

Razor-sharp Shankland unlocks Well door

Lawrence Shankland took advantage of a split-second lack of concentration and then a slick finish by lively Kenneth Vargas punished determined Motherwell at Tynecastle and moved third-placed Jam Tarts 14 points clear of the chasing pack led by Kilmarnock.

Credit Alan Forrest with a pin-point, free-kick to feed Shankland for the opening goal after 67 minutes and it was not until the second minute of injury time that substitute Vargas scored his sixth of the season, thanks to the determination of another second-half substitute, Nathaniel Atkinson.

The fresh blood put added zip into a Hearts side which dominated possession during the first half but their approach play lacked pace and sufficient punch and it was Motherwell who came closest before the break.

Dan Casey took advantage of a slack clearance to lob Hearts' goalkeeper, Zander Clark. The Scottish international had to fingertip the ball over the bar and Lennon Miller shot wide from a Harry Paton pass.

Motherwell parked the bus, relying on breakaways. Hearts certainly move the ball patiently from side to side, sometimes firing long balls across the turf to unsettle The Steelmen by

exploding the flanks, but the Lanarkshire side stayed compact and some of Hearts approach play was sloppy.

It was no surprise when Jambos boss Steven Naismith rang the changes, two at the start of the second period. A knock to Beni Baniyime near the end of the first half forced him off and Dexter Lembikisa, who had not enjoyed the best game, were replaced.

Motherwell started the second period well, but Hearts made two more changes, Yutaro Oda and Macaulay Tait, with the scoreline deadlocked and Cammy Devlin came on after the opening goal. The changes made a difference.

The new blood helped up the tempo and piled the pressure on The Steelmen. They refused to crack until Forrest, who had been busy all afternoon, placed the ball for a free-kick around 30 yards out. He spotted Shankland and floated the ball towards the marksman. Shankland rose to nod home. It all happened in a flash but the Gorgie Ultras behind the goal loved it.

They burst into song, as did most of the rest of the stadium. "We've got Lawrence Shankland," they belted out. Yup, and the skipper has been inspirational this season.

The Jambos then attacked en masse. Well were pinned back and Vargas had a chance, hitting the post, as did Forrest who broke through after a neat square ball from Vargas but fired the ball straight at the Motherwell goalkeeper.

It only seemed like a matter of time before goal No 2 would arrive. Atkinson won the ball inside the box and ballooned up the the air. Vargas latched onto it, bringing the ball down deftly with his back to goal. The Costa Rican turned and lashed home. Clinical. Points secured.

Overall, the home side enjoyed 71 per cent of possession against 29 per cent from Well and Hearts had 22 shots – seven

on target – against ten – three on target. The home side also had nine corners, seven of them in the second session, a mark of their dominance.

It would, however, be unfair not to mention the contribution of Aussie defender Kye Rowles. He goes about his work with calm authority and he was aided by big Frankie Kent.

Naismith said: “I thought we showed our quality in both boxes. We had loads of control.”

His counterpart, Stuart Kettlewell, who was involved in a pitch side skirmish late on with one of Hearts’ coaching staff, both were booked, told BBC Sport Scotland: “I’m absolutely fizzing. The first goal we conceded, the top striker in the league, gets the freedom of our penalty box and that’s unacceptable.”

Hearts now have 51 points from 26 games and travel to second-placed Rangers next Saturday. Rangers have 61 points from their 25 starts but they visit St Johnstone on Sunday (noon).

PICTURE: Shankland heads home to break the deadlock v Motherwell at Tynecastle. Picture **David Mollison**



SHANKLAND: shooting for goal v Motherwell. Picture by *David Mollison*



FORREST ON FIRE: Alan Forrest makes another drive deep into

Motherwell territory. Picture **David Mollison**



MIDFIELD BATTLE: Scott Fraser tried to go between two Motherwell players. Picture **David Mollison**



WELL DONE: Lawrence Shankland celebrates after scoring the opening goal against Motherwell. Picture **David Mollison**