

Shankland lights up Tynecastle

A sublime piece of skill executed with calmness and authority from a proven international striker lit up Tynecastle on a dismal day of weather and sent the Jambos into Christmas clear in third position in the cinch Premiership.

There are no prizes for guessing who produced a nano-second of pure magic to earn Hearts a 2-0 victory over a stubborn St Mirren side who made life extremely difficult for Hearts on a blustery, winters day.

Lawrence Shankland's 15th goal of another spectacular season clinched the three points to add to the three secured in the stunning 2-0 win over Celtic at Parkhead seven days previously.

Now, the Men in Maroon cross town to clash with Capital rivals Hibs on Wednesday (20.00) before squaring-up to struggling Ross County on Saturday (15.00) in Gorgie and then travel to bottom-markers Livingston on January 2 (15.00).

Currently, Steven Naismith's men have 29 points from 18 fixtures with Kilmarnock now fourth two points behind but with a game more played. St Mirren drop to fifth with 26 points from 19 starts.

The Buddies boss described Shankland (pictured by ***Ian Jacobs***)

as the difference between the sides. The Scotland striker claimed his first after 33 minutes, lurking at the back post to latch onto a cross from the left by Alex Cochrane to head home. It was a move that Saints boss Stephen Robinson had warned his men about, but it was executed with aplomb.

The eye-catching second, which will live long in the memory of those lucky enough to be at Tynecastle, arrived four minutes after the break. Barrie McKay sent the ball towards the box, Aidan Denholm produced a deft touch and Shankland let fly with his left foot.

St Mirren goalkeeper Zach Hemming dived full-length but there was no way he was going to reach the ball as it flashed into the top corner to his left-hand side. How the fans loved that and so did Shankland's team-mates.

The inevitable questions about the Glasgow-born player's future surfaced at the post-match press briefing and they were parried by Naismith, but, quite frankly, the in-form player is currently a goal machine for club and country and with the January transfer window about to open it would be a major surprise if nobody came in for Shankland.

The razor-sharp, 28-year-old sniper, counted at Celtic Park with a similar goal and his double against The Buddies saw the prolific marksman netting for the third game in a row. He could have had three had Hemming not pulled off a fine save after Shankland shot from near the penalty spot.

St Mirren struggled to impose themselves in the first-half but stubbornly proved difficult for Hearts to break down in the first 45 minutes. They upped their tempo in the second and Alex Gogic had a header saved by Zander Clark and Kye Rowles, who had a tremendous game alongside Craig Halkett, a steadying influence, cleared an effort off the line with the score at 2-0.

Robinson admitted that his men lacked Shankland's quality in

the box on a disappointing day in the Capital. They have been punching about their weight in the 12-strong division and are still having a good season considering their resources compared to other clubs, including Hearts.

Naismith said: "We scored two goals, we kept a clean sheet, we're happy." So are the fans. They sang "Bring of the Hibeas" as the clock ran down. No surprise there.



PICTURE: Shankland scores goal No 1 v St Mirren. **By David Mollison**



PICTURE: Frankie Kent rises to clear against St Mirren. Picture **David Mollison**



PICTURE: Aidan Denholm on the ball v St Mirren. Picture **David Mollison**



PICTURE: Lawrence Shankland fires for goal v St Mirren.

Picture courtesy of ***David Mollison***