

Glimmer of Hope But Hearts Still Lose at Celtic Park



Celtic 2 Heart of Midlothian 0

Ladbroke's Premiership, Sunday 21st May 2017 – Celtic Park

Season 2016/17 began way back on 30th June for Hearts as they embarked on an all-too brief qualifying campaign for the Europa League. Nearly eleven months, two Head Coaches and a plethora of new faces later, Hearts ended the season with a somewhat predictable defeat at the home of champions Celtic. However, as in the display at Ibrox the other week, there were glimmers of hope of better times ahead for the Maroons as Hearts gave a resolute display.

Hearts under-fire Head Coach Ian Cathro made a couple of changes to the side that lost at St Johnstone on Wednesday. Many expected striker Bjorn Johnsen – who showed obvious displeasure in being replaced at half-time in Perth – to pay the cost of such petulance, particularly when Hearts were going into the cauldron of Celtic Park. However, Cathro kept Johnsen in the side alongside Isma Goncalves. Sam Nicholson made way for the now free from suspension Prince Buaben while Malaury Martin was replaced by 19-year-old Jamie Brandon.

Although there was a party atmosphere at the home of the champions – among the home support at east – there was a definite 'end-of-term' feel as the game kicked off. Hearts were content to sit back and absorb Celtic pressure but it took the home team fully 15 minutes to pose a threat on goal when Griffiths fired in a free-kick from 20 yards which went inches past.

As expected, Celtic dominated possession but young Brandon wasn't afraid to put in a tackle or two in midfield which was encouraging from a maroon point of view.

In the 20th minute, Tierney fired in from long-range but his effort was just too high. McGregor was next to try his luck but former Celtic keeper Noring saved well.

It was pretty much one-way traffic but Hearts almost took an unexpected lead in the 26th minute when Alex Tziolis fired in a long-range shot which came agonisingly close for a rare Hearts goal at Celtic Park.

Noring was the Hearts hero when he saved well from Boyata before, just before half-time, Bjorn Johnsen curled a free-kick which whistled past Gordon's post.

Half-time Celtic 0 Hearts 0

Given the champions' free-scoring record this season and Hearts well-documented defensive woes, it was something of a surprise – not to say relief for the small band of Hearts fans who travelled west – to see the game still goalless as the second half kicked off. But, inevitably, this didn't last long.

Just five minutes into the second half, Hearts defence resorted to type. Roberts was given far too much space to cross for Griffiths – inexplicably unmarked – to head past Noring.

The former Hibernian striker nearly made it two five minutes later but fired into the side net.

Noring saved from Brown as the Hoops upped the tempo but Hearts could have drawn level in the 65th minute. Tziolis delivered a fine pass for Bjorn Johnsen who chested the ball and raced into the Celtic penalty box. Sadly, the big

American's shot lacked any power and was easily saved by former Hearts keeper Craig Gordon.

With 14 minutes left, it was game over. Roberts fired a pass into the Hearts penalty box where the ball broke to Armstrong who blasted past Noring to make it 2-0 – and ensure Celtic would complete their league campaign unbeaten.

Hearts threw on another teenager – Euan Henderson – and great play from the debutant set up fellow substitute Malaury Martin who forced a fine save from Gordon. From the corner, Johnsen's header bounced back off the post with the Celtic keeper beaten.

Martin again forced Gordon into a fine save but the game ended soon after with another defeat for Hearts although there was plenty to be encouraged about from youngsters Brandon and Henderson.

One suspects there will be major changes to this Hearts team over the summer. Given the team's performances and results over much of the last six months, one certainly hopes so.

Celtic: Gordon, Simunovic (Toure, 74'), Brown, Griffiths, Sinclair, Gamboa (Rogic, 46'), Armstrong (Sviatchenko, 79'), Boyata, Roberts, McGregor, Tierney.

Hearts: Noring, Nowak, Buaben (Walker, 65'), Hughes, Smith, Brandon, Tziolis (Henderson, 78'), Cowie, Djoum, Johnsen, Goncalves (Martin, 55').

Referee: John Beaton

Att: 58,967

Top man: Jamie Brandon

