

Joe Savage reflects on a successful summer window at Hearts

It was an important window for Hearts' sporting director Joe Savage, both on a personal level and for the team.

It was Savage's first summer transfer window at the club, and it was an important one for Hearts, as they tried to lower the average age of the squad and offload players who were surplus to requirements.

Hearts have added Taylor Moore, Alex Cochrane, Cameron Devlin, Beni Baningime and Ben Woodburn to their squad, whilst also securing the permanent signings of Ross Stewart and Josh Ginnelly, who both spent last season on loan at Tynecastle.

"We're pleased with the transfer window and we're still trying to bring in another attacker," Savage explained.

"We were close with two from the Premier League in England, one decided to stay and the other went to another club. The biggest thing for us is that we had to move a lot of the players out and had to streamline the squad. We managed to do that and bring in the players we wanted to.

Many of the Hearts signings in this window have been in the mid-to-low twenties and Savage explained that the plan was always to lower the age of the squad and target youngsters with points to prove.

"That's the type we want, young hungry players who wanted to go again. Certainly, in Beni's case I had known about him for years because I had worked down in England and when we heard something could be done we were desperate to do it.

"I'll tell you a wee story, when I was speaking to Beni when he signed he said: "Joe you don't need to worry". I said: "What do you mean?" And he said: "I've got a point to prove, I'll make this club money." That's exactly what you want to hear. Cammy, who we've brought in from Australia, he's really, really enthusiastic and keen to do well. That's the type we wanted and targeted. We made sure it was quality over quantity and that's the message we wanted to send out and we've strengthened the squad as we could.

"Nobody wants to say they're a selling club and we certainly don't want to say we just want to bring guys in to sell them but it's a market that all the best clubs use in the world. They bring in players that are a decent age, develop them for 18 months-two years and then flip them, sell them. We need that message to be getting out that that's what we're doing.

"Certainly, with the young English boys, when you're bringing them up, you're saying, 'come up here and play in front of the 20,000 at Tynecastle in the derby matches, Rangers and Celtic matches – you're live on Sky Sports. These are all our selling points but it's 'we won't stand in your way if something comes up – if there is a bigger move, better money, we know it's a short career, we're here to give you that platform and if you can come up and make us successful we'll see you."

Savage went on to explain that Hearts recently made up a welcome pack and a recruitment video to show players and agents the facilities, stadium and City of Edinburgh.

"We've created a welcome pack that we send to the players and their agents. We've created a recruitment video, it's about the history, the tradition of the club, the fans. For example,

there was a lot of interest in Alex Cochrane, and Robbie and I invited him up...

"We specifically took him for lunch in the city centre, so he could overlook the castle. Then we showed him around the stadium and the training ground. And when he left we knew we had him, that the other clubs interested weren't going to get him. He believed in what we were doing.

"So, we're not having to sell it too hard, and the one we have missed out on have went for more money or they've wanted to stay down south.

"Robbie [Neilson] is very good. You put Robbie on the phone to them and he sells this club better than anyone. He played here long enough, he managed the club before and is manager again. So, he's my secret weapon.

"It's good me telling them I rate them, but I don't pick the team, I'm not training them. He has to believe in them and buy into it, and he is brilliant in that sense. He speaks to them in a way that the boys want to hear, and they understand. He tells them how we're going to play, how they fit into the system."

Savage was keen to point out the recent successes of the current crop of Hearts youth, singling out Finlay Pollock, who broke into the first team towards the end of last season.



Scottish Championship – Heart of Midlothian v Raith rovers.
Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh, Midlothian, UK.

23/01/2021

Hearts play host to Raith Rovers in the Scottish Championship at Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh.

Pic shows: Raith Rovers' defender, Reghan Tumilty, tackles Hearts' winger, Josh Ginnelly.

Credit: Ian Jacobs

"The age of the group was too old, we had too many older players, we just felt we had to lower that. Now we have 21,

22, 23-year-olds who are hungry and desperate to do well. They're all at similar pathways in their careers.

