

Raith Rovers 1 Heart of Midlothian 3

SPFL Championship, Tuesday 17 March 2015 – Starks Park

Relentless is a word that seems to have attached itself to the good ship Heart of Midlothian as it sails inexorably towards the top flight of Scottish football after a year's absence. The SPFL Premiership port is not only in sight but within distance of setting down anchor as Hearts recorded yet another league win, this time at Kirkcaldy on Tuesday evening.

Goals from Kevin McHattie – back in the team for the first time since being injured back in November – Jamie Walker and Billy King gave Robbie Neilson's men another three points and extended their lead at the top of the SPFL Championship table to 20 points – with just eight games and 24 points left to play.

Neilson hinted at changing the team that put four goals past Dumbarton on Saturday and as well as the welcome sight of McHattie back in a maroon shirt, there were starting places for Billy King and James Keatings, who scored a hat-trick on his last appearance in Kirkcaldy.

It was Keatings who had the game's first chance after just five minutes. Sam Nicholson's pass found the former Hamilton Accies man inside the penalty area and his shot on goal was well saved by home keeper McGurn who was to have a busy evening.

McGurn denied Keatings again just after 20 minutes as Hearts increased the pressure as they looked to get in front. Keatings then turned provider for Zeefuik whose effort was saved by the overworked home keeper.

It seemed only a matter of time until the visitors took the

lead and they duly did in the 27th minute. Keatings delivered a fine cross which found McHattie and, with the home defenders appealing in vain for offside, the young full back poked the ball past McGurn to put Hearts ahead.

Hearts continued to press and Billy King was proving a real handful for the home defence. The youngster almost doubled Hearts lead with an effort from 25 yards which just went wide. We were all sure a second goal would arrive and it duly did two minutes before half-time – but not at the end expected. A corner from Raith's Conroy was headed home by Barr to draw unexpected parity at the break. **Half-time Raith Rovers 1 Hearts 1**

Hearts began the second half in the same fashion they ended the first one. Sam Nicholson fired in an ambitious effort from fully 25 yards which scraped the crossbar before Alim Ozturk's now trademark free-kick was brilliantly saved by McGurn. Then Zeefuik had a chance to put Hearts in front but his shot was well wide of the goal.

Despite constant Hearts pressure the score was still level and the game began to take on a feel of 'one of those nights'. However, midway through the second half came arguably the game's turning point. Former Hearts striker Christian Nade, now filling the Raith Rovers shirt, lunged into Kevin McHattie with a ferocity that left the youngster sprawling. Given McHattie had just returned from serious injury there was understandable anger among the Hearts contingent, a feeling shared by referee George Salmond who showed Nade a red card.

Thankfully, McHattie was able to continue and Hearts pressed even harder for the winner. Callum Paterson and Sam Nicholson came close but home keeper McGurn was almost proving to be one-man opposition. It needed a moment of magic to beat the Starks Park number one and this was duly provided with ten minutes to go by Jamie Walker. The youngster collected a pass from Gomis and from 25 yards produced a sublime curling effort

which went beyond the heroic home keeper to put Hearts ahead to the joy of the huge travelling support.

With five minutes to go it was game over. Walker was involved again as he pounced on a shoddy pass from the home side. He squared the ball to Billy King who fired past the helpless McGurn to make it 3-1 to the champions-elect.

Hearts now need just two more wins from their final eight games to clinch the Championship title and secure automatic promotion. Indeed, they may not even need that if they defeat Falkirk this Saturday and Hibernian fail to defeat Rangers on Sunday.

However, Robbie Neilson isn't looking for favours from anyone else.

"I would really like to win the league before our own fans at Tynecastle" he said after Tuesday night's victory. "The players feel the same way. We want to give the fans something. They've been absolutely magnificent all season. If we win the title before then, fair enough, but we would love to make our next home game against Queen of the South a day to remember."

For Hearts, it has certainly been a season to remember.

Raith Rovers: McGurn, Thomson, Watson, Fox, G. Anderson, Callachan, Conroy, Vaughan, McKeown, Nade, Barr.

Hearts: Alexander, Paterson, McHattie, Wilson, Ozturk, Gomis, Nicholson, King, Pallardo, Keatings, Zeefuik

Referee: George Salmond

Att: 4,760

Top man: Billy King