

Neilson eyes big finish to first part of the league campaign

Robbie Neilson, Hearts' manager, faced the media and was asked about the importance of finishing the first phase of the cinch Scottish Premiership with a home victory over near neighbours Livingston on Saturday (kick-off 15.00). His answer was short and swift: "Every game is important to Hearts."

That underlines the philosophy of the ambitious 42-year-old manager who is determined to steer the Jambos to another high finish in the 12-strong league this season.

This is the last game before the World Cup hiatus and it comes after a 1-0 defeat by under-pressure Rangers at Ibrox in midweek. Jambos fans are likely to see much the same squad on duty against the Livi Lions.

Of course, 35-year-old Robert Snodgrass is a former Livingston star, having played 79 games for the club, scoring 15 goals, between 2003 and 2008, and Neilson praised the player for his contribution since joining the Capital outfit this year from Luton Town.

He was also complimentary about the West Lothian club who, he

said, had done well this season and had recruited wisely during the close season, not just strong players but players of good ability.

In fact, Livingston arrive at Gorgie in fourth spot spot in the table with 22 points, two points ahead and a place above Hearts with both clubs having played 14 games.

David Martindale's men moved into the top four after beating third-placed Aberdeen 2-1 at the Tony Macaroni Arena in midweek thanks to goals from Jack Fitzwalter after six minutes and Sean Kelly after 17 from the penalty spot.

Neilson said: "Tomorrow is really important to us. It is the Remembrance game and we will have a full home crowd. If we can go into the break with three points it would be excellent for us.

"Livingston will be full of energy and the league position they are in is justified as they have had such a good start to the season."

Hearts are, he stressed, looking forward to the game against Livingston and, once that it is done, some players will get some time off and some are away on international duty before they get back to the league again in December.

The Paisley-born boss argued that the break for the World Cup gives the coaching staff a valuable chance to start working on things again and he said: "Because of the number of games, Thursday, Sunday, Thursday, Sunday it has been difficult to do work on the training ground. We've also had a number of injuries as well. Hopefully, this period allows us to get back to what we have been good at."

Looking at the season overall, Neilson said there had been some good and some bad but added: "When I looked at the schedule I knew it would be a tough start to the season with the amount of games and the quality of the opposition.

“To be where we are and in contention for third is great and getting a couple of wins in the group stage (in Europe) was great for us.”

Neilson stressed that Hearts always want to be among the front-runners in the table and admitted it was a big ask but said: “We have the players who can get us to that position.”

On Snodgrass he said he was delighted with the contribution made by the Glasgow-born former Scottish international since he arrived and Neilson added: “We knew he had the technical ability and he (Robert) understands the game. He helps the younger ones.

“You can see him improving week-in, week-out and this mini pre-season because of the World Cup break will really help him as well. If you have a player of Robert’s ability you have to get him on the ball as much as possible, when he gets the ball you know he is going to keep it. He will make the right decisions. Robert can play a number of positions.”

So, expect Snodgrass to play a key role as Hearts go for another three points against the Almondvale club.