

Hearts refreshed and raring to go after short break

After a busy return from the winter break, culminating in Hearts playing eight matches in 26 days, following the penalty shootout victory over Livingston, manager Robbie Neilson afforded his players some time off due to a rare midweek without a match.

The Jambos remain ten points clear in third spot and have made it through to the quarterfinals of the Scottish Cup despite a minor dip in performance levels. The recent easing of the fixture congestion has allowed Neilson more time to work with his side on the training ground.

Hearts now have three away games in their next four matches, with a home match against Aberdeen sandwiched in the middle. First up is a trip to McDiarmid Park on Saturday, a ground Hearts haven't taken three points from since 2010.

The Hearts boss is not concerned about that statistic however and is instead focussed on making sure his side are more clinical in the final third when chances present themselves.

"It's been beneficial to get more time on the training pitch," he said.

"The last four or five weeks with all the midweek games you don't get a lot of time and guys are just recovering all the

time and a wee bit of prep for games.

“So, it’s good to get a couple of decent sessions and prepare for St Johnstone. The Livi game and previous games we started really well and created a number of chances. We are not taking them like we did at the start of the season when we were going in 2-0 or 3-0 up and it’s a different story second half.

“If you go in at 0-0 then the opposition are always going to be in the game and things can get edgy. So, for us it’s about getting back to taking the chances we are creating.

“Hopefully the break helps though,” Neilson added.

“When you look at all the teams in the league maybe bar St Mirren then everyone else has found that period difficult because we don’t have big squads.

“In Scotland you’re not used to playing four midweeks on the bounce. In England you might get three in a month but up here you’re lucky if you get one.

“Unless you have a really big squad like the Old Firm who can change five or six players and bring in internationals then for everyone else it’s quite a hard challenge to continually have that freshness and put on performances that win you games.

“We went into the break five points ahead – our form’s not been great – but we came out it 10 points ahead. We have to be happy with that.

“There’s still 12 games to go so the next couple of weeks are important. We have two away games then Aberdeen at home and another away game. It’s a tough block of four but if we can pick up a good number of points then it becomes a good lead.”

Hearts should be all too aware of the threat teams fighting for survival pose following a shock 2-1 defeat to a struggling Dundee side who currently sit only a point above bottom placed

Saints.

Unlike Hearts, St Johnstone were in action midweek, as they battled for a point at Pittodrie, the result came at a cost however and due to injury they will be without a number of players for the visit of Hearts.

Nevertheless, Neilson knows exactly what to expect on Saturday from Callum Davidson's side.

"They've made a number of changes but still play a similar style to what they've been playing the last 18 months. They're picking up a few injuries with Hendry and Clark now out, Booth out, Hallberg out, it will be a test of their squad. But you know what you're going to get.

"The last 18 months they have played the same system, they are very well organised and make it very difficult to break down. Then they hit you on the counter attack with their pace up front. I expect us to have quite a bit of the ball, but we have to use it well."