

# The Case for the Hearts Defence



It may be the winter break for Scotland's top flight clubs but it's been a veritable hive of activity at Tynecastle Stadium.

We're only halfway through the January transfer window period but we've already seen Alim Ozturk leave Hearts for Boluspor in Turkey and on-loan winger Tony Watt despatched back to parent club Charlton Athletic. Heading to Gorgie are Northern Irish defender Aaron Hughes and full back Lennard Sowah.

On Friday, another Hearts defender – Igor Rossi – left Edinburgh having opted to sign for Saudi Arabian side Al-Faisaly Hamah. It was a departure few of the maroon persuasion saw coming but the Brazilian was offered a lucrative opportunity to further his career and Hearts reluctantly agreed to let him go.

Hearts Head Coach Ian Cathro now has a defensive headache ahead of next Sunday's trip to Kirkcaldy and a William Hill Scottish Cup tie with Gary Locke's Raith Rovers. Director of Football Craig Levein has been frantically trying to bolster Cathro's squad with new faces and with full backs Callum Paterson (long-term injury) and Faycal Rherras (African Nations Cup duty, as is midfielder Arnaud Djoum) unavailable for the trip to Fife, the pressure is on.

Hearts have today been linked with former player, Christophe Berra, currently playing for English Championship side Ipswich Town. The centre half, who made his first team debut for Hearts in November 2003 when Levein was the Head Coach at Tynecastle, is reportedly looking for a return to Scotland. It would be a signal of intent by Hearts if they can tempt the 34 times capped Scotland international back to Gorgie. A major

stumbling block would surely be the salary offered as Hearts, in common with most Scottish clubs, can no longer financially compete with clubs in the English championship. Berra, who scored in Ipswich Town's 3-2 win over Blackburn Rovers yesterday, is highly thought of by Portman Road manager Mick McCarthy although his side are stuck in mid-table and are unlikely to be involved in the promotion play-offs and relegation battle.

That said, Berra turns 32 at the end of the month and McCarthy – if he's still Ipswich manager next season – may look to rebuild the team. Berra's possible return to Tynecastle might enable the talented but still inexperienced John Souttar to play as more of a defensive midfielder. The former Dundee United player is prone to the odd mistake but playing him in a slightly more forward position may help take the pressure off.

Ian Cathro, meantime, will likely be planning for next Sunday's game without Berra. With Aaron Hughes and Lennard Sowah likely to make their debuts, it could be Hearts will retain their three at the back system with Krystian Nowak playing just in front.

Whatever the team and formation, the potential for Hearts to extend their miserable recent record in the William Hill Scottish Cup is real enough. Raith Rovers may be a Championship side but the Maroons were knocked out of the cup by a team from that division last season. And, of course, much will be made of the Hearts connection at Starks Park. Manager Gary Locke, a former Hearts manager and captain and former Jambos Jason Thomson, Kevin McHattie, Ryan Stevenson and Gorgie legend Rudi Skacel will need no incentive to put one over their old team. Something BBC Scotland, who are televising the game live next Sunday, clearly recognise.

Hearts follow up next week's tie with games against Celtic and Rangers so the possibility of the 'Hearts in Crisis' banner headlines being splashed across the tabloid newspapers is a

distinct one.

Hearts, however, are in transition. It isn't only the main stand which is being rebuilt. It's also the team under a new Head Coach with new ideas and methods. The loss of Callum Paterson is a major blow and the departures of Ozturk and Rossi mean a new perspective on the defence. Given Hearts have been leaking goals regularly this season perhaps that is no bad thing.

The Maroon Army will need to be patient and remember the old adage – good things come to those who wait. That, my learned friends, is the case for the Hearts defence.