

Inverness Caledonian Thistle 2 Heart of Midlothian 0

SPFL Saturday 31 August 2013 – Caledonian Stadium

Much has been made of the youthful nature of Hearts squad this season but the factor that may prove crucial to the Maroons chances of staying in the SPFL this season isn't the age of the players but size and depth of the squad.

After their heroics last week against Aberdeen, Hearts manager Gary Locke made three changes from the team that beat the Dons against the odds. Two were enforced – the suspended Kevin McHattie and Danny Wilson who were replaced by last week's match winner Jordan McGhee and Callum Tapping – while a tactical change saw Billy King drop to the bench to allow David Smith to start the game.

Hearts began the game in the Highlands brightly and Jamie Walker had their first chance in the opening minutes but his effort was inches wide. After nine minutes, the home side took the lead when Doran's cross was volleyed home by McKay and the Hearts youngsters, having taken the game their table-topping opponents in the early stages, must have felt aggrieved at this turn of events.

Great play by Calum Paterson after 25 minutes set up Walker again but once more his effort on goal went wide. The forward, having scored against Partick Thistle and Aberdeen in successive games, seemed to be out of luck this time around, a feeling the entire Hearts team felt just after half an hour when Caley Thistle went two goals ahead. After Doran and then Foran – try saying that after a couple of pints – saw their efforts on goal thwarted, the ball broke to McKay who scored from six yard out to double his goals and his team's lead for the afternoon. It seemed Lady Fortune had smiled on the

Highlanders before turning her back on the men – or should I say boys – from Scotland's capital city when the unfortunate Walker then saw his effort on goal bounce off a post.

Hearts could consider themselves rather unfortunate to be two goals down at the interval although there was no doubt the home side deserved to be in front. However, it was a different story after the break.

The second half was dominated by the home team who missed several chances to extend their lead. Hearts looked a tired team, their extra time efforts in Kirkcaldy on Tuesday night perhaps taking their toll. Locke replaced Smith with King but still it was one-way traffic towards the Hearts goal with Maroons keeper Jamie Macdonald almost single-handedly keeping Thistle at bay. There was nothing the Hearts custodian could do ten minutes from time, however, when his defensive colleague Jamie Hamill was sent off by referee John Beaton for deliberate hand ball. It seemed a harsh decision as was the subsequent penalty kick awarded to Caley Thistle. Some justice was done when Macdonald saved McKay's penalty kick.

The game ended at 2-0 for Caley Thistle and there was no doubt the league leaders fully deserved their win. Their manager, the ebullient Terry Butcher, has done a fine job and his team has self-belief aplenty. His opposite number, Gary Locke, gave a refreshingly honest assessment after the game when he said Caley Thistle were the stronger team and deserved their win. For Hearts, the only consolation was that 11th placed St. Mirren also lost and so the gap between the pair remains at nine points. Their forthcoming clash at Tynecastle on 5 October looks to be taking on an increasingly crucial significance.

Inverness CT: Brill; Raven; Shinnie; Vincent; Warren; Meekings; Billy McKay; Draper, Foran, Doran, Ross.

Hearts: Macdonald; McGhee; Brad McKay; McGowan; Hamill;

Tapping; Paterson; Robinson; Holt; Walker; D. Smith

Referee: John Beaton

Attendance: 4,034

Top man: Jamie Macdonald kept Hearts in the game with a string of superb saves.

Footnote: Inverness Caledonian Thistle's magnificent gesture of donating £5 to the Hearts supporters' fighting fund for every ticket sold over the average away support attendance of 650 was gratefully appreciated by the Edinburgh club. More than 1,000 Hearts fans were in Inverness and the Highlanders selfless act, following on from similar gestures by St. Johnstone and Partick Thistle, should be warmly applauded.