

Ambitious Neilson targets quick return to Europe

Robbie Neilson has expressed his desire for a return to European football and he aims to steer the Jambos back into that arena next season, a plan which demands a high finish in the cinch Scottish Premiership at the end of this season.

The task continues against Motherwell at Tynecastle on Sunday (kick-off 3pm) and, currently, Hearts are seventh in the 12-strong table with 17 points from 12 fixtures.

Motherwell are eighth, a point behind but with one more game played.

The Boys in Maroon have scored 20 goals and shipped 12 while Well have scored 16 and let in the same number.

However, the visitors have won two of their last five games while Hearts have celebrated one victory and drawn one in their last five.

Neilson said playing in Europe had been massive for the club and also massive for the fans who have had four away trips to enjoy. It is obvious they want more. The manager certainly does.

Neilson was disappointed at the loss of what he called "poor" goals in Turkey, claiming they impacted on the team, but added: "There are a lot of positives to come from it."

And he added that it was vital that Hearts shake off their European defeat and win on Sunday. Neilson said: "We've done it a couple of times."

Of course, there are two other games before the World Cup break, a trip to Rangers on Wednesday followed by the visit of Livingston on November 12.

Robert Snodgrass, who was ineligible in Europe, is expected to return to the side, but there is no official word yet from Tynecastle on the injury situation regarding Peter Haring, concussed at Aberdeen, Craig Halkett, who has hamstring issues, and Kye Rowles, who has a foot problem. Stephen Humphrys' foot injury suffered in the first-half against Celtic is being monitored.

Gary Mackay-Steven is out with a foot injury so is Stephen Kingsley with hamstring issues following the game with RFS in Europe and are not in contention for a place in the match-day squad.

However, there has been a bonus for two of the club's young players. Connor Smith and Lewis Neilson (pictured at training by **Nigel Duncan**), who featured in the 3-1 defeat in Istanbul on Thursday, have been called into the Scotland under-21 squad for the friendly this month at Fir Park against Iceland.

Smith, a 20-year-old has been with the club for four years and had loan spells with Cowdenbeath, Arbroath, Cove Rangers and Queen's Park, as he learns his trade.

The midfielder has appeared for Scotland at under-16 (he scored two goals), under-17, under-18 and has two under-21 caps and made his senior debut for Hearts in May 2018 in a 1-0 defeat at Kilmarnock.

Dundee-born defender Neilson, who, like Smith, played in Istanbul, has also appeared for Dundee United and at Falkirk on loan, and the 19-year-old, who is 6ft 3in tall, has played for his country at under-16, under-17 and has one cap at under-21 level.