

Hope for Hearts despite falling further behind

Heart of Midlothian 1 Aberdeen 1

Ladbrokes Premiership, Sunday 29th December
2019 – Tynecastle Park

Hearts

ended 2019 without a victory in nine games and were cast further adrift at the bottom of the Ladbrokes Premiership table but there was much to be positive about as the Maroons fought out a 1-1 draw with Aberdeen at Tynecastle after playing the last 20 minutes with only ten men.

Manager

Daniel Stendel had seen his new team lose all four games he has been in charge of and after Boxing Day's listless display in the Edinburgh derby defeat to Hibernian, he made four changes to the team. Jake Mulraney, Aidan White, Loic Damour and captain Christophe Berra were all dropped –

Mulraney and White didn't even make the substitutes' bench – with returns for Clevid Dikamona, Oliver Bozanic, Andy Irving and Euan Henderson.

Given

recent results Hearts made a nervous start but at least Andy Irving looked capable and confident enough to put his foot on the ball and play and one of his early passes found Ryotaro Meshino. The Japanese forward exchanged passes with Euan Henderson before firing wide.

Meshino

was involved again soon after and he fired over from 20 yards as the home team began to dominate the game. And it was Meshino once more who almost opened the scoring when he got on the end of a cross from Uche Ikpeazu, but his effort was cleared off the goal line.

Irving

and Meshino were controlling the midfield and there was a real chance for Craig Halkett, but the stand-in captain saw his effort blocked.

Aaron

Hickey then crossed for Oliver Bozanic, but the Australian's header was brilliantly saved by Dons keeper Lewis.

Hearts

were looking a different team from the one that has struggled in recent weeks and their efforts were rewarded four minutes into the second half. Henderson

got in front of Dons defender McKenna and set up Meshino. The on-loan Manchester City player ran forward and curled a magnificent shot from 25 yards which soared beyond Lewis and into the net to give Hearts a well-deserved lead.

Hearts should have doubled their lead when the impressive Henderson backheeled the ball to Irving whose shot from 20 yards produced another brilliant save from Lewis.

The home support had something to cheer about for the first time in weeks and they taunted the visiting fans with chants of 'Can We Play You Every Week?' However, this wouldn't be Hearts without a twist in the tale.

Daniel Stendel was shown a yellow card for the heinous crime of kicking a water bottle after disagreeing with one of the many strange decisions made by referee Alan Muir. If Stendel was angry at that he was enraged moments later when Hearts were reduced to ten men. Aberdeen's Gallagher ran through on goal only to be pulled back by Sean Clare. Mr Muir clearly believed the Hearts man had denied the visitors a goalscoring opportunity and flashed a red card at the Hearts man.

As if this wasn't bad enough Aberdeen's McGinn struck the resultant free kick with

aplomb and the ball crashed into the Hearts net off the post meaning the visitors had drawn parity.

However, Hearts showed great spirit and character and despite being a man short could well have nicked a winner. Long-term injury victims Conor Washington and Ben Garuccio came off the substitutes' bench to warm applause from the home support. Washington showed some fine touches, but he couldn't produce the winner the home side richly deserved.

Daniel Stendel was much happier after the game despite another game without a win. He told BBC Sport Scotland:

"We can be disappointed because, until the red card, we were defending well, we dominated the game and had some good chances to score before we scored.

"I need a bit of time to see which players can play the way I want, and I hope we can start with some new players, but I'm really sure we can climb the table if we play more games like this."

It turned out to be a bittersweet afternoon for Hearts. An encouraging performance against a top side nearly produced a much-needed victory and, at one point in the afternoon, it looked like they may even leapfrog Hamilton Accies who had gone 1-0 down at Motherwell after just five minutes. However, while Hearts were pegged back Accies produced a storming

fightback and won 2-1 meaning the gap between them and Hearts at the bottom of the table is now a worrying five points.

The league programme now goes into a mid-season recess – and Hearts next opponents in the Ladbrokes Premiership are Ross County followed by the visit of Rangers to Tynecastle. But there is hope – and, to quote from the classic film *The Shawshank Redemption*, hope is a good thing.

Hearts: Pereira, Smith, Bozanic (Garuccio, 84'), Clare, Ikpeazu (Damour, 70'), Halkett, Dikamona, Irving, Henderson, Hickey, Meshino (Washington, 75').

Aberdeen: Lewis, Logan, McKenna, Main (Wilson, 54'), Taylor, Ferguson, Gallagher, Ojo (Hedges, 84'), Campbell, Anderson, Vyner (McGinn, 45').

Referee: Alan Muir

Attendance: 17,788

Top

man: Andy

Irving