

# Wilson double but Hearts see victory snatched away

Teenager James Wilson bagged a double, and Liam Boyce made a real impact, but Hearts failed to earn three valuable points at Ross County as the home side hit the visitors with two injury time goals to snatch an unlikely 2-2 draw.

A victory would have helped lift Jambos fans following the Boxing Day defeat by Hibs, but the loss of two late strikes was a body blow at the Global Energy Stadium in Dingwall.

Hearts were minus skipper Lawrence Shankland, a calf injury suffered during the Boxing Day defeat by Hibs at Tynecastle ruling him out despite training on Saturday.

Also missing was Cammy Devlin who was suspended and experienced Boyce was injected into the starting line-up as the Jambos searched for a tonic and the Irish-born striker made his mark inside the first two minutes.

He found space in midfield and fed teenager James Wilson who kept his cool to send the ball into the bottom corner of the net after 82 seconds. Joy for the strong contingent of travelling fans.

And the 17-year-old Hearts Academy graduate could have had a second three minutes later when Musa Drammeh nodded the ball into his path. Wilson took a good first touch but Akil Wright

was in the right place at the right time to block.

Then Blair Spittal and James Penrice, two outstanding players for the Gorgie side this term after arriving from Motherwell and Livingston respectively, linked. Spittal played in Penrice but his effort was saved by Jordan Amissah.

Conditions deteriorated with the wind increasing and heavy rain falling, but Hearts held firm as Ross County failed to put real pressure on Hearts' goalkeeper Craig Gordon who celebrates his 42<sup>nd</sup> birthday on Hogmanay.

The evergreen hot-stop was, however, forced into action when defender Connor Randall shot from distance, but the Scotland No 1 got down to his right to grab the ball.

That sparked a decent spell for the home side and Hearts' defender, Kye Rowles, produced a block to clear danger then Irish-born striker Ronan Hale, with five goals to his name so far this season for County, burst into the play, but he fired over from an angle.

As half-time loomed, the Jambos medical team had to patch up 33-year-old Boyce after a clash of heads, but the injury did not affect him and he was heavily involved in Hearts next raid. It started when Beni Baningime found Boyce, who coolly held the ball until Adam Forrester moved forward from defence. His effort was blocked by Amissah.

Five minutes of additional time was intimated but neither side could add to the scoreline before the break.

Hearts burst forward at the start of the second half and stunned the home side with another quick goal with teenage ace Wilson doing the damage, his second of the game.

Penrice flew down the left and delivered a great cross into the danger area and Wilson, who only made his debut in January this year, made no mistake, heading into the top corner. Queue

more joy for Hearts fans and a celebration from Wilson who took his total to five for the season.

Minutes later Penrice was clattered by Michee Efete which prompted a penalty award by the match official and Wilson picked up the ball while the awards was assessed by VAR. The referee was called to the screen and the official changed his decision and awarded a free-kick as the foul was adjudged to have happened outside the box.

Spittal then fed Penrice as the double act continued to cause real concern to County and this time it was Boyce who flicked the ball over the goalkeeper with his head at the front post as Hearts enjoyed a purple patch. The ball ended up on the roof of the net.

That prompted Don Cowie to reshuffle for a second time and it was Hearts who had to wait while VAR officials checked for a penalty for handball. There was relief for the Hearts squad and the fans as the referee awarded a free-kick.

Neil Critchley, Hearts' head coach, introduced Allan Forrest for Drammeh with just over 15 minutes remaining and the hard-running striker almost scored with his first touch from a Spittal cross.

But the visitors suffered a late scare when midfielder Scott Allardice dragged his effort wide from the edge of the box.

At the other end, Hearts looked to have ended the contest when Spittal crashed the ball against the bar and the ball rebounded to Boyce who found the net. VAR intervened on an offside claim and the goal was ruled out.

Wilson departed with a huge smile on his face for Kenneth Vargas with Malachi Boateng on for Jorge Grant as Critchley looked to make sure of the three points with eight minutes of injury time signalled.

There was real drama when struggling County eventually broke through in the dying minutes of injury time. Gordon parried but John Nisbet's third of the season with two minutes remaining piled the pressure on the visitors.

County threw men forward and Hearts looked nervous. Cowie's men were rewarded as the ball ended up in the net from Jordon White for a 2-2 scoreline in a game in which Hearts dominated most of the proceedings.

The Men in Maroon, who have only lost three of 31 meetings between them and the Staggies, now look towards Thursday's clash with sixth-placed Motherwell at Tynecastle (15.00). The Lanarkshire side were held 2-2 at Rangers after being 2-0 ahead at the break.

Hearts remain in second bottom spot with 17 points from 20 outings with Country tenth on 19 points from the same number of matches with St Johnstone propping up the rest on 14 points also from 20 games.

PICTURE: James Wilson in action by *Thomas Brown*