

# Hearts' downfall – third place now a stretch

A matter of weeks ago, Hearts appeared to be coasting to back-to-back third place finishes, but recently the wheels have come off the Robbie Neilson juggernaut and at one point Hearts' cushion in third place was reduced to a slender four points.

This season, much of the talk was about Hearts consolidating themselves as the 'third force' in the country, using the finances gained from European football to not only strengthen their grip on third, but attempt to bridge the gap to Celtic and Rangers.

It is fair to say that has not happened. Firstly, there are excuses for that. Hearts suffered many injuries whilst on their European campaign, particularly in their defence which meant, they were really down to the bare bones of their squad by the time the World Cup break came around.

Taking all this into account, Hearts fans were relatively content when the World Cup break came around and the Jambos remained within touching distance of Aberdeen who occupied third place at the time.

The plan was then to get players back from injury, kick on in the New Year and coast to third place again.

That has not really happened though, and you would have to say that on current form, Hearts might be fortunate to end up in third place come May.

The 3-0 defeat to Aberdeen at Pittodrie hammered home many of Hearts' frailties and to cut a long story short, they seem to just be very easy to play against.



Robbie Neilson smiling at a move in training at Oriam on 12 October 2022 PHOTO Nigel Duncan

When Robbie Neilson installed a back three last season, he had Craig Halkett in the middle, who had some of the best aerial stats in the division at the time, with John Souttar and Stephen Kingsley on either side, both of whom were comfortable to drive with the ball up to the halfway line and draw an opposition player towards them. This in turn would create more space for an attacking player like Barrie McKay to operate in further up the pitch.

Now however, Hearts have lost the roots of what was good about their back three. With Craig Halkett injured, Hearts are very

vulnerable to long balls and set plays, and with John Souttar having departed to Rangers in the summer, that leaves Stephen Kingsley, who himself hasn't looked his usual self after some time on the sidelines.

The problem with Hearts' system right now seems to be there are too many players dropping deep to get the ball, leaving too few attackers high up the pitch to occupy opposition defenders.

Before, one of Hearts' central defenders was essentially a midfielder, due to their confidence on the ball and ability to play diagonal passes. Now, the midfield, whether it be Robert Snodgrass, Orestis Kiomourtzoglou or Cammy Devlin are dropping into the back three to receive the ball 30-yards from their own goal.

This makes it easy for other sides to press them into tight areas, pin back Hearts' wingbacks and win possession high up the pitch.

At Pittodrie, Hearts had 62% possession, with eight shots and 0 on target. With 38% of the ball, Aberdeen managed 22 shots and six on target. In short, looking at the possession stats those shot statistics should be the other way round.

You will struggle to see many sides with less than 40% of the ball have as many opportunities as Aberdeen did in that match.

And the reason? Well, that's for Robbie Neilson and his coaching staff to try find out.

Finally, on Neilson, doubts have again resurfaced over his ability to 'take Hearts to the next level', but one thing that is certain, is if Hearts do manage to throw away third spot, serious questions would have to be asked.



Scottish Championship – Heart of Midlothian v Arbroath.  
Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh, Midlothian, UK.  
29/12/2020.

Hearts play host to Arbroath in the Scottish Championship at  
Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh.

Pic shows: Hearts' manager, Robbie Neilson.

Credit: Ian Jacobs