

Hearts – McKay and Ginnelly dazzle in convincing home win

Hearts opened up an eight-point gap in third spot with a 2-0 victory over bottom of the table St Johnstone.

Much of the talk in the lead up to this match was not anything to do with fans returning to Tynecastle for the first time since 12 December, but whether Hearts' boss, Robbie Neilson, would choose to start his Rangers bound defender, John Souttar, in a game when he seemed bound to be jeered by some supporters.

After explaining at Tuesday's press conference that Souttar would continue to be involved with the first team squad, Neilson stuck to his word as Souttar lined up in a now familiar defence alongside Craig Halkett and Stephen Kingsley. Souttar has signed a pre-contract deal with Rangers to join when his current contract expires.

New signings Nadir Ciftci and Daniel Cleary made their St Johnstone debuts, meanwhile their stopper Zander Clark returned after missing the previous two games.

It did not take long for the crowd to start calling in Souttar's direction. A loud boo followed the number four's name being read out over the tannoy and the Scotland international didn't feel much love from the home crowd after his first couple of touches. Former Jambos boss, Craig Levein, revealed that part of John Souttar's career choice is affected by a family member who is seriously ill.

Hearts appeared to have a good claim for a penalty after just ten minutes when Liam Gordon tangled with Josh Ginnelly, but referee Nick Walsh waved away the claims.

As you would expect, with Hearts being at home, they were enjoying the majority of possession but didn't manage to test Zander Clark until the 23rd minute when Barrie McKay would have found the bottom corner had it not been for Clark's fingertips.

St Johnstone were struggling to get a foothold in the game, but almost found themselves a goal to the good when Ciftci was gifted an opportunity but was denied down low by Scotland's number one.

After weathering an early storm, St Johnstone were growing in confidence and enjoying more of the ball. Ciftci tried his luck from distance but was denied by the chest of Craig Gordon.

After a goalless first half, the deadlock was broken just seconds into the second period. A ball over the top from McKay found Ginnelly, he had the composure to slot the ball past Zander Clark as Tynecastle erupted.

The first half boos in the direction of Souttar eventually were drowned out by clapping, however they re-emerged after the defender appeared to half-heartedly join in the celebrations for the goal with his teammates.

The game had now reached a stage where another Hearts goal was likely to seal all three points and Mackay-Steven probably should have provided it after being slipped in by McKay-who again seemed to be at the heart of most things the home side were creating- but was denied by Zander Clark.

Eventually, that second goal did arrive and again, McKay was the provider and Ginnelly the finisher. Ciftci gave the ball away and when trying to make amends collided with a teammate

in comical fashion. That left McKay with all the time in the world to unselfishly slip in the unmarked Ginnelly, who once again slotted past Zander Clark to wrap up all three points for the home side.

A lovely breakaway from Hearts saw McEneff and McKay link up before the latter found Devlin, Zander Clark was again alert to prevent a Hearts third, as Devlin's search for a first Hearts goal goes on.

McKay was substituted late on as the game petered out to a 2-0 final scoreline and he was fully deserving of the standing ovation he received. The Scotsman really does look a level above the other wingers Hearts have at their disposal and he will be a major asset in Hearts' quest for third spot.

As for St Johnstone, it was another game without a goal, they have now notched just 11 goals in their 21 league matches, but they certainly looked a more dangerous outfit with Nadir Ciftci leading the line.



Scottish Cup Quarter Final – Heart of Midlothian v Rangers.
Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh.
Credit: Ian Jacobs