

Critchley 'stunned' as Hearts fall to ten-man Killie

Head coach Neil Critchley said he was "stunned and shocked" by the performance of his players as ten-man Kilmarnock edged Hearts 1-0 at Rugby Park to leave them marooned at the bottom of the 12-strong William Hill Premiership.

The English-born coach (pictured by *Nigel Duncan*) told BBC Sport Scotland: "I've not seen that from this group in my time here. That was miles away in every department."

The Jambos have 13 points from 17 games with St Johnstone above them on 14 points. Ross County are tenth with 15 points, the same as ninth-placed Hibs but jubilant Killie move up to eighth with 17 points from the same number of games.

Above them are Dundee on 19 points but that six-point gap going into a heavy Festive programme could weigh heavily on Hearts who made poor decisions during a game in which the Rugby Park side played a man down for around 90 minutes.

It was a brave effort from Derek McInnes' men but a disappointingly poor showing from Hearts who entertain Petrocub from Moldova on Thursday before fellow-strugglers, St Johnstone, visit on Sunday (15.00) in another crucial league clash.

Earlier, Kilmarnock made two changes as did Hearts with

crooked Frankie Kent and the suspended Lawrence Shankland on the sidelines.

Critchley indicated pre-match that Kent will be absent for some time and would be a big miss in the dressing-room and on the pitch. He was a big miss at Rugby Park as the Jambos toiled and Kent will now see a specialist and surgery has not been ruled out.

His counterpart, Derek McInnes, was looking for a quick tempo to capitalise on Hearts being in action at Copenhagen on Thursday in the UEFA Europa Conference League and he wanted his men to ask questions.

Of course, Killie won 2-1 at Tynecastle in late October, another disappointing result for the Jambos, and McInnes was looking for a double but his plans were turned on their head in the early minutes when a Blair Spittal corner and found Musa Drammeh who hit post from close in and then Kenneth Vargas was floored by defender Robbie Deas.

Referee Don Robertson was sent to the pitch side screen and the yellow became red after 5min 38sec leaving Killie with ten men.

McInnes was forced into a switch, Bobby Wales going off after 11 minutes on his first league start, with another midfield player, David Watson, introduced, but Hearts surged forward with Vargas feeding Spittal. As he was preparing to shoot when he was robbed by Killie midfielder Brad Lyons.

Kilmarnock hit back and a ball was sent into the box and James Penrice lifted his foot on Joe Wright who ended up on the deck at the by line. Robertson pointed to the spot. VAR was consulted and the penalty kick given with Bruce Anderson netting down the middle after 17 minutes for his fifth goal of the campaign.

Hearts surged upfield and were awarded a free-kick just

outside the box on the right hand side when Musa Drammeh was brought down, but it was wasted. Forrest then fed Craig Halkett who had crept into the box and his shot was blocked.

The match went from end to end at this stage and Hearts' goalkeeper Craig Gordon has to be in top form minutes later when Kye Rowles misdirected a clearance to Marley Watkins. The ball was scrambled away for a corner and Wright sent a header just wide.

Surprisingly, Kilmarnock appeared the better side, despite being a man short, but Daniel Oyegoke tried to put Forrest through, but the former Livingston failed to make contact and, at the other end, Corrie Ndaba was found at the back post, but he shot tamely at Gordon.

Watkins had a fleeting chance which was smothered and the Jambos broke to earn a corner and Spittal's ball was headed wide by Halkett. The teams withdrew with the scoreline against the Jambos and with Critchley having work to do in the dressing-room.

Hearts brought on Jorge Grant and Yan Dhanda for Malachi Boateng and Forrest in a bid to open up Killie, but it was the visitors who were on the defensive following a swift raid from Watson and Gordon had to save low down before Rowles cleared the danger.

Vargas departed for James Wilson and Blair Spittal was replaced by Liam Boyce eight minutes into the second period, but Killie broke and Liam Donnelly had a great chance only to see the ball deflected for a corner by Rowles.

Hearts were struggling, but Wilson had a chance from close in after Devlin fought for a ball on the byline and sent it towards goal, but the goalkeeper was equal to the task.

Critchley's changes, however, failed to spark Hearts who were kept at long range by the determined Rugby Park side and there

was little evidence that the visitors could claw their way back into the game.

Dhanda chipped the ball into the box but it was inches high for Wilson at the back post and McInnes then replaced Watkins with Innes Cameron.

The Men in Maroon were feeding on scraps up-front but Dhanda fed Penrice who shot quickly and the Killie goalkeeper dived to his left to parry. This was better from Hearts and they continued to press. Boyce had a chance at the back post as Hearts tried to inject more much-needed urgency into their play.

McInnes replaced Liam Donnelly with Rory McKenzie but it was Hearts who were next to threaten as Grant sent a header wide.

Desperate Critchley then rolled the dice for a final time with Adam Forrester injected into the play and Dhanda curled in a free kick from the right. Halkett got his head to the ball but it was grabbed comfortably by the goalkeeper.

Then Dhanda threatened with a high ball which cannoned off the crossbar but that was it for Hearts as Kilmarnock took the points leaving Critchley's men at the bottom of the table.