

Robbie Neilson prepared for different Hibs side at Hampden

In the end, Hibs fell out of the top six with little more than a whimper at Tynecastle last Saturday. But the thing that will concern manager Shaun Maloney the most, will be that everything that could have gone right for Hibs at the start of the match, did.

Hibs got the opening goal they were so desperate for. They put the Hearts players on the backfoot. They got the Hearts' fans on their teams back. And for what?

We will never know just what would have happened had Andy Halliday not equalised for the home side in first half stoppage time, but from a Hibs' fans perspective, to see your team perform the way they did in the second half, especially in a derby must be very worrying.

In the lead up to last weekend's fixture, much of the talk revolved around the opportunity to put down a psychological marker ahead of the Scottish Cup meeting.

Hearts manager Robbie Neilson admitted he doesn't believe that was the case though and feels Hibs have options in their squad to line-up differently at Hampden.

“Going into the game on Saturday, it’ll probably be like the last one where it is 200mph to start with, “said Neilson.

“There will be a couple of chances each, who takes them we’ll wait and see and then hopefully the game settles down and we can start to take control.

“We need to make sure the players know that it’s going to be a tough game. It’s going to be a different game.

“I would expect Hibs to make a couple of changes. Porteous will come back in, maybe Stevenson and maybe Doidge if he’s available. Then it becomes a totally different team, so we have to be wary of that.

“It’s a neutral venue. It’s a different surface, in the Scottish Cup games you’re playing with a different ball, so everything is a wee bit different.

“But ultimately you go out there and it’s 11 v 11 and like any derby you need to win your first headers and tackles and you need to be positive. If we can do that then hopefully we can get a result.”

Few people will be better equipped to enter a game of this magnitude than Robbie Neilson. The Hearts boss featured in the 4-0 Scottish Cup semi-final victory over Hibs at Hampden in 2006 and of course was in charge as the Jambos again gained the bragging rights in the 2020 Scottish Cup semi-final.

Reminiscing the 2006 match, Neilson explained:

“The biggest thing I found was the drive in. Generally, when you go to games an hour and a half before kick-off and there’s nobody there. But in the build-up to the semi-final and the final, the streets were absolutely rammed.

“I think it makes you realise the size of the game. A lot of the time as a player you’ll just focus on yourself: ‘there’s a game Saturday, make sure I’m ready’.

"But when you turn up at Hampden and you're a mile away and there's already fans starting to ram the streets, you realise the importance of it.

"For us, we've spoken to the players about that, about realising that is what it's going to be like. You need to be ready for it, so it's not a shock."

As someone who has spent so much time at the club, both as a player and a manager, Neilson understandably would love to deliver a Scottish Cup as Hearts boss.

"There's not been many teams at this club who have won a trophy," he added.

"There's been a number who have qualified for Europe and a lot of teams have finished third and fourth in the league. But very few have won a cup.

"So, for us, that's the objective now for the rest of the season, to try to bring a cup back here. But look, we're still a long, long way away. To get here, we've only won three games and we've still got another two to go – so we're only 60 per cent done."

The carrot of European group stage football is the prize for Hearts if they can see off their rivals on Saturday and Neilson is hoping if Hearts can secure it, they can attempt to pull away from their top six rivals.

"It is a big part of it," he said, on the topic of European group stage football.

"Ourselves, Aberdeen, Hibs, Dundee United and a number of other teams are looking for that opportunity to get into the group stages, because it allows you to reinvest and hopefully give you a chance to do it again and again and again.

"I suppose it's similar to Rangers and Celtic, and the teams down south who make Europe. They can start to pull away from

everyone else. So, if we can get there it would be a big step. But we've got to get there first."