

Hearts well placed at the break

Would fifth place be seen as an acceptable finishing position for this Hearts side in May? No, is the simple answer.

That is where the Jambos currently sit in the cinch Premiership as the Scottish top-flight broke for the World Cup in Qatar and on the whole, Hearts have to be happy with that.

At times this season, Hearts have had almost a full starting 11 on the treatment table and it is testament to the players remaining on the field that they sit where they do in the table.

It is easy to look at the draws against Kilmarnock and Livingston and say, 'Hearts should be winning those games' but coming from behind on both occasions, after tough matches against Fiorentina and Rangers during the week, highlights the spirit this Hearts team has.

Make no mistake those two points could be very important come what May. Yes, there have been performances this season that haven't been up to scratch, but Robbie Neilson and his players don't need to be told of the high standards they set last season.

A hard-fought victory against Riga in their final Europa Conference League home match netted the club an estimated £450,000, but the three points Hearts picked up in Dingwall less than 72 hours later could be worth just as much.

That result, coupled with a 3-2 home victory over Motherwell, in which Hearts played over half the match with ten men, and throw in Josh Ginnelly's 97th minute equaliser against Livingston in the final match before the break.

Those two results mean Hearts can relax and recover during their holiday period safe in the knowledge that if they hit the ground running when the Premiership resumes, they have every chance of securing third spot for the second consecutive season.

Alongside their injury issues, Hearts' fixture list prior to the World Cup was not particularly favourable either. Having already played Celtic and Rangers four times this season, as well as an extra game away from Tynecastle, it means Hearts have the potential opportunity to immediately start eating into Aberdeen's 4-point lead in third spot.



cinch Premiership – Heart of Midlothian v St Johnstone
18/01/2022

Pic shows: Hearts' Canadian Right-Back, Craig Halkett, clears the danger as St Johnstone forward, Stevie May, bears down as Hearts play host to St Johnstone in the cinch Premiership at Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh.

Credit: Ian Jacobs

Centre back duo, Craig Halkett and Kye Rowles returned to action in the final games before the break and as Hearts continue to get players back, they will only improve on the field, again increasing their chances of kicking on to secure third.

As for the challengers, Livingston deserve a mention for once again punching above their weight under manager David Martindale, but there are probably doubts over the squad depth

in comparison to Hearts.

Aberdeen look strong at home, but their away form is likely to cost them dearly unless rectified and across the city, Hibs appear to be in a period of transition under new manager Lee Johnson.

All in all, you have to say that Hearts have done extremely well to stay in touch with their rivals as they juggled European group stage football and an unhelpful injury list. There is work to be done next year, but Hearts look good enough to kick on and achieve their pre-season goal of third spot and more European football in 2023.



Josh Ginnelly talks to the Hearts coach Lee McCulloch at The Orium in October 2022 PHOTO Nigel Duncan