

European nights is ultimate aim for Hearts boss Neilson

Third meets fourth at Tynecastle this weekend as Motherwell travel to Gorgie hoping to stretch their unbeaten league run to six games.

On the other hand, Hearts have an unbeaten run of their own to maintain. The Jambos are seven games without defeat in the league and have already played Celtic, Hibernian and Aberdeen.

Hearts brushed aside Livingston with ease last weekend and while many people would argue those types of games should be routine victories for Hearts, especially at home, they have not been for some time.

That result in particular highlights how far this Hearts squad has come in the last 18 months, but especially in the last two to three months, with Sporting Director, Joe Savage, and manager, Robbie Neilson, deserving huge credit for the upturn in Hearts' performances.

Motherwell have arguably been the dark horses in the top flight so far this season, after an uninspiring ninth placed finish last season, the Steelmen have responded well to their opening day defeat to Hibs, and Neilson says he's looking forward to facing off against Graham's Alexander's side.



cinch Premiership – Heart of Midlothian v Aberdeen 22/8/2021. Hearts play host to Aberdeen in the cinch Premiership at Tynecastle Park. Pic shows: Hearts' manager, Robbie Neilson,

shouts instructions to his players from the touchline. Credit: Ian Jacobs

"The players have trained well, there is good competition for places here, and we need to try and get to that level again. We played well against Livingston but this will be a different game. Motherwell are on a very good run at the moment, so I expect it to be a good one.

"For us it's just about not getting too far ahead of ourselves, we're a promoted team. We've got some good players but we're taking it week by week. We had a great result last week and are now playing against a team that is flying at the moment as well.

"Motherwell have had a great start after a difficult campaign in the League Cup, the league campaign has been very good and they're pretty consistent with their team and formation. I think it will be two teams that are out to win the game."

Hearts will assess John Souttar on Friday, after the defender picked up a knock in training last week and missed the match against Livingston, but Neilson will welcome back Josh Ginnelly to bolster his attacking options, after he was rested last weekend.

"Souttar trained a bit today and we will make a decision tomorrow, Halkett is ok, he trained all week, Gino is fine as well, we just gave him an extra week's rest."

It's easy to forget that this Hearts side is a newly promoted team, especially when you look at the way they're playing. Most supporters wanted the club to be aiming for a European spot on their Premiership return and in such a competitive league, that should be seen as a successful season.

Before the season got underway, Neilson admitted he felt the league was one of the strongest top flights in recent years, and it shows when you see a top four that doesn't even include Celtic and Aberdeen, separated by just two points.

"It's tight at the moment but we are only seven games in," Neilson explained.

"The key for all teams is consistency and picking up points. Historically it's always been that and it's not the big games it's the smaller games you need to win. Rangers went last week and won 1-0, it comes to the end of the season nobody cares how they got those three points. That's the attitude every other team has to have – you have to win almost every game. Whether teams can do that or not is a different story because it's easier said than done."

Neilson was at Parkhead last night to watch Celtic take on Bayer Leverkusen in the Europa League, and he said that European nights under the lights at Tynecastle is the goal for Hearts.

"That's the ultimate aim for Hearts – to get to that level, but we are not there yet," he admitted.

"We are a team that's been promoted, we have had a good start to the season. It's where we want to be, but you only get there by winning on a Saturday. So, we can't take our eye off the ball.

"It's about winning on a Saturday and then the next Saturday and the next one. If we can do that consistently then we will deserve to be in that position, but you will have Motherwell, Hibs, Aberdeen wanting to be there. St Johnstone have been there and will want to get there again. It's up to us to get there."

Reports earlier in the week revealed that Hearts and Motherwell have both written to the SPFL regarding the lockdown of away fans at Ibrox and Parkhead. Hearts have already played at Parkhead this season with no away fans present and will travel to Ibrox in the middle of October.

Neilson admitted to not knowing the full story but highlighted

the great atmosphere at the Edinburgh earlier in the season, where both sets of fans were present, and believes it's an important issue that needs addressed.

"It's really important. You saw the atmosphere at the Edinburgh derby was absolutely brilliant because we had 16,000 home fans and 3500 away supporters.

"It's really important for the game. I don't know the ins and outs of it or the reasons why we are still not getting them in. But the sooner we get them all back in the better because it's what football is all about.

"We have fans who have been going to every single game for 30-40 years. Now they can't go. Which is very difficult for them after 18 months when they couldn't go to any and now for some reason they can't go to some away games."