

Robbie Neilson provides Michael Smith injury update

Hearts and Hibs face off in the first Edinburgh derby of the season on Sunday with both teams coming into the game after strong starts to their respective campaigns.

Hearts have taken 10 points out of a possible 12 from fixtures against Celtic, St Mirren, Aberdeen and Dundee United and positive results from a tough start have earned Robbie Neilson the Premiership's Manager of the Month award for August.

"I'd rather get the award at the end of the year," he laughed.

"That's where you see where your team is. We're only four games in. It's a good reflection for the players and the work they put in over pre-season and the staff and the recruitment as well, but we still have 34 games to go.

"When the fixtures come out you look at the first few games and then when the first derby is. We'd a couple of big home games first, Celtic and Aberdeen, which have set us up really well for this. We've had good results and we expect the same on Sunday."

Having played and managed Hearts in the fixture, Neilson himself knows all about the importance of the fixture, but added that his players do too, even the new signings, who will be making their Edinburgh derby debuts.

"It's a derby, the players know all about it, and of the

players we have brought in Benni Banningime has played in front of a full house at Goodison, Ben Woodburn has played for Liverpool and Taylor Moore played in front of full houses at Bristol.

“These are guys who have played in this kind of atmosphere, so they won’t be fazed, if anything, it will make them even more up for it.”

Hearts had Craig Gordon, Ben Woodburn and Michael Smith on international duty last week and the latter signalled to be replaced in Northern Ireland’s match on Wednesday, but Neilson expects the reliable full back to be available on Sunday.

“They’re all good. Michael Smith came off in the 70th minute but it was just a tightness and I’m sure he will play on Sunday and Stephen Kingsley has trained for two weeks now.”

Despite Hearts’ positive start to the season, a bad result in a derby can destroy that, but Neilson is only thinking positively ahead of Sunday’s match.

“Look at the positives, win this and then everyone is happy,” he said.

“For me it’s just finding a way to win the game. If you have to play at 200mph then you do that. If you get the time to pass then you have to have the strength to pass, and we have spoken about that this week – when the moment comes to play then we have to play. But when the moment is there to be physical then you have to do it because that’s part and parcel of the derby.”

Recently the derby has been dominated by the away side, with Hearts last home win over their rivals coming back in 2018, but Neilson is hoping his side can change that on Sunday.

“I don’t know, to be honest, hopefully we can turn that on Sunday. It’s up to us to change that. They’re always difficult

games, there's no doubt about that, but with the home fans behind us it's one I expect us to win.

"When you're playing at Tynecastle you have your home fans behind you, and you are more comfortable in that environment. You are used to the pitch and the fanbase."

Derbies can often be frantic matches separated by a solitary goal, and the Edinburgh derby is no different. The Hearts boss insists that you have to be first to everything in derby matches and demands that his players start the game well.

"When you are playing derbies winning the first of everything is important," Neilson explained.

"It's crucial you start the game well. It's a 12pm kick-off so it's important the players are ready, it's a bit different from your 3pm and 7.45pm games. We need to be on it right from the start.

"Time will tell what kind of game it might be like. These games are usually pretty gung-ho right at the start, you have 20,000 people there screaming and shouting.

"That brings an intensity to the game, and you have to try and find a way to win it. If you win by playing great football, brilliant. If you win by a set play, you take it."

Hearts have further added to their squad with the signing of free agent Barrie McKay, Neilson admitted his delight at the signing, but doesn't expect him to start Sunday's grudge match.

"Yeah, he has been doing a bit of work himself with a personal trainer and he has trained with us the last few days. I don't think he is ready to start, but he's definitely ready to be on the bench."

Following the signing, it was announced Neilson had tried to sign McKay previously but was unable to get the deal over the

line and Neilson believes this signing adds both quality and depth to his attacking options.

“I’m delighted to get it over the line. I tried for a number of years, I’ve known him for a long time, obviously his time at Rangers and then down south. You can see even in training now, when he’s not 100 per cent fit, the quality he brings.”

“We just couldn’t get it done before. He was on loan at Fleetwood last season so we couldn’t get him out of that one. Then in the summer he was waiting to come out of Swansea. He had a couple of wee possibilities down there which he was waiting on. He knows I have been in for a while now and it’s good to get him here.”

“Joe Savage and I spoke at the start of the window about what we needed in the team and what we were trying to do with the team. These areas are key, and you can’t run a whole season with two [wingers] – you need four, five maybe even six.

“They pick up injuries off tackles, contact injuries like Gary who has been struggling for the last few weeks and Josh Ginnelly is the same. You need guys who can come in and play the 60 and someone else does the 30. Thankfully we’ve managed to get it done.”



cinch Premiership – Heart of Midlothian v Aberdeen

22/8/2021.

Hearts play host to Aberdeen in the cinch Premiership at Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh, Midlothian.

Pic shows: Honours even in a close fought encounter as the match finishes 1-1.

Credit: Ian Jacobs