

Neilson expects full squad available for Livingston clash

An entertaining 2-2 draw with Ross County last weekend in which Hearts were both in-front and behind, before fighting back to maintain their unbeaten start to the league campaign.

The Jambos changed their shape last week with Beni Baniyime this time playing alone in the deeper midfield role, having previously played alongside Peter Haring.

Neilson explained that until a second midfielder was introduced in the second half, in the shape of Cammy Devlin, Hearts struggled to get to grips with Ross County, perhaps hinting at a return to their trusted wing back's system for the visit of Livingston.

"We changed our shape last week and went with one sitter and it probably wasn't until we brought Cammy Devlin on that we got a bit more stability in the game," he said.

Stats released last week showed that Craig Gordon had made more saves than any other top-flight goalkeeper and after conceding two goals to Ross County, fans could be forgiven for having question marks over the defence, however Neilson explained that conceding goals is just 'part and parcel of football'.

“We spoke at the start of the season and set our objectives for goals against, and we’re still sitting in a good position for that. It’s just part and parcel of football, you lose goals.

“We probably did enough to win the game. We had a lot of chances and I thought we played really well. We just didn’t get the three points. We just need to put it in the past now and get the next one.”

Hearts are only a point behind league leaders Rangers and have already played Celtic, Aberdeen and Hibernian, but Neilson isn’t getting carried away with his side’s positive start to the season.

“It’s early days for teams at the top and the bottom of the league,” he said.

“For us it’s just important to continue picking points up. We’ve had, in my opinion, a decent start. Would I have liked it to better? Yeah, but sometimes you can’t ask for too much.”

Michael Smith and Josh Ginnelly are back in contention for Saturday’s match after missing the trip to Dingwall and Neilson admitted that the options currently at his disposal are the best since he returned to the Tynecastle hot seat.

“Michael Smith and Josh Ginnelly are back training. They’ve trained the last few days and they’re in contention, so it should be a full squad to pick from.

“You then have a decision on who is not involved and that’s always a better one to have.

“It was only a month ago that before we got the new recruits in we were only able to name six on the bench for one game, but over the last four weeks we’ve managed to get the squad back to where we want it to be.”

Hearts have had a busy summer window and signings like Ben

Woodburn, Beni Banningime and Barrie McKay are going to continue to improve with game time.

“I think the fitness levels have improved. All of them haven't really played a lot of games.

Most of them with the clubs they were at, were bit-part players in pre-season, so they've only really had game time with us. I'd expect them to continue to get better over the next month to six weeks.

“Barrie's exactly the same, he was probably further behind most of them when he came in. He hadn't done any pre-season, other than with his personal trainer, so, the more games he'll get, the fitter he'll get, and I think he'll be a very, very good player for us.”

Neilson knows everything about the demands that the Hearts supporters expect after receiving plenty of criticism last season during Hearts' Championship winning season, however the Hearts boss admits it's all part of football and is enjoying watching his side back in the top-flight now.

“There's always grumbles. That's part and parcel of football. I've said it before, the Championship is a different ball game to the Premiership.

“Down in the Championship it's about winning matches. You'd set up against teams and nine times out of 10 they're just camped in looking for a 0-0. So, it's a different game in the top-flight. It's more enjoyable to coach in as teams will play and use a formation that's a bit more consistent.

“Last year in the Championship we'd go watch a team for five weeks and they'd play in a certain way. Then they'd come to Tynecastle and it's totally different.

“So, it's more enjoyable I think for everyone this year. We've got good players. That's the thing. We've recruited well. I

think the squad is a lot stronger than it was last year.

“We’ve got a lot more depth and a lot more quality in all positions. Now it’s just about getting that consistency and winning games.”

Livingston have had a tough week with Celtic last Sunday, Rangers on Wednesday and now Hearts on Saturday, but Neilson believes The Lions have enough depth in their squad to make the necessary changes.

“Livi had a brilliant result at the weekend against Celtic,” Neilson said.

“I was at the game on Wednesday night and for 50 minutes they kept Rangers at bay, although they sat in deep and defended well. I think they will make a number of changes.

“Pittman, Forest, Anderson, McMillan can come in, so I think they’ll make potentially five or six changes, which will freshen it up with guys who didn’t start the other night. We’ll see. For us, it’s about trying to get three points.”

Having said that, the Hearts boss expects Livingston to be more attacking than at Ibrox on Wednesday.

“It’s a different game when you go to Ibrox,” Neilson admitted.

“When you go to the Old Firm, it can be tough to get a foothold in the game. I thought they defended very, very well for long periods of the game. Even when they went 1-0 down, they still stifled the game, but in different games there’s different formations that teams will play.”