

Dundee United 4 Heart of Midlothian 1

SPFL, Saturday 7 December 2013 – Tannadice Park

A difficult end to a difficult week for Hearts as they returned to the important business of trying to garner league points against arguably the form team in the SPFL in their own back yard on Saturday. After the pain of last Sunday's William Hill Scottish Cup 7-0 hammering from Celtic at Tynecastle, Hearts manager Gary Locke replaced David Smith with Calum Tapping – this the only change from the team somewhat shell-shocked from the events in Gorgie six days previously.

United had scored four goals in each of their previous three games. It's said confidence is everything in football and it was clearly evident in the opening stages at Tannadice which team was soaring and which team was struggling. The Arabs displayed the crisp passing that has been a hallmark of their play in recent weeks with the highly-rated Ryan Gauld proving a real threat. It was Gauld who had the first proper chance of the game in the 14th minute with a typically ambitious strike forcing Hearts custodian Jamie MacDonald to palm the ball over the crossbar. A couple of minutes later, there was a touch of inevitability when the home side took the lead.

Mackay-Steven, another highly-rated United youngster delivered a superb pass which caught out the Hearts defence. Armstrong was on hand to score from an angle, despite the best efforts of Kevin McHattie and Jamie MacDonald.

It looked like yet another long afternoon for the travelling Hearts support who had travelled to Tayside in their numbers

but they were given a rare moment to cheer just four minutes later when clever play from Scott Robinson set up Jamie Walker who was tripped by Wilson in the penalty box. Penalty said referee Craig Thomson and Jamie Hamill did the business from the spot to put Hearts unexpectedly on level terms. This gave Hearts something of a fillip and, roared on by the usual vociferous support, they continued to come forward. However, this United team are not short on quality and Gauld came close to putting them ahead again only for McHattie to come to the rescue for Hearts once more. There was another chance for United through Graham but Hearts too had chances, particularly Ryan Stevenson whose effort was blocked by the home defence. Half time came with the score at 1-1.

After Rankin produced a brilliant long range shot which was superbly saved by MacDonald, United regained the lead just four minutes into the second half – and in controversial circumstances. From a corner kick, Graham rose to head home although it seemed Hearts Calum Paterson had been fouled when the ball came over. Despite vehement protests from the Hearts players, referee Thomson gave the goal and the feeling persisted that when you're down at the bottom nothing seems to go right.

Sadly, the decision seemed to affect the Hearts youngsters and United took control of the game thereafter although Paterson and Walker looked dangerous on the odd counter-attack by the visitors. It was from one such attack that the game's second controversial decision went against Hearts. Jamie Walker was the one player causing the home defence problems and it was from another run from the talented winger that Hearts appeared to get their second penalty kick of the game. However, instead of awarding Hearts a penalty, referee Thomson flashed a yellow card at Walker – for diving. The Hearts contingent on the

bench, particularly assistant manager Billy Brown, could scarcely contain their anger.

Feeling justice was required, Hearts came forward more in search of the equaliser and against this talented United side the danger was they would be exploited at the back. And so it proved when, six minutes from the end, Mackay-Steven curled a superb effort past Jamie MacDonald to seal the game at 3-1. Insult was added to injury in stoppage time when a shot from Rankin took a deflection and spun past the Hearts keeper to complete the scoring at Dundee United 4 Hearts 1.

Afterwards, Hearts manager Gary Locked bemoaned the two decisions which went against his side and which, he felt, changed the game.

“We were well organised and battled well and I thought we looked dangerous on the counter-attack” said the Gorgie chief. “I thought we applied ourselves well and it was a big improvement on last week. However, a big decision went against us for United’s second goal. From where I was standing it looked to me that Calum Paterson was fouled. Then Jamie Walker is clearly fouled in the penalty box and he is booked. It’s disappointing because these decisions were costly and the second goal in particular was always going to be crucial.”

With Kilmarnock winning at Ross County, Hearts are now 14 points adrift at the foot of the SPFL – with the Highlanders the team now immediately above them in the table. Despite an improved showing and a spirited one at that, Hearts remain in peril and their chances of SPFL survival seem to be getting

slimmer as the weeks go by. Inverness Caledonian Thistle are next up at Tynecastle – if Hearts can win this fixture next Saturday they will, at least, move on to zero points. Sadly, though, the mountain remains as large as ever...

Dundee Utd: Cierzniak; Wilson, Dillon, Souttar, Robertson, Paton, Rankin, Gauld, Armstrong; Graham, Mackay-Steven.

Hearts: MacDonald; McGhee, McGowan, Wilson, McHattie; Robinson, Hamill, Tapping, Paterson, Stevenson, Walker.

Referee: Craig Thomson

Top man: Jamie Walker – the decision to book the lively winger for diving clearly rankled the Hearts management team and supporters alike.

Att: 7,808