

Raith Rovers 0 Heart of Midlothian 4

SPFL Championship, Saturday 23 August 2014 – Starks Park

Even at this embryonic stage of the season with the teams metaphorically barely out of the starting blocks, Raith Rovers and Hearts met in Kirkcaldy on Saturday afternoon for what was described by the tabloid press as a 'top of the table clash'. Both sides had won their opening two league fixtures with Rovers defeating Dumbarton and Alloa Athletic while Hearts had won their opening day fixture at Ibrox before following this up with an inevitable victory in the Edinburgh derby last Sunday.

Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson fielded a much more familiar looking team in Fife as opposed to the team of youngsters who lost 4-1 to Livingston in the Petrofac Training Cup on Wednesday night. James Keatings replaced the suspended Osman Sow in attack – and it was a decision which was to reap huge dividends for the Gorgie side.

Hearts received tremendous backing from around 4,000 fans who made the trip to Fife. However, it was the Kirkcaldy side who began the game brightly and they forced a couple of early corners. Former Hearts striker, the much-maligned Christian Nade, was keen to do well for his new club but, in truth, the big Frenchman never seriously threatened.

Robbie Neilson's side took the lead in the 12th minute. Billy King took the ball past home keeper Cuthbert before passing to Sam Nicholson. The young forward back heeled the ball towards the goal but the ball was scrambled off the line by the home defence. However, it broke to James Keatings who drove the ball home for his first competitive goal for Hearts.

Buoyed by this early goal, Hearts swarmed forward at every opportunity. Kevin McHattie and Jason Holt had chances to double the visitors lead before a second goal duly arrived in the 28th minute. The hard-working King saw his attempt on goal blocked and Prince Buaben's subsequent effort was pushed out by keeper Cuthbert – but only in the direction of Keatings who drilled the ball home for his and Hearts second goal. At half-time it was the huge travelling support who were the happiest of the 6,000 crowd.

Hearts began the second half the way they had ended the first. The ever-dangerous Keatings brought out a fine save from Cuthbert before the man signed from Hamilton Academical in the summer duly completed his hat-trick just before the hour mark. Sam Nicholson set off one of those runs for which he is becoming renowned and was brought down illegally on the edge of the Raith penalty box. Keatings took the free kick and his superb strike flew into the top corner to put Hearts in easy street.

The home side tried hard for a consolation without unduly worrying Hearts young keeper Jack Hamilton. In stoppage time, Hearts added a fourth goal. Young substitute Alistair Roy, who had replaced the hat-trick hero Keatings, made a forward run before being tackled. However, it summed up Raith's day when the ball broke to fellow substitute Gary Oliver and the young forward fired home to complete a fine afternoon's work for Hearts, much to the delight of the vociferous Maroon Army.

Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson expressed himself satisfied after the game but was quick to stress the long road ahead for Hearts.

'I'll take that, but ask me again in ten games and we'll see how we're doing", he told Hearts official website. 'We've started well but we must maintain it to win the title. Games against the likes of Rangers and Hibs take care of themselves. These are the bread-and-butter matches that will prove hardest

over the season. We had 4,000 fans here today, so the big crowd would have Raith up for the game as well.

Asked what he thought about James Keatings hat-trick performance, Neilson said he wasn't surprised. 'I brought James in because he's a goalscorer. We need different types of players in the squad. James might have played today regardless of Osman's suspension. We wanted to change the shape and we have the options to do so now.'

A fine performance and result for this young Hearts side. After the trauma of last season it's hugely satisfying to see the likes of Kevin McHattie, Billy King and Sam Nicholson maturing into players of some quality. With the addition of more experienced players such as Gomis and Buaben and proven goalscorers in Keatings and Sow, optimism is in plentiful supply at Tynecastle.

Raith Rovers: Cuthbert, Thomson, Perry, Watson, Fox, Anderson, Stewart, Scott, Conroy, McKeown, Nade.

Hearts: Hamilton, McHattie, Wilson, Ozturk, Gomis, Holt, Nicholson, King, Buaben, Keatings, McGhee.

Referee: Craig Charleston

Att: 6,105

Top man: Who else but hat-trick hero James Keatings?