

Hearts Crash Out of Europe



Heart of Midlothian 1 Birkirkara 2

**Europa League Second Qualifying Round, Second Leg – Thursday
21 July 2016**

A week ago when Hearts played the first leg of their Europa League Second Qualifying Round tie against Birkirkara in Malta the baking temperature meant several water breaks were necessary for the players during the game and, apparently, some of the Hearts players were physically sick afterwards. While the temperature in Edinburgh at the start of this week was of the 'taps aff' variety, there was never much likelihood players risking sunstroke at Tynecastle albeit on a glorious Thursday evening in Edinburgh. But that was the only thing glorious for the Maroons as Hearts made history of the unwanted sort by becoming the first Scottish side to lose to Maltese opposition...

Hearts, who yesterday announced the loan signing of former Celtic striker Tony Watt from Charlton Athletic, made just one change to the side that drew 0-0 in last week's game in the searing Maltese heat – Sam Nicholson replacing the injured Perry Kitchen.

Tynecastle Head Coach Robbie Neilson reckoned Birkirkara would sit in deep at Tynecastle but his theory was questioned as early as the second minute when poor defending from Hearts forced goalkeeper Jack Hamilton to make a save from close range – and set the tone for the evening.

Hearts swarmed forward in droves but seemed lacking in ideas on how to break the deadlock. It took 26 minutes for the home side's first real chance when fine play from Callum Paterson set up Jamie Walker whose spectacular scissors kick smacked

off the crossbar.

This encouraged the home team and ten minutes from half-time, Hearts looked set to break the deadlock when they were awarded a penalty kick when Sam Nicholson was brought down in the penalty box. However, there were anxious looks on the faces of the Hearts support when Prince Buaben stepped up to take the kick. The former Dundee United player has a track record of pretty awful penalties and this continued when his lacklustre effort was saved by keeper Kopric.

Half-time Hearts 0 Birkirkara 0

The home support were hoping for an early goal in the second half to calm the nerves. They duly got one – but, to their horror, it was Birkirkara who scored it. A free-kick was not dealt with by a static Hearts defence and Bubalovic fired the ball high into the net from about 10 yards.

Tynecastle was stunned but the fans shock soon turned to boos directed towards Robbie Neilson.

Seconds later, Hearts hit the crossbar for the second time in the evening. Nicholson, who at least looked like the player he was two years ago, cut in from the left and his rocket shot crashed off the bar. The youngster held his head in his hands as did the vast majority of the 14,000 fans inside Tynecastle.

The tie was all but over in the 67th minute. A superb pass from Plut put through Herrera and he slotted the ball through the legs of Jack Hamilton to make it 2-0. Cue a mass exodus of Hearts fans – and there were still more than 20 minutes to go.

Hearts did grab a goal five minutes later when Arnaud Djoum delivered a cross for Conor Sammon to head his first goal in a maroon shirt – but it was too little too late.

Hearts out of Europe before the end of July to a team from Malta. Already this season, Scots clubs have lost to sides

from Gibraltar, Luxembourg and now Malta. Whatever Robbie Neilson may say about this result, it was an embarrassing one and the worst in Hearts history in Europe.

Hearts: Hamilton, L.Smith (Juanma, 57'), Ozturk, Rossi (Muirhead, 74'), Rherras, Paterson, Buaben (Cowie, 80'), Djoum, Nicholson, Walker, Sammon.

Birkirkara: Kopric, Herrera, Bubalovic, Sciberras, Marcellina, Srdan (Guillaumier, 72'), Plut, Bajada (Jovic, 64'), Zerafa, Scicluna (Camenzuli, 90'), Attard.

Referee: Ville Nevalainen (Finland)

Top man: Sam Nicholson

Att: 14,301