

Maeda double sinks Hearts at Celtic Park

Celtic cruised to victory over Hearts at wet and windy Celtic Park with danger man Daizen Maeda netting a double and Jota a single in a comfortable win against a visiting side who failed to mount consistent pressure on the William Hill Premiership pace-setters.

The damage was done in the first half when Celtic moved 3-0 ahead and chances for the Men in Maroon were few and far between, Lewis Neilson testing Celtic's stand-in goalkeeper and teenager James Wilson failing with a header when close in.

Other than that, Celtic dominated proceedings despite Cammy Devlin making his comeback after concussion and Harry Milne making his debut with Adam Forrester also named in the starting line-up.

Celtic gave Finnish goalkeeper Viljami Sinisalo his debut as No 1, Kasper Schmeichel, was injured on international duty for Denmark in midweek.

Hearts took the game to Celtic in the opening minutes and a driving run deep into the Hoops half set up a fleeting chance, but Celtic cleared despite Sinisalo fumbling the ball, and the Jambos continued to exert pressure.

Milne found Elton Kabangu on the edge of the Celtic penalty

box which eventually earned a free-kick and James Penrice swung the ball into the box but, again, it was cleared.

Kabangu and Penrice combined down the left and won a corner which Forrester took and the ball fell to Lewis Neilson who fired for goal from the edge of the six-yard box, but Sinisalo got his hands to the shot.

Neil Critchley, Hearts' head coach, had asked his men to be brave and they were showing real spirit, but the home side broke and Milne had to show his defensive qualities as Celtic threatened.

Celtic appealed for handball against Milne soon after but play was waved on after a VAR check.

Seconds later Kabangu fired over a cross from the left and Lawrence Shankland held his head in his hands as the ball flew inches over his head.

Celtic then broke and skipper Callum McGregor found Daizen Maeda with a ball which sliced through the Hearts defence. The Japanese striker made no mistake one-on-one with Craig Gordon to net his 21st of the season. Cool, clinical and a massive blow for Hearts. Time: 17 minutes.

Hearts hit back and Cameron Carter-Vickers flattened Kabangu on the edge of the penalty box. The free-kick effort from Penrice went straight into the Celtic wall and was comfortably cleared before Jota claimed No 2.

A clever chip from Nicolas-Gerrit Kuhn and a nod on from Maeda which hit Gordon's left-hand post set up a rebound and the Portuguese slotted home giving Hearts a mountain to climb after only 24 minutes.

Celtic began to dominate with the Jambos finding it hard to get possession and the Parkhead squad's slick passing set up another chance, but Neilson cleared for a corner before Reo

Hatate picked up the ball and fired wildly wide, wasting a good opportunity.

Hearts pressed in a bid to win control of the ball and repair the damage and James Wilson, Penrice and Kabangu worked an opportunity at the back post but Celtic scrambled the ball clear with Shankland squeezed out at the back post.

At the other end, Jeffrey Schlupp forced Gordon to save with his feet and then Wilson wasted a glorious chance for the visitors after a chip from Penrice from the left to the back post. The new Scotland international headed tamely wide.

Celtic wasted little time in adding to their tally when they latched onto a ball from Reo Hatate who found Maeda free in the box and there was only one outcome, a bulging net. Time 41 minutes.

Brendan Rodgers' (pictured) side were now in control with Hearts living on scraps and unable to provide quality ball for their front-runners, and Jota tested Gordon at the near post with a left-foot shot just before two minutes of injury time was signalled.

Celtic were not finished and Hatate had another peek at the Hearts' goal but he lashed at the ball high and wide, much to the relief of the Jambos rearguard.

Shankland was becoming increasingly frustrated at the decisions of the referee before the whistle to end a difficult first 47 minutes and the scoreline left much food for thought for the Men in Maroon and coach Critchley in the break.

Celtic had enjoyed 68 per cent of possession in the first 45 minutes against 31 per cent from Hearts and the Parkhead side had 357 passes against 152 for the visitors.

That and the scoreline forced Critchley to introduce Calem Nieuwenhof for Wilson, but Celtic were first to threaten, Jota

tearing down the left and crossing. The ball was palmed out by Gordon but there was nobody in a green and white shirt to take advantage at the back post.

A warning, perhaps, that The Hoops were not finished as an attacking force, and they forced two quick corners which came to nothing, but Gordon was forced to dive to his left to save a shot from McGregor after good work by Kuhn.

Sinisalo was a virtual spectator as the team-mates continued to drive forward in search of more goals, and Jota left young Forrester in his slipstream and supplied another inviting cross which was cleared by Milne.

McGregor was withdrawn after 63 minutes and Paulo Bernardo, who has spent time on the sidelines through injury, came on with Carter-Vickers taking over as skipper, but the switch did not disrupt the home side who continued to pass the ball around, looking for an opening to inflict further punishment on the Jambos.

Beni Baningime left the pitch along with Shankland and Devlin with Jorge Grant, Blair Spittal and Sander Kartum being introduced. At the same time, two-goal Maeda and Kuhn were among the Celtic changes as the clock ticked down and Hearts continued to chase.

Celtic were giving little away in a disappointing second-half and their substitute, James Forrest, threatened down the left late on as Rodgers' men kept a tight grip on proceedings.

Kabangu was replaced by Alan Forrest, James' brother, with less than five minutes of regulation time left but the home side's dominance continued.

Overall, it had been a miserable day weatherwise and a miserable afternoon for the travelling support who saw their side well-beaten with little to lift their gloom as the match petered out.