

# Fans favourite Atkinson 'couldn't be happier' at Hearts

Nathaniel Atkinson's Hearts career is finally starting to take shape. The Australian defender, who signed from Melbourne City in the January transfer window had some early issues with Covid but is now enjoying a run of games at a crucial period in the Jambos season.

It's been quite the 18 months for the 22-year-old, who after scoring and winning the man of the match award in the Grand Final, made his Socceroos debut against Saudi Arabia last month.

Now he has a Scottish Cup Final to look forward to and the defender admits he could not be happier with where his game is at the moment.

"I was a bit unlucky with getting sick a couple of times," he said.

"When I first got here I had Covid and then when I got back from the national team I had the flu for a couple of weeks, so I could not really get over that. Now though my fitness is peaking coming into some crucial games.

“If you were to have said to me 18 months ago I would be here right now I would probably have laughed at you. But football moves quickly, and everything happens for a reason. If you work hard, you get performances and you get these types of opportunities. I’m nothing but grateful and blessed. I could not be happier.”

On his Soccerroos success, Atkinson added:

“I got my debut in the last camp and that has made me nothing but hungrier. The best way to put your foot forward with the national team is to perform with your club.

“It was a long time coming and it was a proud moment, not just for me but my family too.”

As Atkinson grew in confidence and continued to settle into his new surroundings, naturally his performances on the pitch have improved. So much so, that he is now a fans favourite who is often stopped on the streets of Edinburgh, as well as having his own catchy song echoing around Tynecastle.

When asked about the difference between football fans in Scotland and Australia, he explained: “It’s just on another level.

“The fans here eat and breathe football and would die for their club. They go to every single game.

“In Australia it’s a bit different because we are fighting with different codes of supports and it’s just not as popular in Australia.

“So, when you come here it’s a bit of a shock to the system that everyone recognises you.

“I have met a few fans out and about. I’ve had a couple of old people come up and a couple of young people as well. I try to steer away from Cammy [Devlin] because when I walk around with him we tend to get stopped a bit more,” he smiled.

The system that Hearts have adopted under manager Robbie Neilson this season relies heavily on attacking full backs who are not only energetic but have good crossing ability. Atkinson fits the bill perfectly.

“That is part of the reason why he brought me in,” he said.

“I tend to be a fit player and I love to get up and down the line. I like to attack and then I need to work hard to get back into defence as well.

“I think that takes not a special type of player but a player who is willing to do that work. Robbie gave me the opportunity to come here, and I want to repay that favour.”