

Glorious Hearts Shatter Celtic's Unbeaten Record



Hearts 4 (four) Celtic 0

Ladbrokes Premiership, Sunday 17th December 2017 – Tynecastle Park

Having seen their team score just eight goals in the league at home this season, the visit to Tynecastle Park of the unbeaten league champions was not something Hearts fans were particularly looking forward to. Added to this was the fact the home side were without influential players Arnaud Djoum, Jamie Walker and John Souttar and one could see how a word associated with Christmas dinner might be applied to the Ladbrokes Premiership game with Celtic. And so, it came to pass that, shortly after 2.15pm on Sunday, one team was well and truly stuffed.

That team was Celtic whose 69-game unbeaten run in domestic games in Scotland was shattered into tiny pieces in front of a disbelieving but ecstatic Hearts support.

Hearts last couple of performances lent hope to a team slowly turning the tide of what has so far been a dismal season for those in maroon. A narrow 1-0 win over a high-flying Motherwell side eight days ago was followed by an impressive 2-0 win over Dundee on Tuesday. Celtic, though, would be a different kettle of fish. The 'invincibles' had not tasted defeat in Scotland since May 2016, prior to present manager Brendan Rodgers taking over. They almost succumbed at Easter Road last Sunday after throwing away a two-goal lead at Hibernian but very few people saw them losing to the team from the other side of Edinburgh.

Hearts Head Coach Craig Levein made no less than seven changes

from the team that won convincingly against Dundee in Gorgie on Tuesday evening. The impressive Anthony McDonald was left out as was Isma Goncalves, Lewis Moore, Rafal Grzelak, Cole Stockton, the injured Arnaud Djoum and the suspended John Souttar.

Coming into the Hearts team were Harry Cochrane, Don Cowie, Ross Callachan, Michael Smith, Jamie Brandon, David Milinkovic and the man the Celtic fans love to hate, former Rangers striker Kyle Lafferty.

A huge crowd greeted the teams for the lunch-time kick-off for a game being shown around the country by Sky Sports.

Hearts had a determined look about them from the kick-off. Lafferty had the game's first chance when he turned on the edge of the Celtic penalty box but his shot on goal went over the bar and into the baying Celtic support in the Roseburn Stand.

Former Hearts keeper Craig Gordon was almost caught out by Don Cowie before Ross Callachan burst forward but his effort on goal went the same way as Lafferty's earlier effort.

Still, it was an encouraging start for the depleted home side although the unbeaten league champions had an opportunity to open the scoring when Forrest set up Griffiths, but the former Hibernian striker slipped, and the chance was gone.

At the other end, Christophe Berra wasn't far away with a header from a corner from Don Cowie.

Midway through the first half, Griffiths had another opportunity for the visitors after being set up once more by Forrest, but his effort went into the side-netting.

It was a pulsating game and Hearts were having a real go at the league champions. In the 26th minute, Tynecastle erupted when Hearts took the lead. Fine play from Connor Randall found

Don Cowie who fed Harry Cochrane. The 16-year-old looked up and lashed the ball into the net from the edge of the penalty box to the unconfined joy of the Hearts support.

Celtic looked stunned and it could have been 2-0 minutes later when Don Cowie and young Cochrane – both getting through a power of work in midfield – set up David Milinkovic whose fierce shot forced a brilliant save from Gordon.

Eleven minutes before half-time Hearts, incredibly, were 2-0 ahead. The impressive Milinkovic won the ball and passed to Kyle Lafferty. The striker lashed home a shot which struck a post before trundling into the net. Bedlam at Tynecastle!

Half-time Hearts 2 Celtic 0

It had been an incredible first half, but one wondered if such a tremendous effort would take its toll on the Hearts players. Celtic brought on Dembele and Armstrong at the start of the second half and, inevitably, began with an onslaught on the Hearts defence.

The maroon rear-guard, however, stood firm with Christophe Berra and Michael Smith coping admirably with everything Celtic could throw at them although Sinclair had an effort blocked when it looked like he would score.

Then, just three minutes into the second period, a goal did arrive. But not at the end most expected. A slip from Simunovic allowed David Milinkovic to take the ball round Gordon and slot the ball home for Hearts third. Tynecastle was rocking to its new foundations!

Celtic's long unbeaten record was now under serious threat, but Griffiths fired in a long-range effort which was brilliantly saved by Hearts keeper Jon McLaughlin.

Hearts were now happy to hit on the counter-attack and with 14 minutes left put the seal on a memorable victory with an

astonishing fourth goal.

Ross Callachan, who must have covered every blade of Tynecastle grass, ran through on goal and was brought down by Gordon. Penalty said referee Willie Collum and Milinkovic duly converted the spot kick.

Remarkable as it seemed Hearts were coasting now, and the home support even had time to perform the 'Poznan' when they mimicked Celtic supporters by turning their backs on the game, linking arms and jumping up and down. It was a sweet moment for the Maroon Army who have witnessed far too many thumpings at the hands of Celtic in recent years.

When Willie Collum blew his whistle for the final time the magnificent Hearts players were given a tumultuous reception by an ecstatic Hearts support. It was Hearts biggest winning margin over Celtic since 1895 and the first time they had scored four goals against the Hoops since 1972.

Craig Levein was understandably delighted after the game. He told the official Hearts website:

"It's up there with the best moments I've experienced. All credit to Celtic to even be in that position to begin with, trying to get to seventy wins, it takes a huge a level of commitment and effort to get there. That said, for us to be the team to defeat them is outstanding.

"If you get caught, they can cut you open," he continued. "The defenders and their recovery runs when the high press didn't work, that was where we made the difference. We also had Michael Smith doing something he wasn't used to – playing at centre-half – but he was fantastic.

"He and the rest of the defence dealt with a very talented frontline superbly, but it was a team effort ultimately. Today wasn't a day where we could have 9 or 10 players and one not on their game, it had to be collective, and they got their

rewards for their hard work.”

On man-of-the-match Harry Cochrane, Levein said “We don’t want to start putting people on a pedestal. Having said that, Harry is a pleasure to work with. He’s a well-mannered, well brought up boy who just loves playing football. It’s all new to him, but he’s going around like the Cheshire Cat.

“He’s really got something, and it’s not easy to play well in a match like today. Scott Brown is a tremendous player, and Harry could learn a lot from him, but ultimately today it was our day and Harry was on the winning side.”

Given Hearts unimpressive form for much of this season, few would have expected Celtic’s 18-month unbeaten domestic run to have ended in Gorgie on Sunday. But it did after arguably Hearts best performance for many a year.

I had mentioned to my 12-year-old grandson Jack that, given Hearts selection crisis and the fact it was Celtic they were playing, we might want to leave when the score got to 4-0. But we didn’t leave at 4-0 – we stayed to the glorious, if somewhat unexpected end!

Hearts: McLaughlin, Brandon, Berra, M.Smith, Randall, Cowie, Callachan (Grzelak, 85’), Cochrane, Buaben (McDonald, 66’), Milinkovic, Lafferty (Stockton, 72’).

Celtic: Gordon, Lustig, Simunovic, Boyata, Tierney (Dembele, 46’), Forrest, Ntcham (Armstrong, 46’), Brown, McGregor (Edouard, 66’), Sinclair, Griffiths.

Referee: Willie Collum

Attendance: 18,555

Top Man: Harry Cochrane – although ‘man’ might be pushing it. He couldn’t accept the champagne offered for the man-of-the-match as he isn’t legally old enough to drink it!