

Football – Celtic 2 Heart of Midlothian 0



SPFL, Saturday 21 December 2013 – Celtic Park

One has to admire those Hearts supporters who travelled through to the east end of Glasgow on Saturday. Their team is cut adrift at the foot of the SPFL, 14 points behind Ross County; injuries meant Hearts manager Gary Locke was struggling to find enough players for a starting eleven; the game came three weeks after Celtic spanked Hearts 7-0 at Tynecastle in the William Hill Scottish Cup; Saturday was a dark and dreich December day four days before Christmas when last minute gifts may have been on many people's minds. Yet, the ever-faithful Hearts support headed to Celtic Park in their numbers once more, admittedly more in vain hope than any expectation – but that says even more about their loyalty to their club.

Some bookmakers were offering pre-match odds of 25/1 for Hearts to record a victory, putting the Maroon's chances of grabbing all three points on a par with the chance of not hearing Slade's never-ending rendition of Merry Christmas Everybody between now and December 25th...

And so it proved as one of the youngest Hearts teams ever to start a first team fixture suffered their inevitable fate at the home of the league champions. However, this was a marked improvement on the Scottish Cup capitulation of three weeks ago and a degree of pride was restored to the maroon cause.

Hearts made three changes from last week's defeat from Inverness Caledonian Thistle with Sam Nicholson, Gary Oliver and Scott Robinson making way for Brad McKay, David Smith and Adam King, who was starting a first team game for the first

time.

Hearts goalkeeper Jamie MacDonald was the hero of a backs-to-the-wall first half with the stopper making early saves from Commons and Stokes, whose effort he pushed on to the crossbar. While Hearts were content to soak up the pressure, they did venture forward on occasion through Callum Tapping and debutant Adam King. That said, it looked like Celtic were about to go in front ten minutes before half time when Ledley's powerful header from just six yards looked set to break the deadlock. However, MacDonald produced a quite stunning save from the Celtic player, a save which almost defied belief. Half-time arrived with the game goalless, a scenario few would have predicted before the game given the events in Gorgie at the beginning of this month.

The second half assumed the same pattern as the first half with Celtic swarming players forward and Jamie MacDonald keeping them at bay. On the hour mark, the Hearts goalie produced yet another brilliant save to deny Commons. However, Hearts luck deserted them three minutes later when Celtic went ahead in somewhat controversial circumstances. Dylan McGowan believed he had won a throw in when the ball went out of play off Pukki; however, referee Euan Norris gave the throw in to the home side and Commons duly took advantage of such good fortune when he accepted Brown's pass before burying the ball behind MacDonald.

Having been on the back foot for most of the game, Hearts, incredibly, almost equalised with a couple of minutes to go. The unfortunate McGowan met a corner from David Smith and the Australian's header looked goal bound until it was cleared off the goal line, ironically by Commons who had been thwarted by Hearts so many times that afternoon.

To demonstrate this wasn't to be Hearts day, Celtic secured all three points when Forrest scored their second goal deep into stoppage time.

While there can be no denying Celtic deserved their victory, Hearts were much-improved from the last time they faced Neil Lennon's side. If hard work and spirit are anything to go by, Hearts may not be buried yet.

Celtic: Forster; Fisher, Ambrose, Van Dijk, Izaguirre; Commons, Brown, Biton, Ledley; Stokes, Pukki.

Hearts: MacDonald; Hamill, McKay, Wilson, McHattie; McGowan; Walker, A. King, Tapping, Smith; Paterson.

Referee: Euan Norris

Att: 46,058

Top man: Only one contender – the quite magnificent Jamie MacDonald