

Robbie Neilson reflects on Boxing Day win

On Sunday Robbie Neilson's Hearts presented their best and worst this season in their 2-1 win over Ross County.

Hearts created enough chances in the first half to win two games, but goals from Ben Woodburn and Michael Smith sent the Jambos down the tunnel at half time only two goals to the good.

In the second half however, Hearts arguably turned in their worst 45 minutes of the season, allowing Ross County back into the match and after Jordan White halved the deficit, Hearts were hanging on for the remaining 20 minutes.

"I thought in the first half we played really well and should have been up by more," said Hearts boss Neilson.

"When it's 2-0, I know it's a cliché, the next goal is always the most important. We didn't get it, Ross County did, and it became a bit edgy at the end. But today was about getting the three points and we knew that would be difficult with no fans here, it was just a case of trying to bring that energy."

For all the top-flight teams it must have been a difficult matchday to prepare for. Knowing it was the last game for a few weeks and knowing you'd have to find another way of motivating yourself towards the end of the 90 minutes with the absence of a raucous crowd.

It was therefore surprising to see Hearts start the game so

quickly without the backing of their passionate supporters, but Neilson believes the lacklustre second half performance was inevitable in an empty stadium.

“We missed fans massively. It is quite deflating for everyone because we had it all last year and we thought that we had got through it all, we had the fans back but then we had today’s game.

“Looking at it today. I was probably pleased about the two games that should have been coming up. Originally I would have liked them, but we need the fans back here as soon as we can.

“We had it for 18 months, so we knew. There’s no intensity to the place so it is about finding ways to win games. We knew the game would peter out eventually, it’s only natural.

“Usually, the crowd roars and everyone gets going but we ran out there and it was flat as a pancake, so the players had to bring the energy.

“Thankfully, they managed to do that, but it is almost impossible to do that throughout the whole game without the fans beside you. We knew that it would be like that.

“I’m sure fans sitting in the house, watching it on their laptops or the TV, that second half will have been a bit of a drag. Whereas when you’re here, there’s intensity, there’s enjoyment. So, we need that.”

Neither side was able to fill their bench and Neilson explained Hearts were missing some of their stars with covid but confirmed that after the winter break he expects to have all his injured players back.

“Yeah, we had a couple out with Covid, a couple of injuries, a couple of suspensions”, Neilson said.

“We didn’t bring any of the younger ones up because they weren’t in our bubble for testing, so we went a man short.

"I expect Beni to be back soon, expect Boyce to be back, Gino as well. Probably all of them. It just depends how bad Halkett is.

"He's in a boot at the moment and is getting scanned, so we'll know more in a few days.

"Beni is wearing a brace but that's what they do nowadays. He's getting it off next week, I think, so he should be back for the St Johnstone game."