

# More to come from Souttar as contract talks continue

After their adventures playing with the national team, Hearts manager Robbie Neilson was relieved to welcome back a fully fit John Souttar and captain Craig Gordon ahead of their trip to Motherwell.

The Hearts defender was handed his first Scotland cap since 2018 and marked the occasion by scoring the opening goal in Scotland's victory over Denmark on Monday night.

"It was good to see him. I was delighted for him. I thought he did really well," said Neilson.

"Whenever your players go away, you're always worried about them getting injured. That's the main thing. But he's managed to get through the game and done really well so it will boost his confidence. It is good for the club as well," he added.

"To be honest, I didn't realise it was him that scored. I was at the game, and it wasn't until a couple of minutes later that I realised. I'm just delighted for John because he's had a hard couple of years.

"It just shows you. Keep fighting to come back. Three big injuries and he's managed to get back to probably as good as he's ever been. Scoring against Denmark at Hampden in front of a full house – it doesn't get much better than that."

When asked if he was surprised by Souttar's performance,

Neilson responded:

“Not really. He’s a good player. I still think there is a lot more to come from John. When I was here previously, he was a young kid, but he was still a top player. When I look at him, I think there is more in there.”

Souttar is in the final year of his contract at Tynecastle, and it looks increasingly likely that he will be departing the Jambos in the summer window, if not before, however Neilson doesn’t believe his goal complicates the ongoing contract negotiations.

“The better the team does, and the higher up the league they are, it’s harder to keep all the players. It’s just part of football and something you have to accept.

“We’re speaking to him – John. There are a number of players we’re speaking to but that’s the way football is. It goes back and forward, back and forwards. Joe Savage is still dealing with it, still trying to see if we can get some sort of agreement on it.”

Hearts are now faced with a difficult decision if an agreement can’t be reached. They could try and sell Souttar in January, for what would likely be a small fee, given the length of time remaining on his contract or run the risk of the defender leaving on a free in the summer.

“It depends on what the fee is to be honest with you,” Neilson said, when asked about the clubs’ options.

“At this moment in time, he’s a Hearts player and we’re still trying to get him to continue to be a Hearts player. We’ll see where it goes. My job is just to make sure he’s ready for Saturday.”

John Souttar isn’t the only Jambo currently in the Scotland setup. Goalkeeper Craig Gordon created Hearts history as

starts against Moldova and Denmark saw him reach 33 caps for his country (whilst at Hearts), which broke the record for most capped Hearts player, previously held by Steven Pressley (32).

“I am delighted for him”, Neilson said. “Craig made a couple of really good saves, and he just seems to produce it week-in, week-out. I was pleased for both of them.

Neilson added that having Hearts players in the Scotland squad highlights how well the Tynecastle side are faring just now.

“It shows we’re doing well; I think it’s been a number of years since we had a couple of players in the team. They are two guys that were pretty influential on the game as well, but we need to try and get more in there. There are a few that could get in or back in it, so they just need to keep doing well.”

Craig Gordon is another key player that is out of contract in summer and Neilson confirmed talks are still ongoing with the Hearts stopper.

“We’re still talking, I don’t take anything to do with it. I just leave it to Joe to get things moving but I know they have been back and forward. I think Craig is enjoying it, he is pretty comfortable here so I would like to think it would get done.”

Looking ahead to Saturday’s match, Neilson is hoping his players can continue where they left off after dismantling Dundee United at Tynecastle prior to the international break and heaped praise on the Jambos faithful who have snapped up roughly 3,500 briefs for the weekend’s match.

“We were pleased to get the result against United but it’s always difficult at Fir Park, we know that. It’s a different game to Tynecastle and they’re on good form as well.

“It’s brilliant – it’s phenomenal the support we’ve been getting, and long may it continue. If the players keep working the way they are and winning games, being entertaining, the fans will keep coming along,” he added.

Finally, Hearts announced a £2 million profit for the year ending 30 June 2021 and while Neilson and Joe Savage deserve praise for the cutting the sheer size of the first-team squad, the Hearts boss is delighted with the way the club is being run at the top.

“It’s phenomenal to be honest, I don’t think many teams made a profit the way the year went with coronavirus and restrictions. It just shows the backing we’ve got from the Foundation and also from the benefactors and the way the club is getting run, it’s on a real strong footing at the moment.”