

Proud Hearts go down in cup final penalty shoot-out

Hearts 3-3 Celtic

Celtic won 3-4 on penalties.

A battling Hearts lost out on their ninth Scottish Cup with a penalty shoot-out loss to Celtic at Hampden.

After a drab first half in which the current holders strolled to a 2-0 lead, Liam Boyce fired the Jambos back in to the game straight after the restart with an excellent header after Aidy White's efforts on the left and Andy Halliday's cross.

Goal line technology was on hand to confirm Stephen Kingsley's 67th minute equaliser after Celtic simply wilted under the Hearts' pressure.

It was a poignant day for the Jambos with the team sporting shorts emblazoned with club legend and cup winning captain Marius Zaliukas' '26'. However, the first half did not go to plan with Celtic, hunting down their fourth treble, dominating possession and territory. It didn't take long for the opener when Ryan Christie curled in a spectacular effort after 19 minutes. Ten minutes later the Hoops were two to the good when Christophe Berra handled in the box and Odsonne Edouard cheekily dinked in the penalty much to Craig Gordon's annoyance.

In the second half it was a different game. Hearts showed more energy and spirit to ensure they played further up the pitch and caused Celtic problems. Boyce's header came at a perfect time and enabled the JT's to focus. The holders' defence continued to look shaky with young keeper Conor Hazard causing

concern.

Celtic steadied somewhat in a pulsating second period with both teams looking threatening on the attack. Hearts lost Boyce to injury on 70 minutes when he was replaced by Craig Wighton. The change meant Hearts lost a bit of shape up top and, whilst Wighton looked neat with the ball at his feet, it didn't give the Jambos the same structure and outlet offered by the Northern Irishman.

Winger Josh Ginnelly joined the fray in the second half and added pace and threat to the Hearts' front line. He could have been on the scoresheet soon after his arrival with a Celtic defensive gaffe putting him through on goal however his shot was saved by Hazard.

In to extra time, Leigh Griffiths tapped home from close range at the end of the first period of extra time after a strong Scott Brown header was parried by Gordon. The Hoops' captain's antics after the goal certainly lacked class from a player who has achieved so much in Scotland.

However, the Jambos were not done. Ginnelly was to get on the scoresheet when he blasted home a Kingsley ball with nine minutes to go.

So, the final went to penalties. Captain Steven Naismith, Michael Smith and Olly Lee all netted for Hearts but Kingsley and Wighton both saw their efforts saved to enable Kristoffer Ajer to rifle home the decisive strike.

After the game, Hearts manager Robbie Neilson said: "I thought we were absolutely outstanding. To come back in the second half and then recover in the second half of extra-time was phenomenal. It shows all these players are fighting for this club.

"We looked at the teams that had beaten them and the only teams that had done that had played five at the back and three

in the middle to try and shut them off, so we did that. Even in the first half, but for a wondergoal and a penalty they didn't have anything else. So the game plan never really changed, it was just to be more aggressive, to get after them.

"I wasn't here last year but I think if that happened last year they couldn't come back from that.

"It shows we can compete against one of the top teams in Scotland. it shows we should be coming to Hampden regularly."

It was a sickening defeat for Hearts in a game that meant so much after Zaliukas' passing and the fall-out from their demotion to the Championship during the summer. The boys in maroon can be proud of their resolve and resilience but in a game of 'what could have been' defeat is a bitter pill to swallow.

Celtic: Hazard, Ajer, Jullien, Duffy (Johnston, 90), Taylor (Laxal, 83), Brown (Soro, 105), McGregor, Christie, Turnbull (Rogic, 68), Elyounoussi (Frimpongat 83), Edouard (Griffiths, 97) Subs not used: Barkas, Bitton, Klimala

Hearts: Gordon, Smith, Halkett, Berra, Kingsley, Irving (Frear, 109), Halliday (Haring, 90), Walker (Ginnelly, 57), Naismith, White (Lee, 82), Boyce (Wighton, 70) Subs not used: Roberts, Stewart, Popescu, Henderson

Referee: John Beaton