

Confident Hill ready if asked by Hearts

James Hill strolled into a room at The Oriam packed with the Scottish football press anxious to hear more and the Bristol-born defender dealt with the media challenge with a calm assurance.

Hearts bosses now hope the talented, England under-21 defender can transfer that confidence onto the pitch when he makes his debut for the Jambos in the cinch Scottish Premiership.

That, of course, could come on Friday when Hearts entertain St Mirren (kick-off 19.45) and Hill, who has been training with Premiership Bournemouth's first team for over several months, believes he is ready for the challenge of top flight Scottish football.

His family is steeped in football. His father Matt is a former professional and his brother also plays, but coming north is a new challenge for the defender who celebrated his 21st-birthday on Tuesday in the gym and in his hotel room after making the long trip from the South Coast to join the Men in Maroon.

The muted celebrations were possibly not what he had originally anticipated, but things changed dramatically when the loan deal became apparent and the former Fleetwood Town player said: "The diversity of the league is what attracted me to Hearts."

It's been a whirlwind week for the player who made his debut as a 16-year-old for Fleetwood Town and created history as being the club's youngest ever player. He had admitted had been a short turn-around once he was informed about the interest from the Capital club.

Hill (*picture courtesy of Heart of Midlothian plc*) said: "I had two days to get stuff out of my apartment and it is a two day journey down here. My first impressions are that this is an incredible club. I have settled in really nicely and they (players and staff) have been really welcoming and I feel like I am ready to start."

He enjoyed his first training session with his new team-mates on Wednesday at Riccarton and confirmed he has been looking after his body even though he has not been playing regularly. His last game for Bournemouth was on December 20 at Newcastle United in the EFL Cup. Bournemouth lost 1-0.

Hill, who made his debut for Fleetwood in an EFL Cup tie against Leicester City in August 2018, aged 16, stressed: "Any opportunity I get I will take."

It was The Cherries former manager, Scott Parker, who took the player to Bournemouth, then a Championship club, in January 2022 in a four-year-plus deal reported to be a club record £1m, and the player, was asked by the media if his career had stalled.

He replied: "In my opinion it was time to learn and develop. I made 43 appearances for Fleetwood and going to Bournemouth was a break for me, different skills and footballers there had learned things before I did and the question was: 'Did I have the technical side?'. I think I have learned and I am ready now to implement that into the team and to see what I am capable of."

Hill said he has been desperate to be involved first-team action in recent months and he said: "Every day is an

opportunity to learn and, even though there was no place for me at Bournemouth for me to play football now, I have to be ready to take the opportunity when it comes.”

Hill was also attracted to come north after learning of the international quality players currently on Hearts' playing staff and he said: “There are some incredible players here and there is so much I can learn from this team. I also think I can help this team and this could be a big step forward for me, taking me in the right direction.”

Hill described himself as a “very aggressive player” and he added: “I love to win and I will give it everything. I am coming in here to try and improve the team and I think this club is capable of the top three spot with the group of boys that are here. I am really looking forward to the challenge.”

Hearts fans are looking forward to seeing this well-spoken player in action on the park and many are curious about his speciality, a long throw. He made his league debut for Fleetwood n April 2019 against Peterborough United and his long throw lead to a 95th-minute leveller. Another weapon for the Jambos, perhaps.