

Shankland 'better than Morelos'

Lawrence Shankland once again stood out as in-form Hearts edged a battling Livingston side 2-1 at The Tony Macaroni Arena and he also became the first Scottish player to score in six consecutive Premiership games since Leigh Griffiths in 2015.

The highly-rated striker (pictured arriving at Livingston by *David Mollison*) shone in the gloom at a venue where the Jambos have not enjoyed the best of fortune, winning there only once since the Lions were promoted in 2018.

The 28-year-old, Glasgow-born marksman kept his composure despite missing a second straight penalty in the second-half with the score deadlocked at 0-0.

That could have thrown a lesser mortal but minutes later the skipper latched onto a pass from the right from hard-working Alan Forrest to slot home with the outside of his foot. Pure class.

That goal added to the opener from lively Costa Rica-born striker Kenneth Vargas who was fed by a driving run by Forrest down the left. He kept his cool to advance on goal and send the ball past Livi goalkeeper Jack Hamilton. Vargas celebrated as the ball nestled in the back of the net.

No wonder then that Hearts' head coach, Steven Naismith, was full of praise for Shankland, but he also focused on Forrest, a former Livingston player, and Vargas.

Livingston's manager, David Martindale, believes Shankland is better than former Rangers star, Alfredo Morelos, claiming the Scottish international was the difference between the sides.

He did, however, complement his men. Martindale admitted he was critical of his troops recently and challenged them to be up for the fight to save the West Lothian club from the drop. He even told them that if they were not prepared to dig deep they should phone their agent and get him to call Martindale.

Yes, his troops failed to earn any points from their joust with Hearts but there were positives, he argued.

They certainly showed their fans that they were up for the fight and prepared to work for their straight-talking manager who hopes to bring in two or three new players to assist their bid to beat the drop.

It's a big ask. The Lions have now lost 11 of their last 13 games and prop up the 12-strong table with 12 points from 21 games and have the worst goal difference in the league, minus 20.

Their next league game is against Dundee on January 27 (15.00) at Livingston and manager Martindale has some time to bed in new players, if he can source them, but games are running out.

The club's latest recruit, Tete Yengi, was a second-half substitute, and the Australian, who has recently played in Finland, showed some nice touches. He also got an earful from the manager about not being aggressive enough in a challenge. Welcome to Scottish football.

But, back to Hearts and Naismith was delighted with the win which he described as a positive start to the New Year. it

came on a difficult pitch against a hard-working team in a bruising battle in which both sides had ten shots.

And Livingston shaded possession, 53 per cent against 47 per cent, but two moments of quality settled this game. Impish Vargas netted after 53 minutes – two minutes after Hamilton's legs prevented Shankland scoring from the spot – and then Hearts' skipper took centre stage after 64 minutes with a sublime finish.

Andrew Shinnie scored for the home side from the penalty spot with 11 minutes of regulation time remaining after Frankie Kent was adjudged to have handled in the box. VAR officials took ages to make a decision, much to the annoyance of the fans.

And there were a few scares for the Men in Maroon during the 90 regulation minutes plus nine minutes of injury time in the second-half. The Lions roared early on and Kurtis Guthrie had the ball in the net from a close-in header, but this was ruled off after an extended wait for VAR.

Hearts however settled once they became used to the physicality of the opposition and the artificial pitch and they started to impose themselves on the game, but the Lions were always dangerous and substitute Michael Nottingham had an effort cleared by Hearts' goalkeeper Zander Clark's leg late in the game and Guthrie sent a header just wide in injury time.



Alan Forrest who was one of the outstanding Hearts players against Livingston. Picture by **David Mollison**



Kenneth Vargas opens the scoring against Livingston. Picture

David Mollison