

Gordon the hero as Hearts squeeze through

Hearts squeezed into the last eight of the Scottish Gas, Scottish Cup, but they left it late to level after St Mirren took the lead, and they survived a nerve penalty shootout in which Craig Gordon saved twice.

Earlier, St Mirren, who have struggled for form in 2025, and Hearts, with five wins and a draw since New Year, squared-up in the freezing SMISA Stadium in Paisley for the final tie in the fifth round of the competition.

The past record between the two clubs shows three wins each and four draws and Saints manager, Stephen Robinson, made two changes while Neil Critchley, Hearts' head coach, made one, Alan Forrest in for Musa Drammeh, his first start since late December, looking for extra energy.

Both teams struggled to find any real rhythm in a game watched by Scotland manager, Steve Clarke, but a long ball found Saints danger man Toyosi Olusanya driving towards the Hearts goal. He gambled on the bounce of the ball but the 27-year-old, quicksilver striker prodded the ball over the bar. A great chance gone.

St Mirren continued to press, forcing the Tynecastle defence to turn, but Alex Gogic had to sweep up after a deep cross from James Penrice, and, seconds later, at the other end,

Cammy Devlin clashed with Olusanya on the edge of the Hearts' box and the St Mirren player fell to the ground.

VAR was called in but play continued and Devlin then pinched the ball from a St Mirren player. He fed Elton Kabangu who let fly with his left foot only for Zach Hemming to dive to his right and send the ball for a corner which came to nothing.

Hearts won another corner in front of their big travelling support and Penrice played it short. The ball was cleared to Spittal on the edge of the box and his shot into traffic trundled wide of Hemming's right-hand post.

At the other end, Beni Banningime had to rescue Hearts after a free kick 35 yards out, three St Mirren players beating the offside trap. The ball was cleared for a corner and Hearts had another scare with Olusanya breaking free on the six-yard, line but the striker was marginally offside, much to the relief of the Gorgie men.

A back pass down the right had Gordon racing from his goal but Jamie McCart was there to clear as St Mirren looked the more likely to score. The Buddies were knocking at the door and Gordon had to tip the ball over the bar after a long throw on the left.

Mikael Mandron eventually made the home side's pressure tell on the Men in Maroon by tapping in from close range to break the deadlock after Gordon parried a shot from the left. Time: 22 minutes.

Kabangu had other ideas. He took the game to St Mirren, forcing a corner, but Hemming dealt with the set-piece, but Hearts continued to struggle against lively St Mirren who kept up their high tempo, with Olusanya always a threat.

Gordon was beaten by a corner kick as the Buddies looked for a second goal, and the Jambos failed to pick up men from St Mirren free-kicks around the box, causing them some anxiety.

The Jambos were also finding it difficult against the physical Saints players who gave them little or no time on the ball but Hearts, at last, found a move to threaten.

Adam Forrester drove down the right after Banningime had won the ball in midfield but Forrest failed to test the opposition goalkeeper. It did signal a period of Maroon possession, but the visitors continued to struggle to break the uncompromising Saints down and the home side were denied by a last gasp McCart block just before the break as the home side threatened again.

Neither side made any changes at the break, but it was Saints who threatened first, Olusanya breaking down the left and firing wide of Gordon's left-hand post. A warning to Hearts.

Critchley had much to ponder as St Mirren continued to close down Hearts, making it difficult for the Jambos to threaten, but Lawrence Shankland had a sight of goal but failed to connect properly.

Then Spittal fired from range over the bar. Better from Hearts but Lewis Neilson went down with a leg injury and Austrian defender Michael Steinwender was sent on to make his Scottish cup debut after his recent signing from Swedish football.

His first touch sent the ball out for a long throw delivered by Killian Phillips which came to nothing and Hearts worked their way forward, patiently, but the ball broke and Phillips was fed from the left after Gordon had miss-kicked an attempted clearance. The midfielder rose but failed to connect properly and another golden chance was gone.

Kabangu then forced Gogic to defend as Hearts broke and seconds later Spittal worked an opportunity but his shot was partly blocked and Hemming grabbed the ball. There was, however, more urgency from the visitors who prepared to introduce teenage striker James Wilson and another new signing, Norwegian midfielder, Sander Kartum, who made his

debut.

Penrice had sight of goal while they waited on the touchline but fired wide and Devlin left the field along with Forrest as Hearts struggled to find a way through. Gogic mopped up again after Hearts won the ball in Saints half, but this was not a vintage performance from the Capital combine.

