

Halliday is crucial to Hearts

After a fairly busy January, where Hearts tied down a number of their star assets to new contracts, someone who appeared, from the outside, to have been left behind was Andy Halliday.

But Halliday himself confirmed that initial discussions had taken place with little complications, before being put on the backburner as Hearts embarked on a hectic run of fixtures after the winter break.

The versatile Scotsman divide's opinion among Hearts fans, however manager, Robbie Neilson was very keen to keep Halliday at Tynecastle for a number of reasons.

"I've been speaking to Andy and his agent for a number of weeks now," said the Hearts' boss.

"I think it's important we build a squad here where, yes we're trying to bring the average age down, but you also need experienced players who have been there and got the t-shirt.

"Andy falls into the same bracket as Michael Smith. He's played at the highest level, has great experience and can cover a number of positions for us. On Saturday he came on at right-back, he's played left-back, left wing-back, he's played centre-mid, No10, left centre-half.

"Michael covers the same on the other side. I think it's really important when you build a squad to move forwards we have guys like that.

“Andy has probably played 19 or 20 games so far this season and it’s been different positions. He understands the role he has to play within the group and that’s on the pitch and off the pitch.

“He brings that understanding of what’s expected when you’re at a big club, the pressures that come with it and how to deal with it. These guys coming in who are 21, 22, 23 need people around them they can talk to who understand.”

John Souttar has signed a pre-contract with Rangers and will be departing Tynecastle at the end of the season and another Hearts player with only months remaining on his Hearts deal is Peter Haring.

The Austrian is a bit of a fans favourite in Gorgie, after returning from almost 15 months on the side-lines due to groin and hernia problems. Haring has struggled for consistent game time this season with summer arrivals Cameron Devlin and Beni Baniyime impressing in the same role.

“At the moment we’re still deciding what to do with the other guys,” explained Neilson. We’ve still got a few out of contract and some still contracted who might move on, so we’ve still got to make decisions on them.”

Hearts welcome Aberdeen to Tynecastle on Wednesday, a side they have failed to beat this season, drawing 1-1 at Tynecastle and losing 2-1 at Pittodrie.

The Jambos are currently 11 points clear in third spot and with only ten games remaining, it would be an impressive collapse if they were to finish any lower.

Although Hearts were a newly promoted side, Neilson admits that a top four finish was the objective set pre-season.

“We have our own expectations,” he added.

“When we came up from the Championship, we spoke externally

about the top six. Realistically, we were looking for top three or top four. That's what we want and that's where I believe this team should be.

"We have a good group here and, when you're playing at Hearts, you have to expect the pressure to be there. If you can't handle the pressure, somebody else comes in and plays instead of you.

"I think it's great. We want to be winning games week in and week out. If we don't win games, then there should be an expectation level where there is going to be criticism coming."

Finally, Neilson heaped praise on Hearts fans Liam Anderson and Robert Lockhart, who raised £7,500 to purchase tickets for Hearts fans unable to afford the cost of a match ticket.

The £7,500 has been matched by Hearts, taking the total to £15,000, which is enough for 100 tickets for every remaining home game this season.

"It's absolutely different class from the people who started off organising it," Neilson said.

"Everyone else has got involved and it just shows the character of the club. I think it's absolutely outstanding. Whatever they raise for tickets, the club are going to match it as well. We are going to get a lot of people coming to games who otherwise wouldn't be able to come. Hopefully they enjoy the experience, and we can help them at this time."