

Own goal helps Hearts claim third in Premiership

A Will Dennis own goal separated Hearts and Kilmarnock at Rugby Park and the somewhat fortuitous counter after 18 minutes earned the Jambos a fourth straight win in the cinch Premiership, the first time they have achieved that in five years.

Defender Kye Rowles began the move, sending the ball down the left, and Lawrence Shankland outstripped the Killie defence. The Scotland international made for the byline and cut inside before sending the ball towards goal.

Dennis, a loan signing from English side Bournemouth, allowed the ball to pass through him and slide into the net. Then the 23-year-old stopper saw yellow after a challenge on Yutaro Oda. A lengthy VAR review backed up the booking but pitchside observers felt it could have been red.

Eventually, battling Hearts left Ayrshire with a precious three points and a massive lift ahead of Wednesday's home clash with Rangers (20.00). The Jambos move into third place in the 12-strong table, leapfrogging St Mirren who travel to Ibrox on Sunday to play Rangers.

The goal at Rugby Park was not pretty and neither was the bruising game played on a tricky pitch in freezing conditions. Killie, who had 387 passes against 371 from Hearts, and who enjoyed 53 per cent of possession against 47

per cent from their rivals, could possibly feel hard done by.

They now slip out of the top six and into seventh spot with 17 points from 15 games, following a run which includes a draw, a win and three defeats in their last five starts.

The home side did, however, had a number of chances. Defender Corrie Ndaba had a clear sight of goal from a corner early on, incidentally Killie had seven corners to three from Hearts, but headed over, and, Daniel Armstrong, who proved a real handful on the right then on the left, set up a chance for David Watson which was spurned.

Defender Robbie Deas headed over from another opportunity created by lively Armstrong and Rowles cleared a dangerous ball with his knee from another run by the same player.

The midfielder, this time on the left, received a lucky bounce off Hearts' substitute Toby Sibbick – he had come on for Liam Boyce after 27 minutes, the Irishman looking to have a right leg injury – and Armstrong drove towards goal before sending a ball across the six-yard box. Nobody was there to collect.

Ndaba then forced Clark into a save from a header at the far post and, deep into the second-half, defender Stuart Findlay headed over when in a good position then Hearts' goalkeeper Zander Clark and substitute Cammy Devlin at the near post scrambled the ball clear under extreme pressure.

Hearts, however, stuck to their task. They also had chances, with Dennis called into action as the clock ticked down after a drive down the left.

However, the Jambos recent run of wins – Livingston, Motherwell and St Johnstone, plus the victory at Rugby Park – sees Hearts sitting pretty in the table with 23 points from 14 games, five behind Rangers who have a game in hand, and 13 adrift of pace-setting Celtic.

St Mirren have 22 points from 14 fixtures then come Hibs with 18 points from their 14 games with Dundee on the same points from the same number of games.

Steven Naismith, Hearts' head coach, continues to say that small margins are the difference in tight games. A small margin made the difference here and the dice fell in Hearts' direction.

PICTURE: Kye Rowles, who played a key role in Hearts' goal, pictured by ***Ian Jacobs*** against St Johnstone