Wednesday night will testify that claiming all three points is never a mere formality.

St Mirren are fighting for their Premier League survival at the moment and I know from experience that sides are often at their most dangerous with their backs against the wall.

The desire to preserve the right to play in stadia such as our own will be incentive enough for their players to battle and scrap for everything, and we'll have to be prepared for it.

But I must admit to having no fears whatsoever on that score because, as Dundee manager Ivano Bonetti very kindly pointed out after Wednesday's match, one of the main reasons we are in this position is that our players' mentality is extremely strong.

Certainly, the lads' unquenchable will to win has never been more evident than it was on Wednesday when, against a really exceptional Dens Park side, we showed real grit and determination to pull through.

I had thought that taking the lead so early in the match would settle everyone down but, in the end, Johan Mjallby had to be pushed up front to scramble us a late winner. Dundee will have been cursing their luck again having given so much to the match but, although we have played a great deal better this season, I couldn't have been happier with the players' commitment and professionalism.

The same was true in the match three days before when we eventually wore down an Aberdeen side bursting with youthful enthusiasm thanks to a fine opportunistic strike from Didier Agathe.

A mention too for our phenomenal away support that night, whose vocal backing undoubtedly helped spur the players on to claim all three points.

Winning matches is still the most difficult achievement in football. As



THE SWEDEST THING: Johan Mjallby hits the winner against Dundee

We've got title in our sights today

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against Dundee, teams will have possession of the ball for periods.

The players, despite their heroic efforts, are human. They will give the ball away at times, concede ground and, more importantly, concede goals. But Celtic's record over the last 12 years suggests that opposition teams have damaged us with far greater regularity than at present.

I don't want to labour the point, but everyone should know by this stage of the season that - while we might well have to endure a difficult spell during a match - the players are now resilient enough to get us out of it.

Our cause is not helped, however, when anxiety and impatience in the stands transfers onto the pitch. There is no need for this when we are in such a fantastic position and, in any case, I'm

more than capable of doing enough worrying for all of you! The lads have earned your support and you have the ability to have a huge positive effect when you truly raise the roof.

There's nothing I'd love more than to see you all celebrating today and every one of you can play a part in taking us those last few steps towards the finishing line.

We deserve to be in this position, however, the trophy's not in our hands yet. But rest assured that the players will be going all out to make this an unforgettable afternoon for us all.



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celtic:
probable formation 3-5-2

st mirren:
probable formation 5-3-2



Referee: JOHN UNDERHILL

Assistant Referees: JIM LYON

GORDON MIDDLETON

Fourth Official: GARRY MITCHELL

subs	celtic	st mirren

celtic squad

- 1 Jonathan GOULD
- 2 Tom BOYD (*captain*)
- 3 Stephane MAHE
- 4 Jackie McNAMARA
- 5 Joos VALGAEREN
- 6 Alan STUBBS
- 7 Henrik LARSSON
- 8 Alan THOMPSON
- 9 Chris SUTTON
- 10 Eyal BERKOVIC (*Blackburn*)
- 11 Morten WIEGHORST
- 12 Tommy JOHNSON
- 14 Paul LAMBERT
- 15 Bobby PETTA
- 16 Olivier TEBILY
- 17 Didier AGATHE
- 18 Neil LENNON
- 19 Stilian PETROV
- 20 Rab DOUGLAS

- 21 Stewart KERR
- 22 Stephane BONNES
- 23 Dimitre KHARINE
- 24 Colin HEALY
- 25 Lubomir MORAVCIK
- 26 Paul SHIELDS
- 27 Mark BURCHILL (*Ipswich*)
- 31 Rafael SCHEIDT (*on loan*)
- 32 Simon LYNCH
- 33 John CONVERY
- 34 Mark FOTHERINGHAM
- 35 Johan MJALLBY
- 36 Ramon VEGA
- 37 Liam KEOGH (*on loan*)
- 38 Barry John CORR (*on loan*)
- 39 Jamie SMITH
- 40 Stephen CRAINEY
- 41 John KENNEDY
- 43 Liam MILLER

st mirren squad

- 1 Derek SCRIMGOUR
- 2 Iain NICOLSON
- 3 Chris KERR
- 4 Tommy TURNER (*captain*)
- 5 Barry McLAUGHLIN
- 6 Scott WALKER
- 7 Hugh MURRAY
- 8 Tom BROWN
- 9 Steven McGARRY
- 10 Ricky GILLIES
- 11 Mark YARDLEY
- 12 Gary BOWMAN
- 14 Paul RUDDEN
- 15 Ian ROSS

- 16 Ryan ROBINSON
- 17 Ludovic ROY
- 18 Sergei BALTACHA
- 19 Scott MacKENZIE
- 20 Paul McKNIGHT
- 21 Jose QUITONGO
- 22 Stephen McPHEE
- 23 Graham FENTON
- 24 Jamie McGOWAN
- 26 Maikel RENFURM
- 27 Colin DREW

Back to Front

IF YOU ask anyone at Celtic Park their thoughts on a certain Swedish superstar, chances are they'll churn out a variety of adjectives that do a poor job of attempting to sum up the magical prowess of a record-breaking striker.

When you throw into the equation that the Swede in question popped up to scramble home a dramatic last-gasp winner a few days ago that took the club to within 90 minutes of title glory, there's some who would still be singing Larsson's praises.

It's not something that bothers Johan Mjallby, however. Larsson's fellow countryman has been an inspirational figurehead in a stingy Celtic back three this season – the Hoops currently have the best defensive record in the SPL – but he just showed on Wednesday night that he is just as effective at the other end of the pitch.