"We also have a good academy, so we have to get that right as well. Our 13s, 14s, 15s and 16s are all in semi-finals and finals. We're pleased with what is going on behind the scenes. We are pleased with how these players are being developed.

"But we need to bridge that and get them into the first team as quickly as we can. We've got a few in just now, Finlay Pollock being the main one. He's 17 and we feel he has a really good chance to become a top, top Hearts player. But he needs time."

John Souttar is one of Hearts' most prized assets and if able to stay fit, a big move beckons for the defender who is currently negotiating on a new Hearts deal, but with his current one expiring at the end of the season, Savage remains confident Souttar will put pen to paper.

"We're trying to negotiate with John and get him to sign a new contract, but John's a sensible lad with a good family behind him and he understands exactly what he's looking for.

"We did knock back two offers from a Championship club that didn't meet our valuation in any way whatsoever. From speaking to John, Ann, Andrew and Robbie, we all felt that we would rather keep John here for the rest of the season rather than sell him for a fee that we don't think he's worth.

"If that means he leaves next summer on a free transfer then so be it. Hopefully we've either persuaded him to stay or we've finished, first, second, third or fourth in the league or we've done well in the cup, and he'll leave with our best wishes.

"We don't want him to leave and we're trying our best to keep him here but we're not ones to hold grudges. If John gets an offer he feels he can't turn down then sometimes there's

nothing you can do.”

“We’ll try and we’ll try, and we’ll try, and we won’t stop until he tells us to leave him alone. He’s not done that yet and I don’t think he will because he’s not that type of character. He’s enjoying himself here and is doing really well. But we all have to understand that he has just returned from a big injury, and he has to make sure he’s doing the right thing for him and his family.”

Now that the summer window has closed, Savage explained that Souttar isn’t allowed to speak to other clubs until December and is hoping between now and then an agreement can be reached.

“John’s a Rolls-Royce of a centre back isn’t he?” Savage said.

“John’s a top, top player. If he’d played another ten or 15 games he probably would’ve been in the Scotland squad. We value and rate him that highly which is why we knocked back the Championship offer. We didn’t feel it was anywhere near his value. We feel he’s better kept here, playing the way he’s playing than selling him on the cheap if you want to call it that.

“I don’t want to be disrespectful to the team that made the bid, but it was nowhere near what we thought and we’re happy to keep him in. He can’t do anything; he can’t talk to anyone about a pre-contract until the first of December. It’s now up to Robbie and me over the next two or three months to absolutely batter him – not physically – to get him to sign a new contract.”

Hearts have previously lost players like Callum Paterson and Aaron Hickey for less than they would’ve liked due to contract issues and despite not being at the club at that time, Savage insists that Hearts will be in the driving seat when clubs are trying to sign their star players.

"We'll make sure that our assets are tied down and that if anyone does want to come in for them then we're in the driving seat. We can turn round and say we expect x-amount to sell them and we're doing that with John, even though he's in the final year of his contract.

"I wasn't here with the Callum Patterson and Aaron Hickeys of this world but it's easier said than done. People will be speaking to them, telling them they can get big moves and I've been on that side of it. You try and try and try but whatever information they're getting elsewhere can kill you. We'll offer him the best contract we can but if he decides not to take it then you have to accept he's getting more money elsewhere or he feels he wants a new challenge. Hopefully that's not the case.

"It's up to us to try and persuade John this is where his future lies. We aren't the type of club to sign John down and that's him jailed so he can't go anywhere. If he signed a new contract and something came up that was beneficial to him and us, obviously we would look at it.

"If he signs a new deal it protects us and him, then if somebody comes in with an offer we think John is worth then we would absolutely look at it."



Premier Sports Cup – Heart of Midlothian v Inverness Caledonian Thistle
25/7/2021.

Hearts play host to Inverness Caledonian Thistle in the Premier Sports Cup at tynecastle Park, Edinburgh, Midlothian. Pic shows: Hearts' winger, Josh Ginnelly, gets away from Inverness Caley defender, Robbie Deas.

Credit: Ian Jacobs