

Scotland squad is not beyond the reach of Hearts' McKay

Barrie McKay played 90 minutes of football for the first time since 27 April in Dingwall last Saturday as Hearts drew 2-2 with Ross County.

Liam Boyce scored against his former club to put the Jambos ahead before Blair Spittal's meant the Jambos were behind at the break. Stephen Kingsley's free kick was then enough to salvage a point for Hearts and maintain their unbeaten start in the cinch Premiership.

Barrie McKay came on as a substitute in last weekend's Edinburgh derby for his Hearts debut and was handed his first start in the Highlands.

McKay impressed on the wing and Hearts' co-assistant manager, Lee McCulloch, who played with McKay at Rangers, believes the 26-year-old still has a bright future ahead of him.

McCulloch said: "Yes, I know Barrie very well.

"There was a time when he was down in England, in the Championship and he went through a spell where he was the best player in the Championship.

"I don't know what happened, if there was a change of manager when he went to a club, but he fell out of favour and found himself on loan, but I've known Barrie for years and years and he's such a talented football player. A real talent.

“He’s got pace, he can score goals, he doesn’t get enough credit for his final pass, he can play in various positions. Hopefully, he’s found a home here, I know the fans have taken to him.

“He loves the club, so hopefully he can just settle in, he’s still a little bit short of fitness, because he’s not really played at all this season, he came on for about 25 minutes for the game last weekend.

“You can see signs already, that his quality is there, but it’s just probably about getting him a little bit more match sharpness.”

McKay was at Rangers for six years between 2011 and 2017 and was given a five-year contract at Ibrox when he was still a teenager, but after reuniting with McKay, four years later, McCulloch believes McKay has matured since his Rangers days.

McCulloch said: “He was always a stand-out.

“When you look at how he could handle the ball on the half turn, the way he can set up chances and score goals. He’s got blistering pace. He was one who always caught your eye.

“At times, for large spells in his career, as soon as he has got the ball he’s got bums off seats.

“I think that’s what the Hearts fans have been crying out for. It’s good to have him but it wouldn’t be fair to judge him just now because he’s not fully fit.

“You find that in a lot of younger players when you meet them when they’re older. But to be fair to Barrie, he’s always been pretty laid back, he’s always listened to the experienced ones and the managers and the coaches.”

McKay made his Scotland debut back in June 2016 as a substitute in a defeat to France but hasn’t been capped since.

McCulloch believes that should be the aim for McKay and explains that the players at Hearts are often told that international callups should be a benchmark.

“I really don’t see why he can’t get back in the Scotland squad,” McCulloch admitted.

“His ambition and his hunger should be to be in the next World Cup with Scotland. That’s the things we speak to the players about: ‘What’s your ambition, where do you want to be in six months or a year’s time?’

“I think Barrie should be pushing for a Scotland place if they go on and do their stuff.”