

Shankland treble is icing on cake for Hearts

Lawrence Shankland roared back to goal scoring form with a sensational hat-trick as Hearts thrashed cinch Premiership bottom club Ross County 6-1 at Tynecastle.

Josh Ginnelly claimed a double and Alex Cochrane a single in the victory which supplied interim manager Steven Naismith with a welcome first win.

Shankland (pictured by *Nigel Duncan*) scored twice in a first-half, the second from a penalty deep into stoppage time, in which the Tynecastle team, who had lost their last six matches, moved 4-0 ahead and out of site of their opponents.

Delighted Naismith claimed his squad go into the split in confident mood after this performance in which they dominated possession with 64 per cent of the action.

They had 30 shots against seven and Naismith told BBC Sport Scotland: "We've got real quality players going forward and that showed. Everybody was excellent."

Malky Mackay, County's boss, said: "They played well and we didn't. We were, to a man, off it all over the park."

Hearts start their post-split games in the first week of May and the fixtures are expected early this week.

But the 18,000 fans who witnessed the game saw Hearts display the form shown earlier this season and it rekindled hopes that

the Edinburgh side can finish the season in third spot in the 12-strong table.

It looked promising for the home side when Barrie McKay volleyed over the bar in the early minutes and Cochrane was set up by Shankland and Ginnelly and the Brighton-born defender beat County stopper Ross Laidlaw with a powerful right-foot shot from the edge of the box.

No 2 arrived from a breakaway, Cammy Devlin finding Ginnelly lurking around the half-way line and the Englishman darted in on goal before checking inside and firing home. The goal was allowed after a VAR check for offside.

And goal-scoring Cochrane turned provider for Shankland to open his account, the defender chipping the ball into the box from the left for the skipper to beat Laidlaw with a well-placed header.

Shankland's long-range lob from the right-hand edge of the box hit the crossbar seconds later and County were under siege as Devlin's effort was saved, Peter Haring, restored to the team after a lengthy concussion lay-off, fired over and Aussie defender Nathaniel Atkinson had a chance from a Shankland feed.

McKay and Shankland had efforts blocked but one felt that goal No 4 was not far away and it arrived courtesy of a penalty, Dylan Smith tripping Shankland. There was a VAR check but the referee pointed to the spot and Shankland delivered.

Ginnelly claimed the fifth after the break and Japanese signing Yutaro Oda looked like opening his account when he moved into the box but his shot was blocked. The rebound was picked up by Player of the March Shankland who coolly slotted with his right foot for his 25th goal of the season.

County won a penalty when Owura Edwards was bundled over by Cochrane near the by line. Edwards, who had come on as a

substitute, converted for a consolation.