

Football – St Johnstone 3 Heart of Midlothian 3



If you're among those experiencing the 'January Blues' – the post-Christmas and New Year period when it's dark, cold, you're back at work with no money and precious little positivity to keep you going until payday, spare a thought for the supporters of Heart of Midlothian. With their team 20 points adrift at the foot of the SPFL Premiership table before Saturday's game against St Johnstone – meaning it's a question of when, not if, for relegation – it's been difficult to find any joy among those of the maroon persuasion for a few months now. Yet, several hundred of them made the trip to Perth on Saturday in another remarkable display of loyalty. And it was to turn out to be a remarkable afternoon for the Maroon Army.

Skipper Danny Wilson returned to the Hearts team following illness and Gary Locke's side began the game brightly. Ryan Stevenson fired in a long range effort after just two minutes which was saved by St Johnstone keeper Mannus. Hearts, in what was assistant coach Billy Brown's last game, continued to look lively but it was the home side who almost took the lead when Davidson back heeled May's cross which was saved by Jamie MacDonald.

In the 20th minute, Hearts Dale Carrick collected an intended pass back by Saints McDonald and headed for goal. The Hearts youngster was felled by Anderson and as this denied the visitors a goal scoring opportunity, the home defender was shown a red card.

With a one man numerical advantage, one might have expected Hearts to make the running, so to speak. Although they had plenty possession, the Gorgie men – or should that be boys –

didn't really threaten Mannus in the home goal. And, as so often happens, the ten men took the lead when Kevin McHattie fouled Hasselbaink. The offence looked outside the penalty box but referee Brian Colvin decreed it a penalty kick from which May converted to put the home side a goal in front at the interval.

If Gary Locke and Billy Brown were left to rue the way the first half ended, they were apoplectic at the way the second half began. Just four minutes had gone when May found himself through on Jamie MacDonald. The Hearts number one produced a fine save from May's initial effort but the Perth striker clattered into the goalie before getting his toe to the ball to steer it into the net. 2-0 to the ten men.

Even with numerical advantage, it was looking pretty hopeless for Hearts at this stage. However, on the hour mark, Kevin McHattie crossed for Dale Carrick to head home for the visitors. A glimmer of hope for Hearts but this seemed to be extinguished just three minutes later when McHattie was deemed to have handled the ball inside the penalty box. Penalty kick number two for the home team and goal number two for Steve May which put the Perth Saints 3-1 ahead.

Some Hearts supporters headed for the exit at this stage but those who remained witnessed an astonishing end to the game. After Brad McKay's 30 yard screamer was palmed away by Mannus, substitute Sam Nicholson and the always dangerous Dale Carrick produced more fine saves from the Saints keeper.

There were just three minutes remaining when Nicholson pulled a goal back for Hearts after a scramble in the goalmouth. Seconds later, Ryan Stevenson and Saints keeper Mannus were red carded after appearing to trade punches with each other. Having used all three substitutes permitted, St. Johnstone pushed outfield player Patrick Cregg in goal. This was the signal for Hearts to charge forward. Callum Paterson thought he had equalised only to see his header come back off the

crossbar and it seemed the home side would escape. However, they reckoned without Hearts skipper Danny Wilson who headed home the equaliser deep into stoppage time to the joy of the visiting fans.

An astonishing game ended 3-3 and while Hearts remain on negative points, it was heartening to see the Maroons refusing to give up despite being two goals down to a spirited St. Johnstone team.

It may be fanciful to suggest this game was a dress rehearsal for the League Cup final in a couple of months. Nonetheless, given the dramatic events in Perth on Saturday, anything is possible!

St. Johnstone: Mannus, Mackay, Anderson, Wright, Scobbie, Millar, McDonald, Davidson, Croft, May, Hasselbaink.

Hearts: MacDonald, McKay, Wilson, McGowan, McHattie, Carrick, Hamill, Tapping, Smith, Stevenson, Paterson

Att: 3,395

Referee: Brian Colvin

Top man: The lively Dale Carrick.