

# Celtic show real flair to KO Hearts from Scottish Cup

Celtic fans lit up the Roseburn Stand with pre-match flares and their favourites showed real flair on the pitch to secure a slot in the semi-final of the Specsavers Scottish Cup and deny an under-strength Hearts side.

The Tynecastle team did create a foothold in the game after being rocked by an early goal, but were hit by a body blow on half-time when The Hoops slid in for a second.

The home side, minus influential Robert Snodgrass and skipper Lawrence Shankland, the scorer of more than 20 goals this term, did force a save low down from former England goalkeeper Joe Hart from Toby Sibbick during a goalmouth scramble, but the Jambos eventually lost out to a team with purpose, talent and grit plus a determination to succeed.

Ange Postecoglou's squad were relentless and so was the black-capped drummer in the Roseburn Stand. He was centre stage, behind the goal, in the stand packed with 3,000 travelling fans, including the irrepressible Green Brigade.

He orchestrated proceedings off a pitch bathed in welcome winter sunshine and he hardly missed a beat. T-shirted flag wavers surrounded him and they also gave their all for 90-plus minutes.

It is no wonder that Postecoglou's men give 100 per cent. Their fans do and the support was rewarded with a thoroughly professional performance.

In fact, Celtic clicked into gear in the first minute when quicksilver Reo Hatate signalled his and Celtic's intent by spinning away from his marker before sending a curling shot effort towards Hearts' goal. Stand-in skipper, Zander Clark, threw himself to the left to send the ball for a corner.

The fans in the Roseburn End were on their feet and seconds later, Hearts were under real pressure again. This time Jota tore down the right, spinning away from Hearts Kye Rowles near half-way. He looked up before sending a delightful ball across the box to Aussie ace Aaron Mooy. The Aussie World Cup player picked his spot and sent the ball first-time with his left foot into the net with Clark having no chance.

Hearts were on the back foot. Credit to them, Robbie Neilson's men gained a foothold and on-loan James Hill nodded a Jorge Grant free-kick into the danger area and Toby Sibbick saw his effort saved by Hart.

But the Celtic threat was ever present with 32-year-old Mooy pulling the strings in midfield. Saed Haksabanovich was one of his foils along with fleet of foot Jota and Hatate. They were regular outlets and the 25-year-old Japanese star was at his impish best when he forced Clark to make another telling save.

Celtic underlined their superiority with a 21-pass move and they carried an ever-present threat moving forward.

It was no surprise then that they moved 2-0 ahead when Alistair Johnston sent the ball low across the box from the right and Kyogo Furuhashi back-heeled the ball home.

Joy for the Green Brigade. Despair for home fans and Neilson admitted to the post-match press briefing that the second goal

was a blow.

Celtic replaced Carl Starfelt at the break, Postecoglou confirming that he had a niggle pre-match, and the Parkhead men continued to set the pace.

Kyogo and Jota played a major part and it was the tricky Portuguese who tested Clark early in the second session. Jota, whose reading of the game was admirable throughout, then stole the ball, cut inside and drove towards goal. Thankfully, it hit the side netting, but the threat continued.

Mooy again tested Clark before substitute Nathaniel Atkinson clattered Cameron Carter-Vickers. He had been cool at the back and creative going forward. Atkinson was booked and, from the resulting free-kick, Carter-Vickers was gained his revenge.

Matt O'Reilly, who had just come on as a substitute, floated the ball towards Carter-Vickers who headed home unmarked from the right edge of the six-yard box.

That was that as regards goals and for some of the Hearts faithful who took their leave of the proceedings. They had endured enough having seen their cup hopes dashed for another year.

There was no denying the satisfaction felt by Postecoglou after a tiring week having played Sunday, coming from behind to beat St Mirren, Wednesday when they also come from behind to beat Hearts, this time at Parkhead, and with the cup clash on Saturday.

He said: "We knew the last game was the one which was going to be the most intense, the nature of it being a cup game at Tynecastle, but I thought the lads handled it really well.

"For the most part, we dominated the game and played some nice football. Credit to them, they completed the whole week pretty

well.”

The Aussie playcaller dismissed talk of the treble, his men having already beaten arch rivals, Rangers, to win the League Cup, and he stressed the need for his squad to concentrate on one game at a time, a cliché perhaps, but he is determined not to let the players “get ahead of themselves”.

Neilson was obviously disappointed at the quarter-final exit and is now focused on next Saturday’s cinch Premiership clash at Pittodrie against Aberdeen when he obviously will hope for some good news on the injury front.

The manager had hoped his men would come into the game with energy and real enthusiasm after Wednesday’s defeat at Parkhead, a game in which Neilson felt his players had been outstanding for 80 minutes.

To lose a goal right away in the cup clash was a blow but he said: “To the players credit, and the fans credit, they got behind the team and we were back in the game, created some chances and started to play well.”

The goal before half time from a set-play involving a front post run, he said, was key but, on the positive side, he thought Josh Ginnelly led the line well and Barrie McKay, who was asked to play a different role on Celtic skipper Callum McGregor, he said, did well.

He added: “I could not ask for any more work-rate wise and possibly the decision making was not there and the quality.”