

Hearts Fall to a Sucker Punch in Perth

St Johnstone 1 Heart of Midlothian 0

Ladbrokes Premiership – Saturday 17 September 2016, McDiarmid Park

It was inevitable really. After winning their last three Ladbrokes Premiership games, there was much talk about Hearts continuing their good form of late by defeating St Johnstone on Perth on Saturday – and thus going to the top of the league, with champions Celtic not playing until Sunday. But, despite dominating the game, Robbie Neilson's side came a cropper in the Fair City, just as they did in the Betfred League Cup earlier this season. Hearts passed up chance after chance and, predictably, the Perth Saints scored the only goal of the game through Cummins early in the second half.

Neilson made a couple of changes to the Hearts team that defeated Hamilton Academical at Tynecastle a week ago – Sam Nicholson and Bjorn Johnsen started at the expense of Arnaud Djoum and Conor Sammon.

Hearts, playing in their new yellow and pink away strip, began the game promisingly. Fine play from Tony Watt set up Sam Nicholson whose low shot was saved by Saints keeper Clark – which set the pattern for the afternoon.

Sam the Man then burst past Easton down the right wing and crossed for Bjorn Johnsen but his attempt was easily saved by Clark. Then, a corner from Nicholson found John Souttar whose header was picked up by Tony Watt. His spectacular effort on goal was blocked on the line by Foster.

In the 13th minute, Watt sent Nicholson clear and his cross was met by the unlikely figure of Faycal Rherras whose first-time shot was brilliantly saved by Clark.

Twenty-five minutes in and Jamie Walker was next to try his luck as Hearts threatened to over-run their hosts. Again, home keeper Clark produce an outstanding save and the scoreline remained blank.

The home side did come more into things and Davidson sped past Igor Rossi but his effort was easily saved by Hearts keeper Jack Hamilton who must have been feeling left out of things. Encouraged by this, Cummins then had a header which went over the bar for the Saints.

Just on half-time, Tony Watt and Bjorn Johnsen set up Jamie Walker but his attempt on goal was wide.

Half-time St Johnstone 0 Hearts 0

The second half was just minutes old when Hearts had a free-kick but Watt's effort from 25 yards was pushed over the bar by Clark. Moments later, a corner from Nicholson was met by the head of Rossi but, again, that man Clark saved brilliantly to keep the Jambos at bay.

If the travelling Maroon Army were beginning to think 'we need to start taking these chances' their thoughts were proved correct in the 57th minute when St Johnstone took the lead. A miss-hit shot from Craig fell for Cummins who buried his effort beyond Jack Hamilton with the yellow and pink shirts desperately claiming for offside.

The home side had their tails up now and nearly added a second when a slip from Jack Hamilton let Craig shoot for goal 30 yards out but the Hearts keeper recovered well to save.

Hearts threw on Conor Sammon for Johnsen and the big Irishman soon had a chance but his effort was way too high and the home side breathed again.

With the end of the game in sight, Hearts threw everything forward in a desperate attempt for an equaliser. Callum Paterson thought he had scored when his header saw Clark beaten at last – but the ball crashed off the crossbar.

The Scotland defender then linked with Sammon but Paterson was wide with his shot. It was all too much for Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson who was sent to the stand by referee John Beaton.

When the final whistle blew there were disbelieving looks on the faces of the Hearts players and supporters. The Jambos had lost a game in which they should have been out of sight.

Afterwards, Robbie Neilson understandably cut a figure of disappointment. He told BBC Scotland:

"I spoke to the players after the game and said we played some fantastic football and created some wonderful chances.

"But we didn't take them and got done with a sucker punch, but I'd rather play like that and be entertaining and exciting and create chances than go direct and hope to nick a goal.

"I thought we played really well to a man, but we just couldn't get the win our play deserved.

"The St Johnstone goalkeeper has some wonderful saves and probably had the game of his life."

St Johnstone: Clark, Anderson, Davidson, MacLean (Alston, 89'), Shaughnessy, Coulson (Wotherspoon, 65'), Paton, Foster, Easton, Craig, Cummins (Kane, 77').

Hearts: Hamilton, Paterson, Souttar, Rossi, Rherras, Nicholson, Cowie (Muirhead, 83'), Kitchen, Walker, Watt (Djoum, 68'), Johnsen (Sammon, 71').

Referee: John Beaton

Att: 5,456

Top man: Sam Nicholson