

Baningime magic sets up Vargas winner for Hearts

A piece of sublime skill from Hearts midfielder Beni Baningime helped earn the Men in Maroon their first away win of the season thanks to 2-1 victory over St Johnstone in Perth.

He left four blue shirts in his slipstream before slipping an inch-perfect pass to substitute Kenneth Vargas who slotted low into the net.

The Edinburgh combine held out despite intense late pressure from their hosts who were awarded a controversial penalty after a lengthy intervention by VAR officials, but the three points will be a welcome boost for the players, the Jambos coaching team and the club's success-hungry fans ahead of their European joust in midweek.

Earlier, Hearts made three changes from the 2-1 home defeat by Kilmarnock in midweek, and, in the early stages, neat play from the visitors, moving the ball from side to side, retaining possession, put pressure on Saints.

James Penrice looked lively down the left side, winning the ball deep and initiating attacks, but Adama Sidibeh engineered an opening for St Johnstone. He found Benjamin Kimpioka in the box but the visiting defence held firm and the play moved back near the home side's danger area.

Penrice was again at the heart of the move but, eventually,

the final ball into the box lacked quality. Banningami was proving his quality in midfield for the visitors but it was Malachi Boateng who set up the next opportunity, picking up the ball in centre field 25 yards out from a poor clearance from Saints goalkeeper Ross Sinclair and sending a slide rule pass to Lawrence Shankland who fired just wide of the left hand post.

At the other end, Boateng gave away a free kick 20 yards out when he was outmuscled by a Saints player. Three Perth players were over the ball including Saints skipper Nicky Clark and his right foot shot over the wall was palmed away by Hearts' goalkeeper, Craig Gordon.

That produced Saints first corner of the game and their Austrian player, Sven Sprangler, then fired the ball goalwards but the ball hit Penrice before the referee signalled for offside.

Saints maintained their momentum and Kimpioka then powered down the left and sent the ball square to Graham Carey whose left foot drive flew just wide of Gordon's right hand post.

Seconds later, Hearts broke the deadlock. Time 22mins. Spittal's corner from the left arrowed into the six-yard box and Clark, under pressure from Hearts' defender, Kye Rowles, headed into his own net.

Spittal was on corner duty again and his inswinger was nodded on this time by Yan Dhanda but the ball flew agonisingly wide.

It was not, however, all one-way traffic and Alan Forrest was on hand to clear with a header when Saints threatened, but Hearts won the ball back and charged up the pitch. Spittal found Forrest and the hard-working, ex-Livingston player had his shot deflected for a corner which came to nothing.

Hearts, however, kept up the pressure, dominating possession, and Dhanda sent the ball towards Shankland lurking at the back

post. It was cleared for yet another corner, but Saints goalkeeper Sinclair kept his cool to gather.

The home side came more into the play as half-time neared, but Hearts defence held firm, and then there were two bookings, Daniel Oyegoke after 41 minutes and Sprangler two minutes later for a hefty tackle on Bangingime.

Penrice took the free-kick and floated the ball from just inside the Saints half into the home side's box, but it was cleared. Oyegoke then sold Rowles short with a crossfield pass and the Aussie defender was the third player to be booked for his tackle on Sibideh.

The scoreline stayed the same at the break in an open game, involving two new managers, and both sides produced some fine moves to keep the fans entertained.

Saints surprisingly changed their goalkeeper at the break, 24-year-old, former Airdrie player, Joshua Rae coming on in place of Sinclair, and two minutes in Jason Holt came close for Saints after a neat move down the left, firing towards goal only to see the ball rebound off defender Frankie Kent, then sending his follow-up shot against the bar.

The home side were on fire and Shankland became the fourth player to find his name in the referee's book for a foul on Jack Sanders before St Johnstone forced Gordon to make a great save, diving full-length on his right to palm away a glancing header from Sibideh after a probing ball from Carey on the right.

Critchley made two changes with Dhanda off for Kenneth Vargas who joined Shankland up-front, and Boateng made way for Cammy Devlin as the new Hearts boss attempted to stem the St Johnstone tide and put some bite into midfield.

Holt became the fifth player to be booked, this time for a challenge on Bangingime, giving Hearts a free-kick 12 yards

inside the opposition half and that resulted in a corner for the Tynecastle team, but it came to nothing and Saints were back on the attack, earning another corner.

The ball came into the box and Devlin was involved in a tussle with defender Kyle Cameron resulting in a VAR check. Referee Chris Graham was advised to go to the pitchside monitor and he pointed to the spot after a lengthy deliberation.

Devlin was yellow carded and Saints awarded a penalty and Clark calmly sent the ball into the back of the net, Gordon going the wrong way, for 1-1 after 68 minutes.

Hearts, however, powered forward and enjoyed a spell of pressure. Vargas had two shots charged down and Shankland had a sniff, but the scoreline stayed the same before Banningime dug in and won the ball on the centre circle.

The 26-year-old Congolese player (pictured in training by **Nigel Duncan**) weaved his way through the St Johnstone defence before sending the ball to Vargas who showed great composure to slide the ball home for his second of the season. Time 77 minutes.

Forrest was crowded out on the edge of the box as the Jambos faithful urged their favourites on from the terraces and Saints made a double change with Matt Smith and Makenzie Kirk, a summer signing from Hearts, going on for Clark and Sidibeh.

Jorge Grant was introduced by Critchley as the clock ticked down, Shankland going off, and the captain's armband moved to Gordon, as Hearts dug in to secure a much-needed win.

Animated Hearts coach Critchley barked instructions from the touchline as the pressure intensified but it could have been 3-1 after Spittal sent a telling ball over the top and down the left wing. Vargas collected and drove into the box before firing a left foot shot at Rae. The ball rebounded to Grant but the substitute was forced wide and the danger cleared.

Seven extra minutes were added by match officials, mainly due to the intervention of VAR regarding the penalty, and Saints pinned Hearts into their own half as they looked to rescue the game, but the well-organised Hearts defence stood firm.

Kirk did win a corner off Rowles and every blue shirt including goalkeeper Rae were in the Hearts box. The ball was cleared.

Critchley again urged his men forward and Rowles bravely defended from Sibideh on the edge of the box with 95 minutes on the clock then Kent repulsed another attack, blasting the ball upfield following another Saints attack.

Spittal headed clear before Grant cleared and then it was all over. Hearts moved on to nine points to be level with tenth-placed Dundee and off the bottom of the table to be replaced by Hibs but the Easter Road men have two games in hand.