

Inverness Caledonian Thistle 2 Heart of Midlothian 2



(Inverness Caley Thistle win 4-2 on pens)

Hearts had an all too brief respite from their travails of league business with a League Cup semi-final against Inverness Caledonian Thistle at Easter Road on Sunday. It was a re-match of the same stage of the competition a year and a week ago. Sadly, the outcome was different; whereas in 2013, Hearts were the victors after a penalty shoot-out, this year it was the Highlanders, who were reduced to nine men, who emerged victorious after another penalty shoot-out.

Hearts had re-arranged their midweek SPFL fixture against St. Mirren in order that Ryan Stevenson could complete his two match suspension following a red card at Perth a couple of weeks ago. Ironically, with Hearts winning the two games in which the former Ayr United man was missing, Stevenson didn't start the semi-final, taking his place on the substitutes bench alongside Hearts new on-loan signing from West Ham, Paul McCallum.

Hearts boss Gary Locke began the game with the same side that defeated St. Mirren on Wednesday but they were almost behind after just three minutes when a mistake by skipper Danny Wilson allowed Caley Thistle's McKay to set up Draper but his effort went over the bar.

John Hughes' men looked the livelier of the sides in the early stages but Hearts eventually pulled themselves into the game. Sam Nicholson's pace and trickery was causing the Jags defence problems and his effort from 20 yards produced a decent save from Brill in the Caley Thistle goal. Dale Carrick then headed over when he really ought to have found the target as play

raged from end to end. The best chance of a goalless first half, however, fell to Caley Thistle's McKay on the stroke of half-time. The striker got ahead of his Hearts namesake Brad before firing in a shot which Hearts keeper Jamie MacDonald did brilliantly to save.

As happened in last year's semi-final, Inverness took the lead early in the second half. From 20 yards out Tansey fired in blistering shot which whistled past MacDonald to put the Highlanders a goal up.

This seemed to ignite Hearts and Callum Paterson produced a superb save from Brill before Caley Thistle were reduced to ten men when Warren was shown a second yellow card of the afternoon when he fouled Sam Nicholson. From the free-kick, Ryan Stevenson rolled the ball to Jamie Hamill whose shot took a deflection before nestling in the net to level the scores at 1-1. The Hearts fans celebrated and they were ecstatic two minutes later when Hamill scored again, this time with a magnificent 20 yard free-kick.

Jamie MacDonald then produced a wonder save from Meekings but this was the Caley Thistle defender's last involvement before being sent off for a late challenge on Scott Robinson. Hearts were 2-1 up against nine men as the regulation 90 minutes drew to a close and a third cup final appearance in less than two years seemed on the cards. However, calamity struck when shoddy defending from Hearts allowed substitute Ross to squeeze the ball past MacDonald in the final minute to take the tie to extra time.

Caley Thistle defended resolutely during the extra half an hour and Hearts, despite their numerical advantage, just could not break them down. Newcomer Paul McCallum, on as a substitute, had the best chance at the end but couldn't direct his header on target.

So the tie was decided by a penalty shoot-out. After Shinnie

missed his kick for Thistle, Paul McCallum had the opportunity to make an immediate name for himself – but he also missed his spot kick. Danny Wilson and Dale Carrick scored for Hearts but Jamie Hamill, so often hero from the penalty spot missed his kick. Caley Thistle converted their remaining penalties and so progressed to the League Cup Final with Aberdeen on 16 March.

It was a bitterly disappointing end to the game for the Hearts supporters in the crowd of 12,762. Their team's failure to see out a game against opponents who had just nine players was quite frankly an embarrassment and some fans weren't slow in making their feelings known as the Maroon Army trudged out of Easter Road.

Afterwards, Gary Locke struggled to contain his anguish. "We only have ourselves to blame. It was a great opportunity to get to a final. Defending in the last minute, we had chances to get rid of the ball before we did. But there's nothing we can do about it now."

Inverness Caledonian Thistle: Brill, Raven, Shinnie, Vincent, Warren, Meekings, Watkins, Tansey, McKay, Draper, Doran.

Hearts: MacDonald, McKay, McHattie, Hamill, McGowan, Wilson, Smith, Robinson, Carrick, Paterson, Nicholson.

Referee: John Beaton

Att: 12,762

Top man: Jamie Hamill.