

Hearts aiming to maintain Derby stranglehold on Hibs

Hearts go into Monday's New Year clash with Hibs (15.00) five points and five places better off than their near neighbours who have slipped down the table and now sit in eighth spot in the cinch Scottish Premiership with 23 points from 19 starts and a goal difference of minus six

The Tynecastle team, in contrast, go into the game having earned seven points from a possible nine since the World Cup break thanks to their 3-1 home success over Kilmarnock, a 2-2 draw at Dundee United and the 3-2 win at St Johnstone. The Jambos have 28 points from their 18 games and a goal difference of plus two.

Even history is not on Hibs side as the men from Easter Road have not won at Tynecastle since Boxing Day 2019. Two men did the damage that day, midfielder Scott Allan, who is now with Arbroath, setting up Martin Boyle for a double, but the Aussie striker has been on the long-term injury list for Hibs this season. His last outing was on October 29 and he lasted 54 minutes.

It was, however, Boyle who scored in injury time to earn a 1-1 draw on August 7 at Easter Road in Hearts second game of the league season and Hibs desperately need to find a spark from somewhere. What better then than a road win at the home of their Capital rivals?

The Hibeers, however, have failed to win a derby in their last seven attempts and their road form is poor, having won only twice away from Easter Road this term in nine attempts, beating St Johnstone 1-0 in their first league match of the season on July 30 and securing a 2-0 victory at Ross County on October 1.

Manager Lee Johnson, a former Hearts player, hopes Ukrainian-born forward Mykola Kukharevych can be included in the squad for the trip across Capital as the 21-year-old, who is on loan from French club, Troyes, felt a twinge in the pre-match warm-up against Celtic and was replaced on the bench.

Hibs were brushed aside 4-0 on the night by the current league pace-setters. Yes, the Hibeers did have chances but failed to convert and points have been hard to come by as their recent record indicates.

That heavy defeat by Celtic was undoubtedly a real blow after their 4-0 home win over Livingston on Christmas Eve, but manager Johnston revealed to Hibs TV that he has called for a positive reaction to the New Year from his squad. To achieve victory at Tynecastle, he argued, his men must win individual battles on the pitch.

Hearts, of course, go into the game boosted by their win at St Johnstone, traditionally an unhappy hunting ground for points for the Jambos, thanks to a second-half stunner from Barry McKay.

That result secured third position in the table and Men in Maroon currently hold a three point lead over Aberdeen, who are fourth, and the Dons have played a game more.

Looking longer-term, Neilson wants another crack at European football with the Jambos next season. So do the fans who enjoyed their European jaunts, and, to do that, the Glasgow-born manager must be the best of the rest as the Old Firm would appear to be beyond reach, even at this stage, with Rangers in second position on 45 points from 19 games, and leaders Celtic on 54 points from the same number of starts.