

Late goal shatters Hearts' Euro dreams

Hearts hopes of playing European football into the New Year were shattered with a 2-2 draw against Moldova champions Petrocub at Tynecastle.

They looked to be on course when Blair Spittal netted with a header in the second-half but a penalty award proved a body blow to the Tynecastle team who slipped into 25th position and out of the qualifiers.

Four straight defeats in Europe have proved so costly and boos rang out around Tynecastle after the final whistle.

Earlier, Hearts head coach Neil Critchley made four changes from the side edged 1-0 at Kilmarnock on Sunday in the William Hill Premiership, putting his faith in two teenagers, striker James Wilson and midfielder, Macaulay Tait, for the club's 100th game in Europe, match six of six in this year's league qualification competition.

The club desperately wanted to be in Europe after the Festive break for the first time in 35 years and Petrocub from Moldova were already out of contention for the play-offs, but the coach warned against complacency as Petrocub produced a spirited display in their last Euro outing, a 1-0 defeat at home against Spanish side Real Betis last week.

It was important for the home side to impose themselves on the game after three straight defeats in Europe, and they

dominated the opening minutes, moving the ball across the field in front of a near full house, forcing the visitors back.

There were encouraging signs and Yan Dhanda forced a corner on the left which was cleared but, seconds later, Wilson had a sharp chance but was blocked by opposition defenders, then James Penrice burst down the left after being fed by Dhanda but the danger was snuffed out.

Skipper Lawrence Shankland burst onto the scene with a shot which looked to be destined for the back of the net before goalkeeper Silviu Smalenea dived full length to his left to parry for a corner.

It was one-way traffic as Hearts penned the Moldova side into their own half, but the Hearts fans were frustrated as Shankland sent Alan Forrest away down the right and his pass was directed towards an opponent.

At the other end, Craig Halkett had to make a last-gasp challenge as Petrocub broke free, but the home side's pressure told as Dumitru Demian was booked after 17 minutes as he tried to foil another Hearts raid.

The home side forced a corner and Dhanda found Kye Rowles free in the box six yards out. His header flew agonisingly wide of the right-hand post, a major chance spurned, and Hearts paid a heavy price.

Their rivals broke and exploited a gaping hole in the home defence by visiting skipper Vladimir Ambros. The slick move was finished by Sergiu Platica and the goal stood after a VAR check. Time 21 minutes.

Jambos fans voiced their disapproval, but Hearts kept on probing and Dhanda was fouled by Ambros. Dhanda whipped in a free-kick and the goalkeeper cleared under pressure but clattered into Rowles at the same time. Both continued after

medical attention.

Shankland was found by a long ball and he nodded on to Wilson who was wiped out by the goalkeeper but the referee waved play on and the visitors moved up field to threaten again. Home fans were unhappy and let the team know.

But, seconds later Shankland had the ball in the net after a cross from lively Penrice. He challenged the goalkeeper who lost his grip and the skipper bundled the ball home. The referee blew for a foul.

Disappointed Shankland argued the case but his protests were waved away and the skipper then had a shot blocked at the edge of the box as Hearts tried to claw their way back into the game.

Halkett, however, was the next player to go into the referee's notebook following a challenge near half-way after being caught on the wrong side of an opponent, but the home side kept plugging away and Penrice threatened but, once again, the home side were thwarted by the physical defenders.

At the other end there was real danger and Gordon was short with a ball out to Daniel Oyegoke on the right side of the pitch in injury time. Platica was presented with a chance but fluffed his lines when in a good position.

Hearts responded, putting real pressure on the opposition goalkeeper, but they failed to find a way through before the break.

Spittal was introduced by Critchley for Forrest and Devlin was fouled just outside the penalty box. Dhanda took the free-kick but the danger was cleared only for the ball to be recycled back up field to Shankland who fired for goal. The ball was deflected for a corner but, once again, the ball was cleared.

Hearts lack of pace and penetration was there for all to see

but the ball was delivered into the box and Rowles headed wide but paid a price with another clash of heads with a defender.

Oyegoke then danced away from several opposition players and eventually Dhanda fired for goal, but the sting was taken out of his shot by a defender and the goalkeeper gathered.

Spittal then drove into the box and was floored by a clumsy challenge but the referee waved play on. Seconds later 17-year-old ice cool Wilson levelled after a move started inside Hearts half in which Shankland was involved. Time 63 minutes.

It was his third goal for Hearts and it came at just the right time. Petrocub had offered little in the second half as Hearts upped their game and increased the pressure and Rowles had another great chance with his head from close in after a delivery from a Penrice corner.

Critchley made changes with Jorge Grant and Malachi Boateng replacing Tait and Halkett and immediately Hearts were ahead when Spittal headed home from the centre of the penalty box after a ball from Dhanda into the box which was headed out by a defender straight to the former Motherwell man who did the rest. Time 69 minutes.

It had been six minutes between the goals and Tynecastle was buzzing again. Hearts attempted to turn the screw and pressed for a third. Kenneth Vargas was introduced to add to the attacking threat and the visitors also made changes.

They almost paid off but Gordon made an unbelievable stop and then Penrice stopped a header on the goal line. A VAR check was in operation and the crowd waited. The referee was called to the screen with nine minutes left and a penalty was awarded.

Penrice was yellow carded in the aftermath and Victor Mudrac sent Gordon the wrong way to level at 2-2.

The pressure was back on Hearts in the race for qualification and Vargas fed Shankland only for the ball to be nipped from the toe of the captain. Liam Boyce was sent on with six minutes left for Oyegoke as the Jambos gambled.

Vargas was denied after a nod down by Shankland and Petrocub reshuffled again. Six additional minutes were signalled as Hearts hemmed the visitors in but they were unable to find the goal they needed.

Spittal said: "We got ourselves in front but have to defend better. It is very frustrating and it is a very disappointing night."

PICTURE: Forrest floored by a tackle at Tynecastle. Picture *Thomas Brown*



19th December 2024 Edinburgh – Action shots from the Hearts v Petrocub match at Tynecastle. Photo Thomas Brown



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