

Devlin stars as Hearts secure welcome win

Cameron Peter Devlin, to give him his full name, take a bow. Not everybody's cup of tea, but boy, did the 26-year-old not graft for the Jambos in their narrow, 2-1 victory over St Johnstone at chilly Tynecastle.

Devlin put in a real shift, snuffing out attacks, winning the ball in midfield, and generally being a real nuisance, and the dogged Aussie must have covered every inch of grass during the 90 minutes.

He even had to deal with the pressure of being booked for a foul in Benjamin Kimpioka after 41 minutes.

Devlin was the heartbeat of the team on the day and was so heavily involved that he even volunteered to take the captain's armband from Lawrence Shankland and deliver it to goalkeeper Craig Gordon when the Scotland striker left the action late on.

The Men in Maroon now move off the bottom of the pile and into tenth position with 16 points from 18 games. Not where they want to be, but better than being bottom where St Johnstone now reside on 14 points, also from 18 games.

Kilmarnock are ninth and Hibs, who visit Tynecastle on Boxing Day (12.30), are eighth after their impressive 3-1 victory at

high-flying Aberdeen on Saturday. Both have 18 points from the same number of games.

There is no doubt that Neil Critchley's men were worthy of the three points. The head coach was impressed with the temperament of his men and, on possession, pressure and chances, Hearts could have had more to show for their efforts than a goal from James Penrice after 16 minutes.

The former Livingston player bulleted home from a cross from the right from teenage defender Adam Forrester and that strike lifted the faithful.

The Perth combine had offered little in the first session and had only threatened sporadically in the early part of the second-half. It was on one raid that VAR intervened on a handball check and Graham Carey levelled from the penalty spot, a well-taken spot kick, eight minutes after the break.

Hearts' nerves were eased when Blair Spittal volleyed home from the edge of the box, a smart finish and his fifth of the season, after 58 minutes, and Saints goalkeeper Josh Rae produced quality stops to deny Hearts later in the game, one to prevent an own goal and then to deny Hearts' skipper.

He then disappointed substitute Kenneth Vargas and Rae blocked a follow-up shot from another substitute, Alan Forrest.

Earlier, with Hearts 1-0 ahead and the clock ticking down in the first-half, teenage striker, James Wilson, fired the ball home low into the net, a smart finish off the outside of his right boot only to see the goal chalked off from offside after a delay for VAR scrutiny.

The three points undoubtedly lifted the mood at Tynecastle after the disappointment of their Euro exit in midweek and records indicate that this was a eighth straight win for the Jambos over St Johnstone.

The first goal was described by Critchley as “outstanding” and Spittal’s game-winner was, he said, “a fantastic second goal” and the Englishman added that Gordon did not have a save to make.

The coach admitted: “It was a big three points and we were fantastic first-half. We played like a real team, with and without the ball, and we played really good football. We’ve not had a great week, but the players have shown a real response and shown what we are about as a group.”

Simo Valakari, Saints boss, told BBC Sport Scotland: “We were one yard short everywhere but managed to get to half-time one down.

“We came out very strong at the start of the second-half but what hurts me most is that we could not hold the 1-1 for a longer time.”

Saints entertain Dundee United on Thursday after the men from Tannadice earned a 0-0 draw at home to pace-setting Celtic and St Johnstone travel to Celtic Park on Sunday. Hearts travel to Ross County, also on Sunday.

PICTURE: Neil Critchley on the bawl by **Thomas Brown**