"I can't remember much about the goal," laughed a modest Mjallby. "It was a corner and then the ball took a touch off of Ramon Vega and then Neil Lennon before it dropped on to my foot. I just popped it in; it was one of the easiest I've scored, but maybe one of the most important in my career.

"It would have been an anti-climax if we hadn't beaten Dundee because everybody has been talking about what could happen today.

"I've only played up front a couple of times with my former club AIK and with Sweden in the last 10 minutes or so, but I'll be staying at the back today!

"We left it late against Dundee, but it shows just how much morale and character we have in the team. We

Johan Mjallby was a goal hero when he partnered Henrik Larsson but he'll be on the defensive as usual today

always try to win and that's a great thing to have in a team. Now we can really focus on the game against St Mirren and go all out to try to win it.

"People might say it's an easy game but we know we will have to work hard and keep concentrating."

Mjallby's season didn't get off to the best of starts as he struggled to hold down a regular starting slot in Martin O'Neill's squad but after

"My goal against Dundee was the easiest and most important I've ever scored"

Johan Mjallby

moving from midfield to make up the trio at the back, the Swede hasn't looked back and has gone so far as to assume the captain's armband in the absence of either Tom Boyd or Paul Lambert.

"It's been a brilliant season for me," remarked Mjallby. "The gaffer has given me a boost by playing me and I think the current management staff have brought out the best in me; it's been tremendous to play in the back three. I really enjoy it and I hope I can still improve even though this has been my best season by far."

There are still six games to go between now and the end of the

season, and although a win against St Mirren that would clinch the league title would no doubt be the highlight of everyone's season, Mjallby has enjoyed this campaign immensely.

The burly stopper picked up a League Cup winner's medal at Hampden a few weeks ago, but is desperate to add to that tally before the season is out.

"It is also always good to play in a cup final and winning the CIS League Cup was one of the highlights of the season," he remarked. "However, if we win the league I'm sure that the game that'll finally clinch it will be one I'll remember for the rest of my life; just that moment when the final whistle sounds and we know we've done it.

"A couple of weeks before I signed for Celtic I won the league in Sweden with AIK Solna and that was great because I had spent practically my entire football career there. When they won the title before in 1992 I was injured and I didn't feel part of it.

"But it doesn't matter which club you play with, you always want to win as many trophies as you can and it's an absolutely wonderful feeling.

"If you win the league it proves you have been the best team in the country and that's why it is such a good feeling. No-one can take that away from you if you win the league so hopefully that's what we can do."

MEMORIES AND MEDALS:
super stopper Johan Mjallby
wants to clinch the title today





BACK TO BASICS: Johan won't go for a goal repeat



When Celtic won the title in 1998 nerves were fraught as the destination of the championship went all the way to the last day of the season, with Celtic and Rangers both possible victors. This season, however, Rangers have faded fast from the picture and victory today would crown Celtic champions with five games remaining.

It's a scenario that was almost impossible to consider just 12 months ago, and Mjallby revealed that the narrow win over Rangers in February had a large bearing in the race for the Championship.

He said: "So far we have been very consistent but obviously it has been good to do well against Rangers because they are our biggest rivals and have dominated for so long.

"The match that we won 1-0 at Celtic Park in February really presented the last chance that Rangers had to do something and I think they might have been given some confidence had they taken something from that but we got the three points and I think that was crucial. It's always hard to beat Rangers and to beat them twice in the same week gave us a massive boost."

While Mjallby has been busy ensuring there is no way past for any audacious strikers attempting to beat a path to goal, his Celtic and Sweden team-mate has been banging them in at a sizzling rate at the other end.

"His work rate is just enormous,"

enthused Mjallby. "As long as I've been at the club he has always done well and scored goals but this season he has been fantastic. His overall play is excellent as he also works very hard for the team and creates space for other players. What more can you say about him? He is a fantastic talent."

As everyone knows, Celtic clinched a league championship against St. Mirren at Love Street in 1986 in the most dramatic of fashions as they

"What more can you say about Henrik? He is just a fantastic talent"

Johan Mjallby

pipped Hearts for the title. This game doesn't have quite so much at stake but Mjallby has already geared himself up for a difficult encounter.

"I'm looking forward to the match and hopefully we can win it and clinch the title, especially because it's at home and in front of our own fans. In any case we will want to take three points no matter what, but we know that St. Mirren will be battling for anything they can get.

"They really need points and it's hard to play against teams that are fighting to avoid the drop down."

A prestigious opportunity to play in

the Champions League awaits should Celtic wrap up the title, and it is a stage Mjallby would love to grace.

The Swede played in the quarter-finals of the Cup-Winners' Cup in 1997 with AIK, and would love to help Celtic make a similar impact on the European arena.

He said: "I would love to play in the Champions League. I played against Barcelona at the Nou Camp in the quarter finals and that was a great experience even though we lost 3-1. When you play football you want to be on the biggest platform and hopefully that's the direction that we can start moving in.

"I think the gaffer will bring in a few more quality players which we will need to compete in Europe and hopefully the rest of us can also improve. The future looks good."

Talk of a Treble-winning season has been incessant for the last few months among both fans and media alike.

But Mjallby said: "We still have a hard Scottish Cup game against Dundee United before we can even start to think of it. If we win the semi-final then we can maybe start thinking about the Treble but until then we'll be concentrating on every game."

Depending on today the games ahead may seem a bit less pressurised. And Mjallby might have some vintage memories for his scrapbook.

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