

Next two games are key say Hearts duo

Robbie Neilson and Aussie-born Kye Rowles acknowledge that the next two games in the space of four days are key for the Men in Maroon.

Fifth-placed Aberdeen visit on Wednesday (19.45) in the cinch Scottish Premiership and the Jambos then make a trip across the city to Easter Road on Sunday in the fourth round of the Scottish Cup (14.00).

Andy Halliday will miss the clash with the Pittodrie combine because of concussion protocols, but everybody else is back in the frame for selection and that includes defender Stephen Kingsley.

Third-placed Hearts have 35 points from 21 fixtures while The Dons have 29 from the same number of games with Livingston sitting in fourth position only four points adrift of the Edinburgh outfit.

Neilson told the media at a briefing at The Oriam: "It is a huge test (against Aberdeen). We went there earlier in the season and they made it difficult for us."

The manager said he was still working behind the scenes on moves in the transfer area but added that the players understand there is great competition for places at the club.

Neilson said: "We have a good squad here the team is picked to win the game and it is up to the guys to be ready when they are called upon."

The ex-player expects a different formation from the one which Hearts faced against St Mirren last Friday when the Jambos sneaked a 1-0 win and he said: "Friday night was a different type of game. St Mirren are very resilient."

He added that Aberdeen are one of Hearts' biggest rivals for third spot in the table and he added: "Obviously, we have the Derby as well so it is really important we have a good week."

The manager agreed that this was the strongest squad he has worked with since he took over at Tynecastle and added: "You are always building. I would expect next year to be the strongest squad."

Defender Rowles, who signed a five-year deal this week, eyed the home clash with Aberdeen, said: "Hopefully, we get off to a good start and we will give it everything."

Overall, he said there is still plenty of room for improvement in the team and he added: "We are picking up good results, but we have still to throw together a complete 90 minute performance, in my opinion."

"Once we do that we will really hit our stride and there will be so much confidence flying around. We also need to put the foot down against teams, especially at home where you really want to dominate games."

"If we get that balance right of soaking a little bit of pressure and controlling the game for extended periods then that is when we will really start to shine."

PICTURE: Kye Rowles at the press conference. Picture by **Nigel Duncan**