

Vargas miss proves costly for battling Hearts

Hearts were left to rue a missed opportunity by Kenneth Vargas early in the second half as they left Ibrox after a 1-0 defeat in the William Hill Premiership.

The Jambos, who made four changes, Daniel Oyegoke, Cammy Devlin, Kenneth Vargas and Kye Rowles coming in and Stephen Kingsley, Yan Dhanda, Adam Forrester and Beni Banningime dropping out from the starting line-up in the UEFA Europa Challenge Cup clash with German side Heidenheim in midweek, pushed their rivals hard, but were too often let down by their final ball.

Earlier, the visitors forced the play in the first minute, earning a corner, but it was comfortably cleared by Rangers, and they countered forcing a corner which floated well over the danger area. It was cleared, but the home side kept control of the ball, trying to work an opening.

Disaster struck after six minutes. Nedim Bajrami drove down the left and rolled the ball across the box. Jefte took over and slid the ball towards James Tavernier. Connor Barron made to go for the ball but pulled back leaving the skipper to send the ball towards goal.

Cyriel Dessers got the final touch before the ball nestled in the back of the net. Rangers 1, Hearts 0.

Rangers had another chance after a poor touch from Blair

Spittal near halfway. Dessers was unable to make it count, but Rangers maintained possession, moving the ball from side to side, controlling play.

Thankfully, Rowles was in form and he snuffed out two Rangers' attacks, and he fed James Penrice on the right but his cross was cleared, however, Hearts kept on coming. Spittal then sent Alan Forrest away down the right and he earned a free kick, three yards in from the by line. Penrice tried to whip the ball into the near post, but it was cleared for a corner.

It was played short but the ball into the box was comfortably gathered by Jack Butland in the Rangers goal. At the other end, Jefte threatened but the ball was cleared. The Brazilian then cleared a deep cross into the home side's box as Hearts attempted to work their way into the game.

Their final ball was, however, missing. The Jambos persevered and Connor Barron was robbed in midfield giving Hearts to opportunity to build again, but they lost possession and Malachi Boateng gave away a free-kick from which Rangers, who have won 18 of their last 20 home games, worked the ball patiently upfield for Mohamed Diomande to fire a left foot shot inches wide from the edge of the penalty box.

Seconds later Vaclav Cerny sped clear on the right and he forced Gordon to palm the ball clear for a corner. The same player took the kick but Frankie Kent cleared at the back post then Bajrami's effort was cleared for another corner.

At the other end, ex-Hearts defender, John Souttar, was short with a pass back to Butland and Kenneth Vargas raced in but Butland raced from goal to clear with his feet.

Rangers re-applied pressure, Cerny was again involved, but Gordon mopped up. Forrest switched wings in a bid to spark Hearts but Rangers maintained their grip on proceedings.

A sloppy Penrice pass gave the ball to the opposition to

initiate another attack as half time loomed but Hearts held firm despite Kent being injured in a challenge with Dessers.

So, Rangers held a slender lead at the break, but the visitors were not out of the picture. The statistics showed that Rangers enjoyed 52 per cent of possession against 48 per cent, they had ten shots against one in reply.

The Light Blues made 285 passes against 256 from Hearts who had three corners against five from the home side.

Kent resumed and, inside the first minute, Shankland picked up the ball on midfield and threaded an inch-perfect pass which split the Ibrox rearguard as Vargas raced in. His first touch was poor but he got a shot away with his right. The Corta Rica-born forward held his head in his hands when the ball cannoned off the left hand upright to safety. What a chance. Would Hearts pay?

Penrice and Spittal combined to threaten down the left and Souttar cleared, and Hearts continued to press, making it difficult for Rangers to break out.

A clumsy challenge from Leon Balogun floored Vargas as Hearts continued to hold possession and frustrate the home side, but Hearts were unable to threaten Butland.

Devlin was booked after 57 minutes for a crude challenge on Diomande and that led to a spell of Rangers possession with Jefte fizzing a left foot shot across the Jambos box. There were no takers.

At the other end, Shankland and Penrice worked a chance before the ball was cleared, but this was a good spell for the Tynecastle team who kept on probing for an opening with the skipper involved in several promising moves.

Oyegoke was booked before Spittal fired a deep cross into the Rangers' box, but Souttar headed the ball for a corner under

pressure. The ball was cleared but Rangers' boss Philippe Clement made changes with Dujon Sterling and Neraysho Kasanwirjo on. Hearts replaced Forrest and Boateng for Yan Dhanda and Baningime and it was the Congolese player who popped up on the edge of the box to fire a right foot shot inches wide of Butland's right hand upright.

Diomande was booked as Hearts moved the ball around patiently seeking another opening and Rangers made a third change with Dessors off and Danilo on with Neil Critchley's men working hard to level, but it was Bajrami who was next to threaten with a right foot shot which Gordon saved at the second attempt.

Hearts also made a change, Devlin departing and Musa Drammeh coming on, but again, the final ball to open up Rangers failed to appear. Hearts kept on plugging away and Baningime was fouled by Sterling. The Rangers player was yellow carded.

Dhanda had an opportunity to deliver a telling ball into the box, but it was too close to Butland, before Cerny and Bajrami retired and Ross McCausland and Keiran Dowell made an appearance with six minutes remaining.

Penrice threatened with his long throw and Sterling was forced to clear from Kent near the right hand post. The corner was cleared and the ball quickly transferred to the other end with Dowell threatening.

Seconds later Kasanwirjo crashed a right foot volley off the bar as Rangers looked for a second to secure the points after a bruising battle and the Ibrox men maintained their pressure in the two minutes of added time but they were unable to add to their tally.

FLASHBACK: Vargas scoring at Livingston. Picture *David Mollison*