

Hearts Draw a Blank at Tynecastle



Hearts 0 Ross County 0

Ladbrokes Premiership, Saturday 25th November 2017 – Tynecastle Park

Hearts winless run extended to five games after a goalless affair with Ross County in the Ladbrokes Premiership at Tynecastle Park on Saturday. However, the Maroons dominated a game they should have won handsomely, and the performance was a notable improvement on last Sunday's draw with Partick Thistle.

Gorgie gaffer Craig Levein made three changes to the side that struggled to that draw with Don Cowie, Ross Callachan and the flu-hit Kyle Lafferty moving to the substitutes bench, being replaced by Jamie Walker, Harry Cochrane and Cole Stockton.

The effects of Scotland playing a rugby international against Australia across the Western Approach Road, the month before Christmas (and Black Friday offers spilling into the weekend) and freezing temperatures meant Hearts were playing in front of their lowest home attendance in the league this season and the somewhat muted atmosphere appeared to encourage Ross County who made a bright opening. Just five minutes were on the clock when a quick break forward saw Schalk fire a shot off the post with Hearts keeper Jon McLaughlin motionless.

However, Hearts grew into the game. Cole Stockton, still without a goal this season and the butt of some Hearts supporters' jibes, was working hard in his role of target man and he set up Jamie Walker whose strong drive was eventually saved by County keeper McCarey.

Walker, now fully recovered from the hamstring injury he sustained against Rangers four weeks ago, was looking lively but he was rather restricted with long-range efforts on goal, one of which went inches wide, the other deflected over the crossbar.

Arnaud Djoum was providing a much-needed impact in the Hearts midfield and when the Cameroon international dived to head Harry Cochrane's corner the Maroon Army rose to acclaim a goal – only to realise the ball had went inches wide. Djoum then tried his luck from the edge of the penalty box. The ball fell to Isma Goncalves but his attempt to open the scoring was weak.

County were making their physical presence felt much to the anger of the home support, but referee John Beaton didn't see anything amiss – just like he didn't see Jamie Walker's shot on goal take a deflection off a County defender. No corner said the referee, despite the protests of the home players and support. The chant from Tynecastle's impressive new stand implied that Mr Beaton didn't know what he was doing.

Ross County keeper McCarey was having a busy afternoon and he pulled off two more impressive saves before half-time from a long-range shot from Harry Cochrane and a header from Cole Stockton.

Half-time Hearts 0 Ross County 0

There was a blow for Hearts when defender Aaron Hughes didn't appear for the second half and he was replaced by Prince Buaben.

Hearts remained on top but despite the probing from David Milinkovic, Jamie Walker and even Jamie Brandon, the home team couldn't break down a resolute Ross County defence.

Walker tried an ambitious overhead kick which was straight at keeper McCarey while Cole Stockton fired a shot high into the

Gorgie Stand.

Gorgie captain Christophe Berra then forced McCarey into a fine save but Isma Goncalves fluffed a great opportunity from close range.

Hearts threw everything at Ross County but had to settle for a share of the points which, I suspect, was manager Owen Coyle's objective at the start of the game.

Craig Levein wore his now accustomed look of disappointment after the game. He told the official Hearts website:

"I've got contrasting emotions, because I'm delighted with the performance but I'm disappointed with the result. To get to this from last week is a big step forward. I want the team to play like this more often. Obviously, with more goals at the end of the build-up, but that's the play I want us to maintain.

"We talked about the performance. I stressed to them that football is hard and sometimes it seems like nothing goes right, but today Jon McLaughlin had no save to make, and defensively we cruised it again. We did a lot really well, the midfield functioned well too. We kept the pressure on and their keeper had to make numerous really good saves."

Hearts inability to score goals is a major concern and with Dundee defeating Rangers on Friday evening the more 'glass half-empty' thinking of the Hearts support are looking over their shoulders at a potential relegation battle. The hope was that Hearts would take advantage of their plethora of home games but the last four have yielded a total of just two points from a possible twelve.

Hamilton Academical are next up at Tynecastle Park next Saturday. Nothing less than three points for Hearts will do.

Hearts: McLaughlin, M. Smith, Berra, Hughes (Buaben, 46'),

Brandon, Djoum, Cochrane (Cowie, 79'), Walker, Isma (Lafferty, 82'), Milinkovic, Stockton.

Ross County: McCarey, Fraser, Naismith, Routis, Kelly, Gardyne, Schalk (Curran, 71'), Davies (Lindsay, 41'), Draper, O'Brien (Dow, 60'), Keillor-Dunn.

Referee: John Beaton

Attendance: 15,601

Top man: Arnaud Djoum – not quite back to his best but he made his presence felt in the midfield.