

Hearts will push Celtic “all the way”

On Wednesday night all eyes will be on Tynecastle as the second place team meets the third in the cinch Premiership.

It's a massive game for both sides. Celtic cannot afford to lose any ground on Rangers, who already have a four-point cushion at the top and Hearts are looking to close the gap on Celtic, cementing their grip on third spot in the process.

Hearts came out on top when the sides met on the opening day of the season, with John Souttar's 89th minute winner separating the sides that night.

Fast forward six months and Souttar's Hearts career is all but over. The defender has signed a pre-contract with Rangers, which means should he start on Wednesday night, he's likely to take some verbals from both sets of supporters.

That doesn't concern his defensive partner Craig Halkett, who himself penned a new deal at Tynecastle until 2024, along with Stephen Kingsley, Michael Smith and skipper Craig Gordon.

The former Livingston man insists that Souttar is strong enough to deal with the situation he finds himself in and confirmed he had no doubts about his own Tynecastle future.

“John is a strong character,” Halkett said.

“He's a big boy and can look after himself. There had been a lot spoken about him prior to that game, and when he signed

the pre-contract it was maybe not expected, but there was always going to be some sort of reaction.

“To be fair to John, I think he handled it really, really well and put in a really good, professional performance. After the game, the boys were just really happy that we won the game, and nothing was said about it.”

Whilst delighted to get his own contract situation sorted, Halkett was equally as happy to see some of his defensive teammates pledge their future to Hearts too, however admitted Souttar’s departure is tough to take.

“For the last five, six, seven months we’ve had a settled back three or five, and Craig as well, so to get myself, Stephen and Michael all signed up in a short period has been massive.

“Don’t get me wrong, John is a sore one to lose. He has been a massive part of that defence and is a great character on and off the field, so I’ll be gutted when he does leave, but having the other defenders signed up is a massive boost.”

“It was all about Hearts for me really if I’m honest. The contract talks began around the start of December, but everyone knew it was such a busy period with games, so we agreed to put it on the backburner and really just concentrate on the football.

“Which is what we did and then obviously the winter break came and that was a good time to get it all sorted and thankfully we did, but no it was always about Hearts for myself.

“When I first signed for Hearts, I thought I was coming to a club that would be pushing at the top end of the table, European spots and cup finals. Obviously the first 18 months didn’t work out like that, but the last six months have been really good, we’re in a good place and I think there’s a lot of good things to look forward to at the football club.

“I’ve said before, when you’re at a club like Hearts you want to have the belief that you can take points off every team in the league. We’re not the type of team that will sit back and play for a draw. We believe we’ve got good enough quality to go and win these games. So, on the back of that one, we felt it was a sore one, you’re hurting at the time, but you do take confidence from it and that’s something we’ll take into Wednesday night.”

Sometimes it’s hard to remember that Hearts are a newly promoted side, however the world really is their oyster heading into the second half of the season.

The quality that Hearts have in their squad just now is more than capable of securing third spot, as well as enjoying a strong run in the Scottish Cup. Halkett explained the current mood in the dressing room is very positive and the players are now refreshed and raring to go.

“The break came at a good time for us, coming off a good couple of results,” he said.

“The boys got a few days’ off and got refreshed and came back really looking forward to the second part of the season. We’ve come back with another two wins and progressed in the Scottish Cup, so morale is really high and now we’re looking forward to Wednesday night.”

“It’s going to be really tough. We managed to get the better of them in the first game of the season and I think since that game we’ve had another two fixtures that have both been really close. I think it will be similar this time.

“It will be a tight game but one that we are looking forward to. Celtic are in a rich vein of form at the moment, but so are we and I don’t think we have anything to fear. We will go out and hope to pick up the three points.”



Premier Sports Cup – Heart of Midlothian v Inverness
Caledonian Thistle
25/7/2021.

Hearts play host to Inverness Caledonian Thistle in the
Premier Sports Cup at tynecastle Park, Edinburgh, Midlothian.
Pic shows: Hearts' Canadian Right-Back, Craig Halkett.

Credit: Ian Jacobs