

Kabangu double secures welcome win for Hearts

Hearts battled to a narrow 2-1 win at struggling St Johnstone thanks to a double from Elton Kabangu and some brilliant work between the uprights from veteran goalkeeper Craig Gordon.

The three points moves Hearts up to seventh position in the 12-strong William Hill Premiership table, one point behind St Mirren who they entertain at Tynecastle on Wednesday (19.45).

Earlier, Neil Critchley named an unchanged line-up but warned the players that the conditions, including a sodden pitch and heavy rain, could play a part. His message was to adapt and not get frustrated.

Cagey opening, players trying to get to grips with the pitch, with both teams preferring the long ball. On one of their first raids upfield, the home side sent the ball up the left wing. Gordon (pictured by *David Mollison*) ran out of his goal to clear and he was felled by Adama Sidibeh. The veteran goalkeeper nursed his right arm in the aftermath.

The Perth side, who have consistently failed to make the final ball count this term, continued to dominate possession and pressed the visitors hard. It took Hearts until the 14th minute to force their first corner but the Jambos, who have scored on 11 occasions this season from corners, failed to test the home defence.

Teenager James Wilson, lurking on the right hand side of the penalty box, knocked down a high cross but nobody was there to collect, an opportunity missed. Minutes later Blair Spittal had a view of goal from just outside the box and fired over.

The service to the Jamos strikers was sparse and Wilson moved out to the right hand side. He picked up the ball and advanced before sending the ball across the box towards Kabangu but he failed to make contact as the ball skidded out.

James Penrice and Spittal, who have dovetailed well this term, were struggling to get into the game and the ball from to Sibideh who had a sight of goal but failed to test Gordon.

Beni Baningime was working hard, trying to plug gaps and pick up the ball in midfield but Wilson picked up a loose ball and drove down the right again. He kept his cool and picked out Jorge Grant with a ball into the box. The midfielder let fly only to see Saints goalkeeper Andy Fisher tip the ball over the bar. Grant held his head in his hands. Time 29 minutes.

Hearts continued to grow into the game and Kabangu was then fed by Spittal from midfield and he fired towards goal from the left side but the ball flashed wide of Fisher's left-hand upright.

After 35 minutes Hearts struck. Penrice fed Lawrence Shankland inside the box. The skipper moved to his left and then sent the ball to his right with his left foot towards unmarked Kabangu who bundled the ball home from close range for his sixth goal for the club since the 27-year-old Belgian-born player joined on loan. VAR intervened but the goal stood giving hearts the lead.

The travelling fans celebrated and Kabangu urged his teammates to maintain their push, but, at the other end, Graham Carey saw a chance to chip Gordon after a poor clearance but he failed to keep his composure and the ball was blasted high over the bar.

The surface, particularly on Hearts' right flank, was proving tricky for both teams, but neat inter-passing from Hearts, with defender Michael Steinwender involved, ended with Spittal testing Fisher with a strong right-foot shot from outside the box. It was arrowed towards the goalkeeper's left hand but he palmed the ball for a corner. Hearts failed to make it count.

The referee added an extra minute but the scoreline stayed the same.

Saints had worked the ball well in the first-half but failed to make that count in the final third, and manager, Simo Valakari, made two changes in a bid to claw his way back into the game.

Hearts, however, had other ideas, pressing hard, and they earned a quick corner. It was not cleared and Grant and Penrice combined to find Shankland who fired wide of Fisher's right-hand post.

From nowhere, Saints were level. The ball was sent towards the left wing and a cross from the edge of the box went over the head of former Saints defender Jamie McCart and Sibideh ghosted in at the far post to nod home. VAR was called in but the goal stood.

And Sam Curtis latched on to another deep cross from the left to fire towards goal and Gordon parried the ball with his left hand before Penrice nodded over the bar, a real scare.

A minute later the ball broke upfield and Shankland found Kabango with a peach of a pass which sliced open the Saints defence and the Belgian hammed it home with his left foot for Hearts' second. How he celebrated with the fans behind the goal. Time 58 minutes.

Fisher was again in the thick of the action with Shankland testing the goalkeeper at his near post after a slick pass across the box from Kabangu.

Saints were under siege and Grant and Shankland all had a glimpse of goal from inside the box but Valakari's men survived but the Jambos upped the heat with two substitutions, Grant and Adam Forrester departing for newcomer Sander Kartum and Gerald Taylor.

Saints, however, stung Hearts with a quick strike. Curtis fired in a wonderful cross from the right and Drey Wright jumped to head the ball into the postage stamp corner of the net, Gordon had no chance. VAR intervened and ruled that Wright was offside.

The home side made two changes, Zach Mitchell and former Hearts player, Mackenzie Kirk, coming on for Jonathan Svedbert and Curtis and Hearts also made a double change, Calem Nieuwenhof and Musa Drammeh being introduced with Spittal and Wilson departing.

Baningime then won the ball just inside the Saints half and fed Aussie midfielder Nieuwenhof who fired towards goal with his right foot from just outside the box. Fisher palmed for a corner which sparked another change, Taylor Steven being introduced and Sibideh going off.

But Hearts suffered a major scare when Stephen Duke-McKenna sent in a curling cross towards the far post and Kirk sped in to side-foot the ball wide, a glorious change. No wonder the Edinburgh-born player held his head in his hands. It eventually proved costly.

At the other end, Baningime won the ball and worked a one-two with Shankland but the chance evaporated when he failed to control the ball in a great position inside the box.

Alan Forrest was then introduced for Hearts for the last two minutes of regular time with Shankland going off and the captain's armband going to Gordon for the remainder of the game which included four minutes of added time.

Taylor was booked for a two-footed tackle on Steven as Saints launched a desperate bid to score, pinning Hearts in their own box, but Hearts held out despite Kabangu receiving a yellow card for diving in the box.

Gordon said: "Conditions were not great but we found a way. There was a good performance from Elton."

Kabangu, the Player of the Match, added: "The most important thing was to win and it was an important game to win."