

Hibs go joint top of SPL after two goal win over St Johnstone



Goals by Paul Hanlon and Eoin Doyle either side of half time, secured the three points for Hibs in a hard fought encounter against St Johnstone at Easter Road today, leaving Pat Fenlon's men joint top of the league with next week's opponents Celtic

Boss Fenlon kept faith with the starting eleven who won against St Mirren last Saturday, and Shefki Kuqi had to be content with a place on the bench.

Alan Maybury faced his former club for the first time, whilst the Saints fielded ex Hibs midfielder Patrick Cregg.

The Perth men started brightly and dominated possession in the early stages. Paul Hanlon had to be alert to stop Rowan Vine with a last ditch tackle in the penalty box, and the young defender did well to clear a dangerous cross from Vine two minutes later.

Hibs were struggling to get possession and after nine minutes Gary Deegan brought down Murray Davidson on the edge of the box. Liam Craig's free kick hit the wall and rebounded back to the midfielder who struck a volley inches past the post.

A minute later, a Tim Clancy mistake allowed Nigel Hasselbaink to get possession inside the box, but his shot was blocked for a corner.

After 15 minutes, Gary Deegan lost possession and the ball fell to Gregory Tade but his first touch let him down and James McPake ushered the ball to safety.

At this stage, it was all St Johnstone and the Hibs fans were becoming impatient. Five minutes later, a stramash in midfield resulted in the ball falling to unmarked Tade just inside the box, but the big striker took too long to adjust his body and a superb tackle by McPake cleared the danger, hurting his back in the process.

Vine, Craig and Cregg combined to set up Dave McKay, but the full back's shot just wide, as Hibs looked a shadow of the team who had performed so well in the previous two games.

On 30 minutes, Shefki Kuqi started warming up and received a great reception from the fans in the Famous Five stand. This seemed to inspire Hibs and David Wotherspoon sent a dangerous cross into the Saints box.

Hasselbaink then had a good run down the wing and shot narrowly wide after slack play by the Hibs midfield lost possession.

As half time approached, Doyle had the fans on their feet with a great run down the left wing, and only a last ditch tackle prevented him opening the scoring. The corner was cleared but fell to Wotherspoon whose long range effort was deflected for another corner on the right.

Leigh Griffiths hit an accurate ball to the back post which was met by the head of Paul Hanlon and the Scotland under 21 captain's effort just crossed the line before being cleared by a Saints' defender, to give Hibs an undeserved lead.

During the break, Hibs legend Lawrie Reilly told the Edinburgh Reporter: "It's been a disappointing game and to be honest, Hibs are fortunate to be ahead, but you have to remember, the goalkeeper Ben Williams has not had a save to make."

Whatever Pat Fenlon said at half time seemed to work, as the Hibs players came out with a different attitude and started winning the midfield battle. In 49 minutes. Deegan set up

Jorge Claros, but the Honduran international's shot went just over the bar.

A minute later Griffiths did well to beat a defender but his cross toward Doyle was intercepted and fell to Paul Cairney. The former Partick Thistle man did well to dribble past a defender inside the box, but his shot was blocked.

It was only a matter of time before Hibs scored again and on 51 minutes, Deegan split the Saints' defence with a through ball to Griffiths. The on-form striker looked as though he would pull the trigger from an acute angle, but instead cut the ball back to Doyle who hammered in a shot from six yards. Saints' keeper Mannus somehow blocked the effort, but Doyle was first to react and prodded the rebound into the net.

Doyle almost made it three minutes later after a through ball from Alan Maybury, but after beating his marker, his shot was deflected for a corner.

On 56 minutes. New signing Peter Pawlett replaced Cregg, and the Hibs fans were quick to remind him of his dive which gave Aberdeen an undeserved penalty last year.

McPake was unlucky not to get his head onto a Wotherspoon corner, and the ball fell to Griffiths on the right touchline. Griffiths swung over a cross cum shot which almost sneaked in at the back post, generating a chant of 'Leigh Leigh Super Leigh Griffiths' from the singing section.

With Hibs looking comfortable, they survived a scare on 61 minutes when ever reliable McPake misjudged a long ball which fell to Tade in the box. The big striker took his time and should have scored but a fantastic save by Ben Williams kept the two goal margin.

Five minutes later, a wonderful piece of skill saw Griffiths beat his marker on the half way line and run clean through on goal. He elected to go himself when Doyle was in a better

position and was tackled as he was about to shoot.

Shortly afterwards McKay was booked for a scything tackle on Griffiths and Saints replaced Hasselbaink with Sean Higgins as manager Lomas tried to get his team back into the game.

On 70 minutes, Wotherspoon sent a dangerous corner into the six yards box and McPake's flying header went inches past the post.

Two minutes later Cairney had the ball in the net after lobbing the keeper but the whistle had already gone for offside on Doyle.

McPake had to leave the field due to a bleeding nose, and St Johnstone almost took advantage during the next corner which was headed narrowly past the post. McPake resumed the field to a massive roar from the Hibs fans, and was immediately in action heading clear a cross.

The captain had a penalty claim turned down and Wotherspoon was booked for protesting when he was adjudged to have fouled a St Johnstone player during a 50-50 tussle.

Clancy almost wrapped up the points with a near post header from a Griffiths corner but the Saints upped the tempo for the last 10 minutes and Hanlon was outstanding in clearing any danger.

With four minutes remaining. Doyle and Griffiths were replaced by Ross Caldwell and Shefki Kuqi, and both left the field to a standing ovation from the delighted Hibs fans.

After the game Pat Fenlon said: "We didn't get to the levels where we've been in the first half, and in fairness, the players knew that before I got to them. The second half was much better. St Johnstone started the game really well and worked us hard, picked up a lot of second balls, things we've been doing well the last couple of games, so we spoke about it

at half time, how we would have to up the gears and we did that quite well second half. We kept the ball a lot better. Last season we would have been going in one or two down. We got a lot of blocks in there first half. Paul (Hanlon) obviously scored but I though he was very good in the first half as well. The second half is where we want to be as a club and where we should be, we've just got to make sure we don't start games down the gears."

St Johnstone boss Steve Lomas felt his team were unlucky not to take something from Easter Road. He said: "For the first 45 minutes, we absolutely bossed it. We had better chances in the second half and I am disappointed by the result but pleased with the response after the Aberdeen game. We've got to get better in the last third of the pitch. Goals change games."

Hibs: Williams, Clancy, McPake, Hanlon, Maybury, Cairney, Claros, Deegan, Wotherspoon, Doyle, Griffiths. Subs: Antell, Caldwell, O'Hanlon, Stanton, Sproule, Kuqi, Handling.

St Johnstone: Mannus, MacKay, Wright, Anderson, Davidson, Cregg, Vine, Davidson, Craig, Hasselbaink, Higgins. Subs: Tuffey, Higgins, Miller, Caddis, Adams, May, Pawlett

Attendance 9639

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