

Hibernian 2-3 St Mirren: Too little too late for Hibs



A late brace from James Collins was not enough to snatch a point as Hibs went down 3-2 against an incisive St Mirren team.

There was bad news for the home side even before a ball had been kicked, with news that defender Paul Hanlon was out with a thigh strain. Hanlon has been flourishing under the reign of new manager Terry Butcher, playing in every minute of every game so far this season, and his presence at centre-half was missed in the Hibs defence. Jordon Forster moved into the middle, while Alan Maybury made a rare start to fill in at right-back.

St Mirren took the lead within five minutes when a Paul McGowan shot rebounded off the post and hit keeper Ben Williams in the back, rolling back into the net. Sean Kelly had made a good run down the left hand side, and the 35-year-old Maybury didn't have the pace to close him down enough to prevent the dangerous cross coming in. McGowan's resulting shot was powerful, and Williams was helpless as the ball came off him for the goal.

Hibs could have been level minutes later, with teenager Jason Cummings provided with a good change, but the 18-year-old could only head over the bar.

After eight minutes Alex Harris came on to replace Ryan McGivern because of injury. This compounded Hibs woes, as there were no available defenders on the substitutes bench; in fact, both teams had only named six out of the available seven subs. Lewis Stevenson slotted in at left back, while Harris took Stevenson's place in left midfield.

With a back four which was beginning to look more and more makeshift, Hibs were put under pressure by a St Mirren side who were quick and ruthless on the counterattack. After 23 minutes they doubled their advantage with a shot from a tight angle from Adam Campbell. Campbell was dangerous down the right-hand side, and he linked up well with John McGinn who was given too much space by the Hibs defence, allowing him to set up Campbell for the goal.

The away fans were delighted with their team's display, and they didn't have to wait long for goal number three. Only a few minutes later, Campbell the goalscorer turned provider and set up Steven Thompson with a good cross which the striker was able to head past Williams into the top corner.

McGowan could have made it four before the break, but his curling shot only hit the woodwork.

Half-time was met with a chorus of boos from the home support, who were unimpressed by their side's capitulation in the first half. Terry Butcher saw fit to make a substitution at the break, with the rather ineffective Paul Cairney being replaced by 19-year-old Sam Stanton.

Stanton, who has been in and around the fringes of the first team this season, made a positive impact when he came on, looking to run with the ball and attack the St Mirren defence more directly. A series of corners saw the home side pile on their first real spell of pressure in the game, and it was through one of these that Collins managed to claw a goal back for Hibs.

Harris fired in low from the corner and Collins met the ball in the middle of the box with a bullet header into the top right-hand corner. The striker ran to the East stand to celebrate before quickly making his way back to his own half, to try to make the comeback count.

Hibs always looked at their most threatening through set-

pieces, and their second goal came in the 89th minute when a long-range free-kick was headed down by Forster. Again it was Collins who was first on the scene with another header that set up the home side with a chance at grabbing a point.

With four minutes of added time to play, Hibs tried to push for an equaliser but despite the late comeback, the performance in the middle of the park was slack and ponderous for large spells, with players unable to pick out passes and instead giving the ball away or playing it aimlessly long. St Mirren, on the other hand, were quick and sharp with their passing, moving quickly on the counterattack to build moves that always looked to threaten Hibs at the back.

Screams for a penalty in added time were turned down by referee Willie Collum, who said no to the claims of handball by Campbell, the scorer and provider of two of St Mirren's goals. Hibs fans and players alike felt aggrieved at the dubious decision, but St Mirren would feel that they deserved all three points over the course of the game.

Hibs manager Terry Butcher was critical of his players after the game, saying that their first-half performance was unacceptable.

"It was the most wretched 45 minutes I've seen from one of my teams, I must say," he said. "That was absolutely abysmal.

"At half time there were a few choice words and it was about getting a bit of pride back which I think we did in the second half, but you can't give teams three goals of a start as we did and then hope to get something from the game, which we nearly did."

Butcher was also infuriated about the penalty, which could have seen his side rescue a point.

"I've just seen the penalty [appeal] on the far side. It's an unbelievable flick-up. He could probably get a contract in a

volleyball team doing things like that and Willie Collum's got a great view of it as well, but he doesn't give it."

A few Hibs players may also have to start worrying about their place in the team, with Butcher keen to point out that those kind of performances would see players on their way out of Easter Road:- "I don't know where that first half performance came from because that is not like us at all. Defensively we were a shambles and going forward we weren't much better.

"There were a few players in the first half that said to me by their performances that 'I'm not good enough, get someone else in.' I can't do that in January but I will in the summer, because that was not acceptable. That was awful.

"The youngsters were showing the older ones this is the way we should go by being a bit fearless and having a go.

"They were going to have Monday off but they are in Monday now and I'm going to work them hard. If they are going to give the ball away and defend as poorly as we did in the first half then they are going to have to work hard to get the ball back and that means extra fitness and extra work."

Hibs: Williams, Maybury, Forster, Nelson, McGivern (Harris 8), Cairney (Stanton 46), Craig, Robertson, Stevenson, Collins, Cummings (Zoubir 76).

Substitutes not used: Murdoch, Tudur Jones, Heffernan.

St Mirren: Kello, Naismith, McAusland, McGregor, Kelly, Goodwin (Wylde 65), Newton, McGowan (Van Zanten 81), McGinn, Campbell (Grainger 90+3), Thompson.

Substitutes not used: Dilo, Reilly, Brady.

Referee: Willie Collum.

Attendance: 9,610

Photo by John Preece

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