

Another Betfred Cup Struggle For Hearts



Raith Rovers 1 Heart of Midlothian 1

(Hearts get bonus point after winning penalty shoot-out 4-2)

Betfred Cup Section C – Saturday 21st July 2018 – Bayview Stadium

Hearts had to settle for a 1-1 draw in their Betfred Cup tie with Raith Rovers this afternoon on an afternoon when the Tynecastle team huffed and puffed but made little impression. Nisbet gave the Fife team the lead early in the second half and it took a wonder strike from Hearts Michael Smith to earn a draw. Hearts did gain a bonus point by winning the penalty shoot-out 4-2 but it was yet another below-par performance in this competition for the Gorgie side.

Hearts Head Coach Craig Levein made a couple of changes from the side that made hard work of defeating Highland League champions Cove Rangers on Wednesday evening. Michael Smith and Steven Naismith replaced Callumn Morrison and Steven MacLean respectively.

On a bright afternoon at East Fife's Bayview Stadium – the game being moved from Raith Rovers' Starks Park due to work being carried out on the pitch there – Hearts began brightly enough and after three minutes Olly Lee's shot from the edge of the penalty box was too deliberate to trouble Rovers keeper Thomson.

Duggan then had a chance for Raith when he tested Hearts keeper Zdenek Zlamal before Olly Lee had a shot on goal which was deflected wide.

Kyle Lafferty had a chance with a free-kick after 26 minutes,

but last season's top scorer saw his effort easily dealt with by the home defence. It was to turn out to be one of those days to forget for the Northern Irish striker.

The best scoring opportunity came for the home side seven minutes before half-time. Valentine escaped the attention of Peter Haring and delivered a deep cross towards Watson, but the defender headed wide when it seemed easier to score. It was a major let-off for Hearts.

Hearts Jake Mulraney, who impressed against Cove Rangers the other night, wasn't having such a joyous time but he did cross for the ineffectual Lafferty whose shot scarcely troubled keeper Thomson.

Half-time: Raith Rovers 0 Hearts 0

The second half took on the same look as the first; plenty of Hearts possession but with Raith keeper Thomson not having a lot to do.

In the 51st minute the inevitable happened. More slack defensive play from the visitors saw Nisbet through on keeper Zlamal and he stabbed the ball home to put Raith Rovers in front. Cue an angry reaction from the travelling Maroon Army.

Bozanic fired in an effort but it was saved by Thomson as frustration began to boil over. Lafferty was hauled off to make way for young Aidan Keena and he at least had a shot on target but, again, keeper Thomson was able to save.

It was beginning to look like Hearts would travel back across the River Forth empty-handed but with 12 minutes left they finally equalised with a stormer of a goal from an unlikely source. Defender Michael Smith collected the ball 25 yards from goal and unleashed a ferocious drive which flew into the top left-hand corner of the net to finally bring some joy to the Hearts support.

In injury time, it looked like Hearts had snatched all three points when Christophe Berra headed home Bobby Burns' corner, but referee Robertson inexplicably blew his whistle for a foul on a Raith defender. The game ended moments later at 1-1.

Hearts did pick up a bonus point when Michael Smith, Aidan Keena, Steven Naismith and John Souttar successfully converted their penalty kicks to enable Hearts to win the penalty shoot-out 4-2. But it was another disappointing display from Hearts in the Betfred Cup and with the likelihood of the win against Cove Rangers being overturned after Hearts admitted fielding an ineligible player – the SPFL will deliver their decision on Monday – Craig Levein's team will need to win their remaining two games against Cowdenbeath on Tuesday evening and John Robertson's Inverness Caledonian Thistle on Sunday week if they want to progress to the knock-out stages of the competition. 'Robbo' was in the stand at Bayview and must have left in a confident mood.

At least Craig Levein was honest enough after the game to say he was disappointed with the performance of his side, particularly some of his senior players. He told the official Hearts website:

"I don't know what the referee saw, the defender wiped out their keeper and we've been penalised, but I'm angry at our performance in parts too.

"I'm irritated I had to bring on three young kids to improve us", he continued. "For me, that's what's most disappointing. Senior players playing today didn't have enough digging in. If both teams put in the same effort, 99 times out of 100 we win, and I feel Raith put in more effort than we did today.

"I told the players what's expected, it's not good enough, we moved the ball far too slowly. It's dry, it's sunny, I get that, but it's not an excuse. We didn't run in behind the defence, or hold the ball up, or switch the play. If we did

these things we'd win the game comfortably."

"I'd rather have the bonus point than not, but I felt before this match if we won this game, then qualification was still in our own hands, and now it might not be. If Inverness win on Tuesday, they're on nine points – and potentially, we might not be able to reach that total. Now, it looks like we might have to score a lot of goals in the next two games."

Hearts now face Cowdenbeath at Tynecastle on Tuesday evening.

Raith Rovers: Thomson, Watson, Valentine, Davidson, Murray, Benedictus, Duggan (Milne, 62'), Gillespie, Matthews, Nisbet (Stevenson, 80'), McKay.

Hearts: Zlamal, M. Smith, Haring, Souttar, Berra, Mulraney (McDonald, 73'), Burns, Lee, Bozanic (Morrison, 58'), Naismith, Lafferty (Keena, 51').

Referee: Don Robertson

Att: 1,452

Top people: The travelling Hearts support – if some of the players matched the effort of the fans then Hearts would have won easily.