

Football – Ikpeazu will set Hearts racing

Uche Ikpeazu is the rampaging striker who has set his sights high, which is why the 23-year-old Londoner moved from League Two side Cambridge United to Scottish Premiership side Hearts last month.

He agreed a two-year deal at Tynecastle and will move to Edinburgh on 21 June. “I’m excited and really looking forward to this challenge,” Ikpeazu said. “It’s a big step up but I’m looking forward to the opportunity and relishing the opportunity to show what I’m made of at a higher level.”



Photo of Uche Ikpeazu by Simon Lankester

The 6ft 4in centre forward joined Cambridge from Watford in 2016 and scored 22 goals in 78 appearances. When he left Watford, he was in a “very dark place” not having a team for a couple of months. He had to take a massive pay cut to join Cambridge who were bottom of League Two initially on a five-month contract.

It was incredibly tough as he wasn't fit because he didn't have a pre-season and was running in the park on his own. He had to establish himself in a struggling side that had four

strikers ahead of him. "It was an uphill battle and I couldn't help but think the worse. But I had faith in God, worked hard and by January had scored eight times despite missing the start of the season." He missed six weeks with a pulled hamstring then a few games later dislocated his shoulder and was out for the rest of the season. He was set to be out for four months but even after a shoulder operation came back in nine weeks in time for the new season.

Ikpeazu signed from Hearts along with St Johnstone's veteran forward Steven MacLean and hopes they form a dynamic partnership together as well as complement Kyle Lafferty, Hearts' outstanding forward. "Hearts finished top six last season and I hope to help them finish top four this year," Ikpeazu said. "As long as there's an improvement I think that's the most important thing."

He was incredibly popular at Cambridge which is why Hearts say they "beat off stiff competition from sides north and south of the border".



Photo of Uche Ikpeazu by Simon Lankester

During his time at Watford, Ikpeazu had loan spells with Crewe Alexandra, Doncaster Rovers, Port Vale and Blackpool. Having not settled at any one club, he is excited now to join a club that appreciates his all-round ability.

He added: "I scored 14 goals last season, eight the season before and six the season before that. For me, it's all about progression. As long as I score more next season I'll be happy with myself. I also want to help the team finish in a high position so it's a collective thing."

He loves playing against big clubs so facing Celtic and Rangers will not be a daunting experience. He rates his performance against Leeds for Cambridge in the FA Cup as one of his finest games. "You want to test yourself against that sort of opposition and I did well." Although they lost 2-1, Ikpeazu scored the Cambridge goal and earned the Man of the Match award. "Scoring against Leeds was a high. My parents (Alex and Marion) don't often come to my games but they managed to come to that one and scoring in front of them and getting Man of the Match was great. I thought I was unplayable at times. I proved to myself that I can compete against big teams and I should always believe in myself.

"There's been loads of highs and lows and I embrace it. The move to Hearts is definitely a high. The manager, Craig Levein (former Scotland manager), really likes me. For someone who has managed at that level to really want me, makes me feel good. I want to repay that faith to him. I know the best is yet to come."

Ikpeazu believes his physical strength is his biggest asset as well as his two-footed ability, link up play and just needs to work on dominating in the air.

He watched Hearts lose at home 3-1 to treble champs Celtic last month. The intensity of the game brought home to him how important it will be to be in the best physical shape possible "to shine through". He added: "Celtic are a big team and can be a bit intimidating. But when Hearts played them, they were unlucky to lose. They were on top of them for most of the game. They can certainly compete against the big teams."

Ikpeazu hopes that a fresh start in Scotland will lead to a callup for Nigeria, his father's birthplace, and possibly England if his form peaks. "Nigeria did call me up for Under-23 training in 2015 when I was doing well at Port Vale. I decided not to go but looking back I regret that. After that it was downhill but in the last couple of years I've

rejuvenated myself. I'm hoping to get a chance to represent Nigeria now. I'd love to represent England too if the opportunity arises, but to play for England you probably have to be in the Premier League, which I still believe is possible."

Ikpeazu began his career at 10 alongside Raheem Sterling for three years with Brent Borough and then Queens Park Rangers. "I think Raheem is an inspiration to every young player, if you work hard you can do it," he said. "I messaged him to congratulate him on winning the Premier League and he responded: 'The work doesn't stop.' He still works hard. That inspires me. We both came from the same area in Wembley and we've both done well. He hasn't had it easy and had some adversity growing up. It's important to overcome that. I hope to get to that level one day."