

Shankland double edges Hearts closer to third spot

A double from Lawrence Shankland fired Hearts to within a point for third-placed Aberdeen thanks to a 3-1 victory in the cinch Scottish Premiership over lowly Kilmarnock before another big crowd at freezing Tynecastle.

The home side played some flowing football to dominate the first half and went into the dressing-room at the break comfortably 2-0 ahead, but Killie boss Derek McInnes made changes in the second and Hearts found themselves under pressure.

Killie hit back with a goal 17 minutes from time, but Shankland's late second, this time from the penalty spot, secured the three points in a game in which the home side had 540 passes against 315 from the opposition.

Overall, Hearts had 64 per cent of possession against 36 from their rivals and Jambos boss Robbie Neilson told BBC Sport Scotland that come back to playing after the World Cup was almost like having a first game of the season.

He added: "In the first 45 minutes we were exceptional. The second 45 was not as good."

To Kilmarnock's credit, he said, they were more aggressive in the second-half but the Hearts manager said: "There are still

a lot of things to learn.”

Neilson is pleased that he is not having to ask his squad to play Thursday and Sunday every week as he did in the first part of the campaign and he is pleased to be back playing games on a Saturday.

He is also delighted that his long injury list is receding and added: “It is massively important to have the best players available.”

Kilmarnock’s assistant manager, Tony Docherty, said that when you come to Tynecastle you know you have to compete for 90 minutes and he said: “The first 45 minutes were not good enough.”

The home side opened brightly, moving the ball around with authority, creating chances, and it was lively Josh Ginnelly who broke the deadlock in 19 minutes against a side who have dominated Hearts in recent games, winning four and drawing one of their last five against the Jambos.

Joe Wright failed to deal effectively with a long, high ball from inside the Hearts’ half and his attempted header was pounced on by Ginnelly who fired home low into the net for his third of the season, a well-taken strike.

And Killie lost another avoidable goal after 29 minutes. Sloppy marking in the box allowed Shankland freedom to move between two defenders and onto a floated free-kick from Robert Snodgrass. He sent the ball home with his head from close range.

Defender Alex Cochrane had the ball in the net again soon after but an offside flag denied the player, however Killie were not completely out of the picture and Lewis Mayo just failed to connect after a flick-on from a corner.

McInnes had seen enough by the break and introduced former

Hibs forward Christian Doidge. Chances began to arrive thanks to their more aggressive approach.

Wright had an opportunity from a free-kick but failed however the visitors counted to come forward and, from another set-piece, they netted on 73 minutes.

Daniel Armstrong sent the ball into the danger zone from near the right touchline and Ash Taylor ran in to fire past Hearts' goalkeeper Craig Gordon at the near post.

Killie continued to press, looking for something from the game, but, with seconds, left Wright was adjudged to have handled in the area and referee Willie Collum immediately pointed to the spot.

Up stepped Shankland (pictured in training *by Nigel Duncan*) to fire the ball down the middle and into the net to secure all three points and leave Killie in second-bottom spot with 15 points from 17 outings, three ahead of bottom club Dundee United who have played a game less.

And it is the men from Tannadice who Hearts, who have 24 points from 16 games, meet on Christmas Eve when they travel to Tannadice (14.00).