

Shankland saves Hearts but Gordon injury is big blow

Lawrence Shankland maintained his perfect penalty record by slotting home deep in injury time to claim a valuable point for Hearts against cinch Scottish Premiership bottom-markers Dundee United in an eventful Christmas Eve clash at Tannadice.

The former Dundee United star coolly sent the home side's Aussie-born goalkeeper, Mark Birighitti, the wrong way and slammed the ball into the back of the net to the relief of the large travelling support.

It was a controversial award, with commentators claiming it was a "soft" penalty, but Shankland's eighth spot kick of the season proved priceless and took his personal total to 15 so far.

The point was not enough to claim third place in the table, a position retained by Aberdeen on goal difference – Aberdeen on plus two and Hearts on plus one – with both sides on 25 points, but the Jambos have a game in hand.

United continue to prop up the rest with 13 points from their 17 games, but they were overshadowed in possession by Hearts who had 68 per cent of the ball against 32 per cent.

The Capital combine strung 457 passes together while Dundee

had 215, but the home side registered six shots on target against three from their rivals.

The Edinburgh side also had nine corners against six by the opposition, but United dug deep and held onto their slender lead until late on.

This match also saw two penalties awarded by the referee which were overturned by VAR in, an action-packed tussle on Tayside, Hearts' international goalkeeper Craig Gordon had to leave the field on a stretcher after a clash with Stephen Fletcher.

Hearts manager Robbie Neilson said the goalkeeper is a warrior but told BBC Sport Scotland: "It does not look good. We'll know more in a couple of days."

The afternoon started badly for Hearts who had targeted third spot before Christmas. Experienced defender Craig Halkett, who has just returned after injury, received treatment after three minutes, but looked in real pain, and he left the field soon after with Kye Rowles replacing him.

That failed to dampen Hearts' and Barry McKay had a chance but shot straight at the home goalkeeper and, at the other end, Gordon was forced to save from Glenn Middleton's left-foot shot.

United, with only one win in six games, took the lead when Stephen Fletcher counted, his left-foot shot flashing past Gordon from the edge of the box. Time: 20 minutes.

Josh Ginnelly attempted to level 11 minutes later, driving through the heart of the home defence and then curling the ball from the edge of the box towards goal but it flew inches wide.

United hit back immediately and midfielder Dylan Levitt crossed for 35-year-old Fletcher who fired his header towards Hearts' goal but Gordon beat the ball away for a corner.

Harkes then had a chance from the corner but he clipped the ball onto the bar as United tried to beat Hearts for the first time since February 2016.

Minutes later, Hearts were forced into a second change when Toby Sibbick replaced Stephen Kingsley and four minutes from the break Michael Smith levelled by firing low into the bottom corner from inside the box after being fed by Cammy Devlin.

The home side were not to be denied and United went in front for a second time when Levitt counted after 47 minutes and then Gordon produced a great save from Fletcher after a floated ball into the box.

Hearts boss Robbie Neilson rang the changes in a bid to salvage a point, but the scoreline stayed the same as the clock ticked down.

Then, four minutes into injury time, Shankland (pictured *by Nigel Duncan*) appeared to be knocked to the ground by a United defender and the visitors were awarded a penalty. The same player grabbed the ball and converted, much to the delight of the travelling fans.

Neilson's men are next in action on Wednesday when they travel to Perth to face St Johnstone (19.45) with the Tayside team in fifth position in the 12-strong division with 24 points from 18 outings.

And they will look to improve on their recent record of only two wins and two draws in their last five domestic games.

BBC Sport Scotland talked to United manager Liam Fox who said: "If I get what I got today from my team over the next weeks and months, we'll be fine."

Neilson said: "We played well in periods, lost a couple of poor goals and the game became a bit of a farce at the end with VAR and the decision-making by the officials. It was a

very strange day.”