

## Football 249

### Chapter 249 Vs HEARTS (2)

Kieran Tierney picked himself up, brushing off the dirt from his kit, and focused on the free-kick. As the Hearts players set up their defensive wall, Scott Sinclair and Ewan Henderson positioned themselves around the ball, discussing the best approach.

Sinclair took a few steps back, his eyes fixed on the goal. The referee blew the whistle, and Sinclair started his run-up, but at the last moment, Henderson took the kick, sending a perfectly weighted cross into the penalty area. Oliver Burke rose above the defenders, meeting the ball with a powerful header that rocketed towards the goal.

Hearts goalkeeper Zlamal was in a good position though allowing him to jump in time to make an acrobatic save. The Hearts home fans couldn't hold back from celebrating as they watched him pushing the ball out for a corner. Burke on the other hand looked at the keeper in disbelief not understanding how he made that save.

The corner kick provided another opportunity for Celtic. James Forrest took the corner, delivering a high, curling ball into the box. This time, Dedryck Boyata timed his jump perfectly, heading the ball downwards into the crowded goalmouth. Before the Celtic players could even celebrate Zlamal pulled another trick out of his gloves.

Arriving in front of the ball in what seemed to be a slide he pounced on the descending ball. Gripping the ball tightly he held onto it as he fell onto the ground keeping it safe. The Hearts supporters erupted in applause for their goalkeeper as he stood up, clutching the ball. Zlamal's heroics had kept Celtic at bay, but the visiting side relentlessly pursued an early goal. The ball was quickly back in play, and Celtic resumed their high-pressure tactics.

In the commentary booth, a discussion between the pundits was also in full swing as they watched the match. Callum McDonald was the first to voice his opinions on the ongoings of the match. "Celtic is absolutely dominating the early stages here, Roy. Their energy and cohesion under Lennon's guidance are evident. Hearts are struggling to keep up with the relentless pressure."

Roy Townsley his co-commentator was quick to respond keeping the conversation flowing. "Absolutely, Callum. Lennon's influence is clear. The players are sharp and disciplined. Zlamal's saves have been crucial, but Hearts need to find a way to disrupt Celtic's rhythm."

Their words proved true as Celtic continued to maintain control of the game not allowing the home side to settle. Despite Craig Levein's best attempt to settle his boys, they found it hard to fight back. The dominance at display from the Scottish champions helped put some of the fans at ease.

Hearts attempted to counterattack but found themselves consistently thwarted by Celtic's disciplined defence. Every Celtic player had something to prove to not only the manager but to the fans watching. This became notable as they continued to chase that first goal of the match.

[20] As the clock ticked past the 20-minute mark, Celtic orchestrated another attack. Bitton intercepted a loose pass in the midfield, quickly laying the ball off to Brown, who directed it out wide to Forrest. Forrest, with a burst of pace, drove down the right flank, leaving Hearts' left-back struggling to keep up.

"Forrest is looking lively today, Roy. His pace and directness are causing all sorts of problems for the Hearts defence." Callum exclaimed as they continued to watch Forrest bringing the ball forward.

"He's been outstanding, Callum. If Celtic can maintain this intensity, it's only a matter of time before they find the back of the net." Roy Commented keeping up his end of the job as they watched Forrest reach the side of the box.

Forrest whipped in a dangerous cross, aiming for Burke at the far post. Burke managed to get his head to it but couldn't direct the ball on target, sending it just wide. The Hearts defence, visibly relieved, regrouped as Zlamal prepared for the goal kick.

Celtic's relentless pressure paid off as they won the ball back almost immediately. This time, it was Henderson who picked up the ball in the midfield, showing composure beyond his years as he threaded a precise pass to Sinclair on the left wing. Sinclair cut inside, dribbling past two defenders before unleashing a curling shot from just outside the box.

Zlamal, once again, was forced into a spectacular save, tipping the ball over the bar for another corner. "What a save from Zlamal! Sinclair's effort looked destined for the top corner, but the Hearts goalkeeper is having a phenomenal game." Roy exclaimed with excitement completely astonished by what he had just witnessed.

Callum responded with equal excitement "He's keeping them in it, Roy, Celtic needs to stay patient. They're doing everything right; they just need that final touch." Forrest stepped up to take the corner again, sending in another precise delivery. Ajer managed to connect with a powerful header this time, but a Hearts defender cleared his effort off the line.

[30] Halfway through the first half, Hearts finally managed a promising counterattack as they got used to the game's tempo. Naismith picked up the ball in midfield and drove forward, slipping a pass to Ikpeazu. The striker, using his strength, held off Boyata and unleashed a shot from the edge of the box. Bain was called into action for the first time, diving low to his right to parry the ball away.

"That's the first real threat from Hearts! A solid effort by Ikpeazu, and Bain did well to keep it out." Callum noted as he watched the keeper in question animatedly pumping his fist after his save. "They need more of that, Callum. If Hearts can capitalize on these counterattacks, they might just turn the tide." Roy added with a hint of caution, but Callum beside him could clearly tell he was excited.

"The game is much more exciting now that we have two teams participating," He added with a slight smile throwing a subtle jab at the hearts squad who have been below par today. "Yes exactly, they have been giving Celtic way too much respect and now they finally remembered they are good too," Roy added with a smile as they watched Hearts launch yet another counter after escaping a Celtic attack.

[35] Hearts began to grow in confidence, pushing higher up the field and challenging Celtic's control. Their midfielders started to find pockets of space, testing Celtic's defence with quick passes and clever movements. Naismith, in particular, was becoming a focal point of their attacks.

"Naismith is really stepping up for Hearts. His experience and vision are starting to make a difference," Callum observed. Roy nodded in agreement. "Absolutely, Callum. If Hearts can keep feeding him the ball, they might create more opportunities."

Despite Hearts' resurgence, Celtic remained dangerous on the break. O. Lee found himself in an advantageous position outside the box receiving a hasty pass from Djoum he didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. His shot didn't get far though as Brown dived feet first in a bid to block the shot.

His effort paid off as the ball ricocheted off his shinguards deflecting it away allowing Sinclair to pounce on the loose ball. The winger immediately launched a swift counterattack darting down the left flank. He put in the jets as he manoeuvred around a few players before accelerating down the wing.

Ignoring the Cahotc movements all around him he quickly entered the final third. Souttar appeared ahead of him ready to stop him at all cost but the winger didn't engage with him. Choosing to send a sharp pass down the flank just beyond Souttar for Burke to run onto.

The striker left his man with ease using his speed to catch up to the ball before he could be marked again. Looking up into the box he looked for a teammate and quickly a few options appeared. Not hesitating he sent a grounded cross into the box hoping to connect with Forest.

Forrest who had sprinted into the box following the counter lagged behind a few of his more eager teammates. That left him with a gap between him and the Hearts back line finding himself surprisingly free as the ball flew towards him. Not hesitating he angled his body let the ball pass in front of him and swung his right foot with practised ease.

He struck the ball perfectly sending a sharp shot towards the middle of the goal. Despite not placing the ball perfectly it hopped over the ground only bouncing in front of the line. That was all he needed to beat the Zlamal who had been close to the front post and had to desperately try and make the save.