

Hearts Ease to Much-Needed Victory



Heart of Midlothian 3 Motherwell 0

Ladbrokes Premiership – Saturday 26 November 2016, Tynecastle

The sound of bulldozers demolishing the buildings at the rear of the old main stand at Tynecastle have been resonating around McLeod Street in recent days. However, following a run of four games without a win, there have been murmurings of discontent among some Hearts fans in Gorgie as the battle for second place in the Ladbrokes Premiership has recently been superseded with a fight to remain in the top half of the table. Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson has come under fire from some of the Maroon Army for tinkering with team selection and tactics, standing accused of paying more attention to the opposition rather than focusing on the strengths of his own team.

At Tynecastle on Saturday, though, a much more balanced team selection was on view and it paid off with an emphatic victory over a Motherwell team who Hearts defeated 3-1 in Lanarkshire just a few weeks ago. Neilson made four changes to the team that came back from a 3-1 deficit to draw 3-3 at Hamilton on Monday evening. Igor Rossi, Faycal Rherras and Robbie Muirhead came into the side at the expense of Alim Ozturk, Liam Smith and Tony Watt the latter pair dropping to the substitute's bench. The most welcome return of all, however, was – in the eyes of this writer – that of Arnaud Djoum who replaced Prince Buaben.

It took Hearts just 20 seconds to record the first shot on goal when Jamie Walker tried his luck but his effort was straight at Well keeper Samson.

Walker looked in the mood and he set off on a long run before forcing Samson to save down at his post. He then linked well with captain Perry Kitchen before testing Samson again but, again, the Motherwell number one was equal to the task.

It was all Hearts in the early stages of the game. Callum Paterson raced down the right wing before passing to Bjorn Johnsen but the big American blazed his effort high into the Roseburn Stand. Moments later, Johnsen left McManus for dead before delivering a fine cross into the Motherwell penalty box but Djoum couldn't get to the ball before Samson.

Edinburgh Reporter reader Norman Towler, resident in Texas but still a devoted Jambo, had suggested before the game that this match report would read 'Hearts rue missed chances' and it seemed he might be proved right as Hearts continued to pass up opportunities to score. And the feeling this may be 'one of those days' intensified in the 27th minute when Callum Paterson had to depart the scene having suffered a head knock. Despite his wish to carry on it was clear the Scotland defender was in no fit state to continue. It was an antidote to the old joke about Partick Thistle John Lambie when, upon being told one of his players had received concussion and didn't know who he was, barked at the physio 'then tell him he's Pele and get him back on his feet'.

However, five minutes later, Hearts took the lead with a well-worked goal. A superb pass from Arnaud Djoum picked out Bjorn Johnsen who coolly took the ball round Samson and fired home. As stadium announcer supreme Scott Wilson declared 'the opening goal of the game is from a Hearts striker' – not something that has happened too often this season.

Two minutes later, Hearts almost doubled their lead when Jamie Walker's cross only just eluded the feet of Djoum in the penalty box.

Hearts were on fire at this stage and it should have been 2-0

moments later. Faycal Rherras fine cross into the Motherwell penalty box was headed over Samson by Bjorn Johnsen into the net and the Maroon Army acclaimed another goal. However, the assistant referee decreed Johnsen to be offside – a decision that looked highly questionable.

Right on the stroke of half-time, more fine play from Jamie Walker found Djoum but this time the midfield player fried just over. He had another chance seconds later when Robbie Muirhead's corner was headed on by Igor Rossi – but Djoum opted to find some chums in the Roseburn Stand with his effort.

Half-time Hearts 1 Motherwell 0

Motherwell manager Mark McGhee made a double substitution at the beginning of the second half but, just five minutes in, he must have wondered if it had been worth it as Hearts doubled their lead. Another fine delivery from Muirhead was met by the head of Johnsen and the ball looped into the net. 2-0 for the home side.

I opined to grandson Jack that Hearts needed to consolidate this lead. The boys in maroon heeded my advice rather too strongly as Motherwell finally became an attacking threat and Hearts were pushed back. It took a couple of goal line clearances from Rherras to maintain Hearts two goal advantage while John Souttar came to the home side's rescue by knocking a goal bound effort from Ainsworth over the crossbar.

The impressive Robbie Muirhead was causing the visitor's defence all sorts of problems with his direct running down the left wing and the former Killie player had an effort saved by the overworked Samson in the 64th minute.

With Motherwell pressing for the goal that would bring them back into the game, Hearts hit the Steelmen with a counter attack two minutes later. Jamie Walker got possession in the

middle of the field and passed to Arnaud Djoum. Mindful of the Cameroon international's wayward efforts on goal in the first half, the home fans gave a sigh of relief when he returned the ball to Walker inside the Motherwell penalty box. Young Jamie finished with aplomb to make it 3-0 to Hearts – and it was game over.

The much-maligned Conor Sammon made a substitute appearance and he at least had an attempt on goal with a shot that was somewhat scuffed and trundled wide of Samson's right hand post.

Sammon then had another chance which was deflected for a corner before Igor Rossi showed why he is a defender by firing his shot on goal into the Gorgie Stand.

John Souttar and Faycal Rherras then cleared off the line as Motherwell sought a consolation. But the game ended at 3-0 to Hearts and a much-needed win was secured.

Robbie Neilson was a satisfied man after the game. He told BBC Radio Scotland

“I thought we started really well with good energy. We passed the ball well and quickly and it was a pleasing performance all round. We get the first goal and we think we have a second that gets chalked off and that was disappointing but we score and kill the game off.

“Arnaud Djoum is a top player and we had him linking with Johnsen. I thought Robbie Muirhead did really well out on the left. He gave us that balance that we have been looking for. I thought we also defended well apart from set plays but we managed to see them out.”

Hearts remain in fourth place in the Ladbrokes Premiership but have the chance to go second on Wednesday evening when Rangers visit Tynecastle for a game which is already a sell-out.

Hearts: Hamilton, Paterson (L. Smith, 27'), Souttar, Rossi, Rherras, Walker, Kitchen, Cowie (Currie, 75'), Djoum, Muirhead, Johnsen (Sammon, 68').

Motherwell: Samson, Tait, Heneghan, McManus, Moulton, Cadden (Hastie, 65'), Lasley, Clay, Ferguson (Ainsworth, 46') , McMillan (Hammell, 46'), McDonald.

Referee: Bobby Madden

Att: 16,199

Top man: Robbie Muirhead – on this form it's difficult to see his namesake keeping him out of the team.