St Mirren made their first change with Elvis Bwomono coming on and Ryan Alebiosu departing, a move to counter Hearts' change of shape, and Forrester found Shankland who worked some space and fired a right foot shot towards Hemming who grabbed the ball much to the relief of home fans.

Mandron was the next player to threaten, forcing a corner, as The Buddies maintained their hold on the narrow lead, and Hearts fans became more and more agitated as their favourites failed to test the Saints rearguard.

Indeed it was Mandron who again threatened as the rain poured down before Declan John fired in a low left-foot shot which Gordon dived to his right to divert the ball for a corner, a great shave and one much needed by the Jambos.

Midfielder, Calem Nieuwenhof, out of action with injury for 11 months, and another long-term injury victim, Gerald Taylor, were sent on to salvage something from the game with seven minutes left and the Australian's first touch struck gold for the Jambos.

The 23-year-old picked up a fortunate flick from Penrice and fired home with his right foot to level, time 84 minutes, from near the penalty spot after Saints failed to clear. Hearts fans were jumping and it was game on. The drummer upped his decibel rate.

Steinwender and Taylor were in the wars as the clock ticked down, but they played on as Hearts looked for game-winner. Saints replaced Olusanya with 17-year-old midfielder Evan

Mooney and eight minutes of injury time was posted.

Mooney had a fleeting chance as Hearts struggled to clear the ball, another real scare for Critchley's men, but they survived and this bruising battle raged on with Hearts in the ascendancy.

Taylor launched a long throw from the right but it was eventually cleared with goalkeeper Hemming commanding. At the other end, Phillips launched a throw into the Jambos box. The ball was cleared.

Another long throw and Shankland cleared to bravely headed the ball on to Kabangu – the teenager needed treatment after being clattered – who sped upfield. He beat the goalkeeper before going wide and firing for goal but midfielder Caolan Boyd-Munce made up ground to clear at the near post. Still deadlock. Gogic was booked for a foul on Wilson during the move.

One last chance and Penrice swing the ball into the box. The ball came out of the box to Kartum who blasted over. Level at the final whistle after 90-plus minutes and now extra time.

Robinson made more changes, Greg Kiltie and Oisin Smyth came on and Boyd-Munce and Mark O'Hara went off, and Saints won an early corner, but Taylor galloped down the right to put pressure on Saints but his ball in was poor.

Kabangu then won a corner down the left but the ball from Kartum into the box was cleared, and Saints' defender Marcus Fraser tried his luck from the edge of the box. Corner, cleared then another and Hearts bundled the ball away.

Danger over for a few seconds before Mooney was fouled. From the free-kick Mandron was fed by an inch-perfect pass from young Mooney but he put the ball over. However, he was in an offside position.

At the other end, Penrice sliced wildly wide from the edge of the box with his left-foot, as play raged from end-to-end and Saints won another corner and Gordon blocked from Gogic and Phillips at the near post.

Referee Don Robertson signalled the end of the first-half of extra time, so still all to play for.

Critchley introduced Jorge Grant and Kenneth Vargas, replacing Shankland and Kabangu, as penalties loomed and Hearts patiently probed, leaving Saints to chase the ball on tired legs, and The Buddies retreated, looking to hit the Jambos on the break.

Nieuwenhof drove for goal and eventually the ball fell to Grant whose shot was blocked and then Vargas who shot wide, and Saints made two more changes, James Scott on for Mandron, and Phillips was replaced by Luke Kenny.

Kartum won a controversial corner and Vargas blasted over. The Costa Rica striker had a shot blocked as tension mounted.

Vargas was floored by Kelly, giving Hearts a real chance from a free-kick, and Penrice had his shot tipped over by Hemming. It was a testing free-kick but the subsequent corner was grabbed by Hemming.

It was the last real chance as referee Robertson signalled the end of the game. Now penalties.

The nerve-jangling penalties were towards the Hearts travelling support and it was young Wilson who stepped up first. Short run, high into the net. Smith next and Gordon got down low to his left to tip the ball wide of the goal.

Vargas was up next and he blasted the ball low into the net to the left hand side. Next up James Scott and 42-year-old Gordon saved again, this time to his right.

Grant came next for Hearts and Jorge found the net despite

Hemming getting a hand to the ball. Hemming will be disappointed.

Mooney stepped-up for Saints and he took a long run before sending Gordon the wrong way and burying the ball into the other corner.

Now Gerald Taylor. He could seal victory for Hearts and his shot was saved by Hemming. A poor penalty from a short run.

The drama continued. Fraser next and the skipper found the net to make it 3-2. Now Penrice to send Hearts through and he side-footed the ball into the net with his trusty left foot.

PICTURE: Craig Gordon (right) in training.