

Young Hearts just fall short at Celtic Park

Celtic 2 Heart of Midlothian 1

Ladbrokes Premiership, Sunday 19th May 2019
– Celtic Park

On 19th May 2012 Hearts visited Glasgow for the Scottish Cup final. They took their neighbours with them, but they didn't stay for the after-match party and had to leave early.

On 19th May 2019 Hearts were back in Glasgow. This time it was a much less intense occasion, being the final game of a long Ladbrokes Premiership season.

With league business already done and dusted both Hearts and Celtic opted to rest several key players with eyes on next week's Scottish Cup final between the pair at Hampden. Hearts began the game with no fewer than eight players under the age of 22, including two 17-year-olds.

Hearts record in the east end of Glasgow is nothing short of horrendous and the small band of travelling fans who made the trip – and kudos to them for their devotion, parting with hard-earned cash for a meaningless league game six days before the cup final – must have feared another afternoon of misery when the champions went ahead within two minutes. Johnston was given too much time in the Hearts penalty box and he fired an effort into the net past a bewildered Hearts keeper Bobby Zlamal who, perhaps, should have done better at his near post.

Things got worse for the visitors soon after when Olly Lee limped off injured. The Englishman was only in the starting eleven because Harry Cochrane called off with illness. Lee was replaced by Ryan Edwards.

If the Hearts support were covering their eyes at this stage they were soon lifting them when the Jambos unexpectedly equalised in the 18th minute. Craig Wighton pressurised Celtic keeper Bain whose hurried pass was seized upon by Sean Clare. The Englishman squared to Jake Mulraney who curled a superb shot past the Celtic keeper to draw parity.

Thereafter, Hearts youngsters gave a very good account of themselves with neat passing and determined defending. Andy Irving, in particular, looked comfortable and there was a

sublime piece of skill from young Connor Smith who managed to bamboozle two Celtic players and pull away from them.

There was more injury woe for Hearts when John Souttar went off but the smile on the defender's face as he departed hinted this was just a precaution ahead of next week's showpiece game at Hampden.

Just when it seemed the Hearts youngsters were about to take a point their play thoroughly merited, Celtic grabbed a winner when Johnston scored his second goal of the afternoon, shooting past Zlamal after he was given the freedom of Parkhead to get his shot in.

Another defeat for Hearts, then, to end another disappointing league season. However, manager Craig Levein will be happy with the performance of his youngsters and with Uche Ikpeazu, Peter Haring, Arnaud Djoum and captain Christophe Berra hoping to be back next week, hopes of winning the Scottish Cup for the fourth time in 21 years may not be the lost cause some believe it to be.

Celtic:

Bain; Ralston; Ajer; Benkovic; Toljan; Bitton; Ntcham; Johnston; Henderson; Sinclair; Burke.

Hearts: Zlamal; M. Smith; Souttar; Shaughnessy; Hickey; C. Smith; Irving; Lee; Mulraney; Clare; Wighton

Referee: Craig Thomson