

Hearts – Neilson hopes to have Boyce back in attack for United showdown

When Liam Boyce went off injured during the match against Dundee, it was obvious that Hearts would struggle without him.

Scoring goals is the main thing you want from a striker, but in Boyce the Jambos have a clever and well-rounded forward, who is capable of doing so much more than just finding the net.

At times during Hearts' 2-1 defeat at Pittodrie, Boyce's absence was particularly noticeable. Normally when Hearts are under the cosh in a game and the ball goes long to the number 10, he is clever enough to notice he has no support nearby, so gets his body between the ball and defender and wins a foul for his side.

Gnanduillet doesn't appear to have this ability, which is probably why Hearts struggled to get up the pitch at times last weekend. But when it comes to holding the ball up, buying fouls and getting your side up the pitch, there aren't many better in the country than Liam Boyce.

With an international break following Hearts' clash with Dundee United, if Boyce isn't 100% fit then the last thing Robbie Neilson might do is risk his star striker and aggravate his calf injury.

Nevertheless, the Hearts boss remains hopeful that the

Northern Irishman will return for the visit of his former club and added that the players who have replaced Boyce have "done well."

"Hopefully Boyce will be back for the weekend, he did a bit of training on Wednesday then a bit more on Thursday. Hopefully he will take part in most of it on Friday with a view to being available for the weekend.

"He's our top goalscorer," Neilson added. "You know he's one of our better players, but the way we play, whoever comes in should know what they're doing. It's the same system, sometimes you need to adapt it, depending on the type of player, but no club is going to have an exact like-for-like match to bring on that does the same thing.

"That means the game has to change a wee bit for us. The guys that have come in in these positions have done well, yes, we've maybe not got a result, but sometimes it's not all down to them."

Hearts suffered their first league defeat of the season last weekend in a game that they offered very little in the way of an attacking threat. Neilson has put the defeat down to a poor 45 minutes from his side and hopes Hearts can get back to the level that saw them go through the first round of fixtures unbeaten.

"The boys have trained really well. I thought we had a poor 45 minutes in the second half to be honest. So, we spoke about having a look at it, how do we get ourselves out of that wee rut when you have a poor second half. It's to focus on the positive stuff that we've done already this season, there has been a lot of good stuff and it's trying to get back to that again.

"It's part of football, we've got a few senior players, but we've got quite a young squad that have not been in that situation before, Pittodrie is always a difficult place to go.

A poor 45 minutes, over the course of 12 games you would probably take it.

“We’re back at Tynecastle on Saturday, a big crowd, Dundee United are going well. We expect to go out and get back to the way we’ve been playing all season – that’s just the belief of passing the ball. I felt at Aberdeen we didn’t have that second half. If you look at stats on it, no team is really passing the ball that much up there and we need to get back to it.”

Hearts will welcome Dundee United to Tynecastle on Saturday, who despite losing to St Johnstone last weekend are themselves enjoying a successful start to the campaign.

Saturday’s match will also be Hearts’ annual Remembrance fixture and Neilson described the occasion as a “key one”.

“It’s one of the key ones for us, you get the derby games, and you get Remembrance. It’s always a good atmosphere and you always expect to get a win in them.

“United have played really well and picked up some good results. They’re a pretty solid team when you watch them, two experienced centre backs. In the midfield they have a lot of energy and good pace in the wide areas. You look at the balance of the team, it’s very good.

John Souttar once again missed out on Steve Clarke’s Scotland squad for the upcoming qualifiers against Moldova and Denmark, Neilson believes Souttar must bide his time before admitting there’s more improvement to come from the defender.

“I’m sure he’d be round about selection, but when you look at the players and consistency Scotland have got in those positions, he’s probably going to have to bide his time.

“I think there’s more to come. I think his fitness levels can keep going. His general fitness can get better the more games

he plays. That confidence he has himself as well, so I think there's still quite a lot of improvement in him.

Souttar is out of contract at the end of the season, Neilson has expressed his desire to sign the defender on a new contract and despite the developments being rather slow, the Hearts boss says it's all part of the game.

"I think it's just part of football nowadays," said Neilson.

"It's up to John to make sure he performs on the pitch for us. If he does that and he re-signs then we'll be delighted, but we just need to keep working away at it.

"I've not spoken to Joe Savage about it recently. Obviously I want to try re-sign him, then Joe will go and speak to the agent and then we wait and see what goes on, from my perspective he just needs to concentrate on Saturday.

"I think being here gives him the best opportunity to be in the Scotland squad. We're hopefully playing at the top end of the league, competing at the highest level and hopefully that'll give him a platform."



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: Hearts' Irish International, Liam Boyce, is mobbed by teammates after putting his side 1-0 ahead from the penalty spot in the second half.

Credit: Ian Jacobs