

Shankland claims game-winner in Tynecastle classic

The result reads Hearts 2, Aberdeen 1 but it does not tell the story of a compelling game and the implications are that the fourth-placed Tynecastle team edge to within two points of Aberdeen who are third with two games left in the cinch Premiership.

Those lucky enough to be in the packed ground witnessed a classic and what an advert it was for Scottish football. Sadly, the game was not screened nationally and only the highlights will be shown on BBC Scotland.

This deserved more. There were penalty claims, controversial moments, a stunning goal and loads of goalmouth chances, tactical switches and, of course, talking points involving VAR.

Overall, Hearts had to come from behind to snatch the three points after Mattie Pollock rose at the back post to nod The Dons in front after 31 minutes of end-to-end entertainment. Leighton Clarkson, a 21-year-old player on loan to Aberdeen from Liverpool, and what a prospect he is, reading the game and supplying pin-point passes around the pitch, setting up the chance from a set-piece.

The home side, urged on by their passionate fans, surged

forward and Josh Ginnelly stunned the Red Army with a rocket strike from wide left, giving goalkeeper Kelle Roos no chance as it sped into the top left-hand corner.

The goal came at the right time, two minutes before the break, and Hearts upped their tempo in the second-half and were rewarded when skipper Lawrence Shankland forced the home side in front with his 27th of the season after 56 minutes.

The crisp finish followed a great move down the left, Barrie McKay sending Alex Cochrane scampering down the wing and the Brighton-born defender found Shankland who guided the ball home from the six-yard box.

It was no more than Hearts deserved and the visitors were clinging on. McKay shot inches wide as Hearts pounded the visitors, Shankland fluffed his lines after quicksilver Japanese forward, Yutaro Oda, fed Nathaniel Atkinson on the right. The Aussie defender squared to Shankland who beat his hands into the lush turf in frustration after missing the glorious opportunity.

Hearts continued to search for a third to kill off their rivals and substitute Alan Forrest, who replaced Oda – who received a standing ovation for his contribution as he walked off the pitch – was lurking around the penalty spot but sent his shot wide of the left-hand upright after being set-up by industrious Cammy Devlin. A glorious chance.

Yes, there were scares as the clock ticked down, Aberdeen resorting to long balls deep in the Tynecastle rearguard, but Hearts, who thrashed Aberdeen 5-0 on their last visit to Edinburgh on a bitterly cold night earlier this season, managed the game out.

Steven Naismith, Hearts' interim manager, saw his men attack with flair and their speed and their fluidity of moment caused real problems for Barry Robson's men who only had 39 per cent of possession against 61 per cent from the fired-up home side.

Now, Hearts must recover from a bruising battle, make no mistake, Aberdeen did not take any prisoners, before visiting Ibrox on Wednesday (19.45) while the Dons host St Mirren at the same time.

Naisimth conceded post game that there were areas to sharpen up on, like the final ball, but he was delighted with the work rate, effort and the ability of his men to claw their way back into a game for the second week running.

His opposite number, Robson, who was booked by referee Kevin Clancy after 73 minutes, said it was good scrap and he added: "We knew, coming down here, we would not get our own way but when we got a goal up Mattie Pollock had a great opportunity to get another goal."

He added that the Dons changed their shape and so did Hearts and Robson said: "There were chances we could have had but they came back into the game. It was a wee bit frustrating. We could have won the game.

"A positive for me is that we have (Graeme) Shinnie and Duk (Luis Henriques de Barros Lopes) to come back and it is not easy to come down here and play a game without those players. The players who came in did well but they have experience. That is what we have to look forward to on Wednesday.

"Two points ahead, two games to go, two top players to come back I am looking forward to the game on Wednesday."

Naismith said: "I think we played a really good game of football for 70 minutes, again there was progression in what I want to do and how I want to play, to try to control games.

"We want an attacking team which creates problems all over the pitch and you will see that we did that today, shots at goal and really good chances we had and the other pleasing aspect is that we came from behind.

“In the last two games we have been in compromising situations. Last week we had a red card and got a draw and today we came back from a goal down to win which is very pleasing for me.”

PICTURE: Hearts players celebrate their 2-1 win over Aberdeen.
Picture ***Nigel Duncan***