

Hearts shake off festive hangover with big league win

Hearts 5-3 Ayr United

Hearts came from behind to notch up their seventh win in eight league games with a 5-3 Boxing Day victory over Ayr United at a storm battered Tynecastle Park.

Six days on from their agonising [Scottish Cup final defeat to Celtic](#), the Gorgie side got back to league business with a result that puts them three points clear at the top of the Championship with a game in hand over second placed Dunfermline.

There were goals aplenty in this festive fixture but seven of the eight strikes came in the second half after Ayr threatened to spoil the Jambos' Christmas when they battled back to take a 2-1 lead on 59 minutes. However, four goals in 12 minutes from the home side saw them come roaring back to take the three points.

Hearts boss Robbie Neilson made three changes to his starting XI with Olly Lee, Jordan Roberts and Elliot Frear all coming in to replace Jamie Walker, Aidy White and Steven Naismith. There was no Aidy White or Josh Ginnelly in the Hearts matchday squad with an unnamed first team player being confirmed pre-match as having tested positive for coronavirus on Christmas Eve.

The wind and the rain was battering down in the capital with storm Bella making it tricky for both sides. Stephen Kingsley's opening goal for Hearts epitomised the conditions perhaps when his 35 yard freekick was fumbled on the greasy surface by Ayr keeper Viljami Sinisalo .

Whilst the away side were letting Hearts play, certainly in the middle of the park, they did threaten themselves and could have taken the lead early on when Andy Murdoch had a decent shot blocked on seven minutes after a Craig Gordon fluffed clearance created an opportunity.

Other clear cut chances were few and far between with longer efforts the theme of the half with Michael Smith's 30 yard raker coming back off the upright on 16 minutes.

If the first half wasn't miraculous, the match did come to life in the second half when Ayr bagged two goals in three minutes and raced to a shock lead. Cammy Smith prodded home from seven yards after meeting Michael Moffat's lay off. Luke McCowan then curled in a stunning second when he beat Gordon from a tight angle to put the Honest Men 2-1 up.

For the second time in two games, Hearts had to show spirit and resilience to battle back. Robbie Neilson introduced the influential Steven Naismith for the disappointing Jordan Roberts and striker Craig Wighton bolstered the Jambos' frontline by replacing winger Elliot Frear.

The setup for the Jambos' equaliser came from an unlikely source however when a rampaging captain for the day, Christophe Berra, found himself on the attacking wing to cross low for Wighton to strike. Just three minutes later, the JTs were back in front when a Kingsley cross was laid back by Liam Boyce for Lee to smash home from close range.

Another three minutes on and another Hearts goal. Wighton collected neatly on the edge of the box before unleashing a terrific low right footed effort in to the bottom corner to

bag his brace. With four Hearts goals scored and none of them credited to main striker Liam Boyce, the Northern Irishman was desperate to get himself on the scoresheet and on 79 minutes he finished with aplomb after being put through nicely by Wighton.

The sheen of the scoreline was perhaps dimmed somewhat when a defensive mix-up at the death enabled Tom Walsh to add an Ayr consolation. However, after the emotional highs and lows of last weekend's cup final defeat, to be able to return to league action with such fortitude and steel to overcome a losing position in such an emphatic manner will be welcome in Gorgie.

Robbie Neilson said: "At 1-0 up we were comfortable but we never managed to get into second gear. We then lost two sloppy goals and that fired us into life.

"The big concern for us was coming off the back of a big game and disappointment last week, we had to make sure we were back at it again. The main thing was to get a victory."

Hearts: Gordon, Smith, Halkett, Berra, Kingsley (Haring, 78 mins), Lee, Irving, Halliday, Roberts (Naismith, 58 mins), Boyce, Frear (Wighton, 63 mins) Subs: Walker, Stewart, Popescu, Henderson

Ayr United: Sinisalo, Muirhead, Baird, Roscoe-Byrne, Reading, McCowan, Murdoch, Miller, Chalmers (Walsh, 78 mins), Smith (Zanatta, 78 mins), Moffat (Anderson, 58 mins) Subs not used: Houston, Hare-Reid, McKenzie, Kerr

Referee: David Munro



Tynecastle Park. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com