

# Sensational Smith strike icing on the cake for Hearts

Toby Sibbick picked up the ball near Hearts' penalty box, looked up and saw Michael Smith unmarked on the right wing. He pinged an inch-perfect, cross-field pass to the bearded Northern Irishman who was lying unmarked in the Aberdeen half.

Smith (pictured) controlled the ball in full stride with a deft touch of his right boot and then fired an unstoppable shot past Aberdeen goalkeeper Joe Lewis with his left. Wonderful execution and a spectacular goal which had the freezing fans justifiably on their feet.

The fluency and speed of the move in the 28th minute was breathtaking and it put the home side 2-0 ahead. They never looked back. Three more goals followed as Hearts equalled their highest score against the depressed Dons.

The goal, however, was just one highlight of a heady night at Tynecastle in the cinch Scottish Premiership from which manager Robbie Neilson and the squad can take so many positives. Aberdeen held their own for the first ten minutes but then an own goal from Graeme Shinnie started the rout. The catalyst was a long throw from newcomer James Hill.

The England under-21 player told the media of his prowess with

the long throw at his maiden press-briefing and the tactic has come good for Hearts at an early stage of his loan spell from Premiership side Bournemouth.

Hill has made his mark and the 21-year-old former Fleetwood Town defender once again showed a full gamut of his talent against Aberdeen, his speed, his aggression, awareness and passing ability. An asset for Hearts even in the short term.

Smith's glorious strike came next and then ice cool Lawrence Shankland took centre stage on 40 minutes. Liam Scales handled in the box, VAR judging that his arm was in an unnatural position away from his body, and Hearts skipper feinted right before sending the ball low into the bottom left-hand corner of the net for his 19th goal of the season. The strike also continued his unblemished record from the spot.

Then, Josh Ginnelly took the spotlight. A flowing move down the right saw Smith feed Shankland who squared the ball along the six-yard line. Ginnelly did the rest.

So, 4-0 at the break, and an unhappy return to duty for the first time since May last year for 35-year-old goalkeeper Lewis, the club's former No 1.

However, it took until the 61st minute for Hearts to break through again. Man of the Match Shankland (a goal and two assists) controlled the ball despite being closely marked. He nudged it to waspish Cammy Devlin, who had been a real pain for the Aberdeen side during the game, hustling and harrying the opposition.

The Australian World Cup squad player drove across field before sending a left-foot shot into the bottom left-hand corner of Lewis' net. It was his first goal of the season and how he celebrated.

Other players are deserving on mention in a superb Herts team performance. Kye Rowles, who has just signed a five-year deal

with the ambitious club, was resolute in defence, snuffing out danger on a number of occasions when Aberdeen advanced.

Robert Snodgrass provided the glue which kept Hearts together and 23-year-old Sibbick, apart from his sensational ball to Smith, who was lucky that a shirt tug on Scales in Hearts' box in the first-half went unnoticed, continues to develop his game as he gets a consistent run in the first team.

Hearts could have had more goals against a porous Dons defence which has now shipped 27 goals in 11 road games plus another ten at home. Some would argue that Aberdeen were unfortunate to come into this game after an energy-sapping League cup semi-final defeat at Hampden by Rangers.

Jim Goodwin's men were also minus skipper Anthony Stewart and No 1 goalkeeper, Dutchman Kelle Roos, but this was, without doubt, a clinical display by the confident home side which consolidated Hearts status in third place in the table.

The goal cushion allowed Neilson the chance to give new Japanese signing Yutaro Oda his debut, the 21-year-old newcomer replacing the industrious Snodgrass with seven minutes remaining.

There were two jolts to the system for Hearts. Aberdeen did have the ball in the net in the final minute but the goal by Welsh striker Marley Watkins, following a run along the goalline by Columbian-born Vicente Besuijen, was ruled off by VAR for offside, and Sibbick limped off after 73 minutes.

Time will tell if the Englishman is a doubt for Sunday's Scottish Cup fourth round tie at Easter Road against Hibs (kick-off 2pm, screened by Viaplay Sports 1), but it allowed Stephen Kingsley to get a brief run after injury.

The question now is, can Hearts cap off a good week, and continue their good form, with a Scottish Cup victory at their arch rivals?