

Dejection for Hearts as Buddies claim final slot

Hearts travelled to Fir Park looking for a win to clinch a top six spot, but they and their success-hungry fans travelled home disappointed as St Mirren came from behind to secure place among the best teams in the William Hill Premiership.

It was the third straight top six finish on a limited budget for The Buddies who celebrated in style, but this was a crushing blow for the Men in Maroon who expected more from their squad.

St Mirren now have 41 points with the Jambos on 40 and Motherwell on 39.

Earlier, Neil Critchley put his faith in this starting side for the crucial match against Motherwell at Fir Park. The team sheet read: Gordon, Banningime, Grant, Steinwender, Spittal, Kabangu, Kartum, Penrice, McCart, Forrester and Musa.

On the substitutes bench were Fulton, Kent, Kingsley, Halkett, Nieuwenhof, Shankland, Devlin, Forrest and Dhanda.

Teenage striker James Wilson misses out after the red card issued in the narrow defeat by Dundee United at Tynecastle and Musa Drammeh was the man entrusted with filling the slot, not Shankland, as Critchley looked for a player to have pace and

the power to run in behind the Fir Park defence.

The 23-year-old, Spanish-born player, he stressed, scored a few goals in a practice match in midweek and the head coach said he wanted to compete with the best.

The Jambos were up against a team with only two wins in their last 11 league games and Motherwell manager, Michael Wimmer, made two changes, Tony Watt in to lead the line and Twanda Maswanhise made his comeback and fans were looking to him to carry the ball to the opposition. Kai Andrews and Luke Armstrong made way.

Once play started, Kartum had a goal-bound effort blocked, and Kabangu was stopped by Balcombe as Hearts tried to impose themselves on the game.

The visitors had a massive opportunity after 17 minutes, Penrice crossed towards Kartum who was unmarked at the back post but he sent the ball over.

The home side were forced into an early change with Koutroumbis coming on and Balmer going off with what appeared to be a leg injury before Norwegian midfielder Kartum was booked for a foul on Thompson.

Young defender Forrester then entered the book after a foul on the edge of the area and there was not a lot between the teams in the Lanarkshire sunshine.

Motherwell then had a chance, Watt standing at the back post and latching onto a corner. He fired the ball across goal, but wide of the target, then, at the other end, former Motherwell player Spittal cut inside before shooting straight at Balcombe.

Both managers were animated as the scoreline remained blank, and the stakes grew higher, and Grant tried to break the deadlock, but his shot was hooked wide.

Three minutes of injury time still failed to produce an opener, and both managers had work to do in the interval to find that vital spark to break the deadlock in a disappointing match.

Critchley made a move, introducing Devlin and Shankland (pictured) with Kartum and Musa not reappearing after the break, and Kabangu sent a cross in the direction of substitute Shankland but his header was cleared by O'Donnell.

At around the same time, St Mirren bounced back from 1-0 down to Ross County at Paisley to take a 2-1 lead and heap pressure on Hearts, who dropped out of the top six.

Devlin added bite in midfield and Shankland looked sharp, but the play was halted for several minutes when former Jambos player, Andy Halliday, received treatment and then left the pitch.

Andrews was brought on as a substitute for Motherwell but it was Spittal who had the next chance but he failed to make it count. Baningime was then booked for a foul on Miller.

Then news filtered through from Paisley that Ross County had levelled with St Mirren which meant Hearts were back in the top six.

Critchley did not want to rely on results elsewhere and Shankland had a sight of goal from the edge of the box following a deep cross from Forrester who found Kabangu. He spotted Shankland but the Scotland striker hit the ball wide.

Forrest was introduced for Baningime and Motherwell made a double substitution, Sparrow and Watt off and Armstrong and Tavares on as the clock ticked down.

Home boss Wimmer then made a double change with Dickson and Paton going on and Maswanhise and Slattery going off with less than ten minutes of regular time remaining, but it was Hearts

who upped the tempo and McCart had a chance cleared and Spittal blazed over.

Critchley then introduced Nieuwenhof for Kabangu with six minutes left, but the Men in Maroon suffered a major blow when St Mirren scored to move 3-2 ahead of The Staggies and into the top six with Hearts and Motherwell edged out.

Casey then had a chance for Wimmer's men as the match moved into seven minutes of injury time and Halkett took over from Steinwender, but Halkett was used up-front for the desperate Jambos.

Shankland then had a great opportunity but he failed to make it count and that was that. The final score was 0-0 at Fir Park and confirmed at 3-2 for St Mirren at Paisley thanks to a late strike from Roland Idowu which clinched that spot among the elite for Stephen Robinson's squad.