

Livingston 0 Heart of Midlothian 1



SPFL Championship, Saturday 27 December 2014 – Energy Assets Arena

A week ago Hearts had a nine point lead at the top of the SPFL Championship. This was extended to a formidable 12 points after a fine win at Cowdenbeath on Tuesday evening. With second placed Rangers falling victim to a revitalised Hibernian at Easter Road at Saturday lunchtime, Hearts had the ideal opportunity to extend their lead at the top of the table to 15 points when they visited bottom of the table Livingston. They duly did, but the victory was more of a struggle than it ought to have been after the proverbial game of two halves in West Lothian.

After the win in darkest Fife on Tuesday, Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson made four changes to the Hearts team that took to the field two days after Christmas with Billy King, Sam Nicholson, Jason Holt and Alim Ozturk all starting.

The Maroons took to the field buoyed by a truly magnificent travelling support that numbered more than 7,500 and took three stands of the Energy Assets stadium – the largest travelling support in the country this weekend.

As is now customary, Hearts began the game in dominant fashion. Adam Eckersley was proving a threat with his runs down the left wing and his dangerous cross after 13 minutes found James Keatings but the former Hamilton Accies striker pushed his effort agonisingly wide. Three minutes later, Keatings had an even bigger opportunity to score when Hearts were awarded a penalty kick after Jason Holt had been tripped inside the penalty box. However, Keatings effort was saved by

home keeper Jamieson. Then Sam Nicholson's header was brilliantly palmed away by the Livvy keeper and the afternoon began to take on a worrying look of 'one of those days'.

However, in the 25th minute, the huge away support had their nerves calmed somewhat when Hearts went in front. Yet again, Adam Eckersley was the creator, refusing to give up on a loose ball which appeared destined for a throw-in down the left. Eckersley kept the ball in play and passed to the hard-working Billy King. The youngster skipped into the penalty area before flicking the ball across the six yard area for Keatings to sweep home.

Livingston had been rarely seen as an attacking force in the first half although White did have an effort on goal ten minutes before half-time which was saved by the largely redundant Hearts keeper Neil Alexander. **Half-time Livingston 0 Hearts 1**

The home side proved more of a threat in the second half as Hearts, perhaps unintentionally, took their foot off the gas. That said, Sam Nicholson had a chance to double the visitors' lead when he danced his way into the Livvy penalty box before firing his shot on goal so high over the bar it posed a threat to incoming aircraft at Edinburgh Airport...

Worryingly, Hearts were becoming wayward with their approach with too many passes going astray and mistimed tackles. Towards the end of the game, the home side's Gallagher had a great chance to draw parity but he snatched at his shot and the chance was gone.

With minutes left, Gary Oliver fell down in the Livvy penalty box and the huge travelling support bawled for a penalty. All they saw, though, was referee McKendrick flash a yellow card to the Hearts man for diving which seemed a tad harsh from where I was sitting.

The final whistle sounded moments later. It was a far from convincing Hearts display but, once the dust had settled, it was a third win in seven days, no goals had been conceded and Robbie Neilson's side are now 15 points clear at the top of the SPFL Championship.

Of course, nothing can be taken for granted, but it's going to take one helluva effort from Rangers, Hibs or Queen of the South to catch Hearts now.

Livingston: Jamieson, Mensing, Fordyce, Jacobs, O'Brien, Gallagher, McKenna, White, Glen, Mullen, Rutherford

Hearts: Alexander, Paterson, Wilson, Ozturk, Gomis, Holt, Nicholson, King, Buaben, Keatings, Eckersley.

Referee: John McKendrick

Att: 8,178

Top men: ...and women and children – the truly magnificent Hearts support. The financially stricken Livingston board must be truly grateful!