

Hard-Working Keatings Remains Focussed

Hearts unbeaten start to their league campaign in the SPFL Championship – at the halfway stage in the season the Gorgie club are an astonishing 15 points clear of second-placed Rangers, the pre-season favourites for the title – has rightly earned plaudits from around the country. Even from across the capital city where Hibernian boss Alan Stubbs heaped praise on his city rivals – before saying his team would look to end Hearts unbeaten run when the pair meet in the New Year derby at Tynecastle this Saturday. A photograph of Stubbs in the national press clenching his fist under the headline ‘The Jambos Are Next’ and his assertion that Hearts can only throw away the Championship given their commanding lead, seemed to be a case of the former Celtic and Everton defender starting the mind games ahead of the capital city clash. Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson, however, is maintaining the stance he has adopted since the first game of the season when his team defeated Rangers at Ibrox – namely, he is not looking any further than the next game.

It’s an attitude Neilson is eager to instil in his players and if centre forward James Keatings is anything to go by, the Hearts chief, nicknamed The Tackle after his heroics in the 2006 Scottish Cup final triumph over Gretna, is certainly getting his message across.

Keatings netted the only goal in Saturday’s win over Livingston and his fourth goal in four games has seen the player – who passed up an opportunity to play in the SPFL Premiership with Hamilton Academical to sign for Hearts – become joint top goalscorer at Tynecastle.

Keatings has become a favourite with the Maroon Army, possibly because he’s the sort of player who works tirelessly for the

team and never lets his head go down when faced with a setback. This was proved at the weekend when, early in the game, he scooped a chance wide from six yards and then missed a penalty kick. However, while some players might have put it down to 'one of those days' and let others take responsibility, Keatings kept working and was rewarded when he drove home the only goal of the game after being set up by Billy King.

"Scoring is what I was brought here to do," Keatings told the official Hearts website. "Four goals in four games is a good record, but I should have more. The chance at the back post and the penalty were unfortunate, it's just one of those things. When I played for Hamilton, I took all the penalty kicks and scored them all. But I've missed two here. I was glad to be able to make up for it with the goal.

"You just need to get it out of your head as quickly as possible. If you let it get to you it'll affect your game, so I focused on getting into the right positions again because I knew I'd get another chance. I'm off penalties now though, the boys have caned me for the miss, so someone else can get a shot."

Like his manager, Keatings played down the significance of Hearts opening up a 15 point lead at the top of the table, following Rangers crushing defeat at Easter Road. "We don't care what Rangers and Hibs, or any other teams do. It's only down to one team, and that's us, no matter what. If we win all our remaining games we will win the league. And we're remaining focused on winning games."

A mouth-watering Edinburgh derby would seem the best way to start 2015. And James Keatings will be looking to make it five games in a row that he has found the net. If he does, his stock among the Hearts support will rise even higher.