

Hearts players challenged to prove they are third force

Andrew McKinlay revealed he addressed Hearts' squad at The Oriam and challenged them to prove they are the third force in the cinch Premiership.

The face-to-face took place before training on Tuesday morning then interim manager Steven Naismith and his team of Gordon Forrest and Frankie McAvoy took over.

McKinley then addressed a packed press conference at Tynecastle (picture by **Nigel Duncan**) where he said the board decision to relieve manager Robbie Neilson of his duties was unanimous. There are two fans representatives on the board.

The chief executive officer said that members of the board took their own soundings prior to the move which comes as Hearts face seven vital games in the run-in to the end of the season.

The out-of-touch Tynecastle team travel across the city to face arch rivals Hibs on Saturday (kick-off 12.30) and McKinlay said: "I very rarely speak to the players. That is not my job.

"We have a group of players who, during the season, have shown their capabilities."

McKinlay added that the decision was taken after a great deal of discussion before Neilson was cut and he said: "We want to give ourselves the opportunity in the last seven games to finishing third in the league.

"That is very important to us and it is fair to say that this was not a knee-jerk decision made on the back of one result, but over the last few weeks the results have been poor and

performances have let a lot to be desired.

“We got to a stage where it was hard to see how we could turn it round. A crucial question the board asked ourselves was is it better to stay as we are and see how we get on for the last seven games or is it better to make a change now and give ourselves a better opportunity.

“It was a very difficult question to answer, but we took the decision and we go forward but it is really important to make it clear my thanks to Robbie (Neilson) and to Lee (McCulloch).

“Robbie came back to the club the same time as I joined the club and I worked very closely with him and developed a good relationship with him. These decisions are never nice but it makes it even harder with somebody you like and respect and have a lot of time for. I have a lot of time for Robbie.

“Our decisions are always unanimous as far as I am concerned. I will never say anything else. Hearts board is an incredibly effective board and individuals on that board challenge each other, we have robust conversations and we come to a consensus decision. Once that consensus decision is made, no matter what you said in that room, no matter what your thoughts were privately, that was the board decision.

“That is the sigh of a strong, good board and Hearts have a strong, good board.”

He confirmed that members will have spoken to different people before the decision was made, and that was up to each individual, but McKinlay added that, at the end of the day, you cannot abrogate responsibility, you are the ones on that board and you are the ones who will make the decisions and you make those difficult decisions. You live by those decisions.

McKinlay said the board were “cognisant” of fans way of thinking. He added: “We are fan owned but what does that mean? We are not fans run and the fans have a very privileged voice

in the fact that they have two representatives on the board and those representatives will give the views of the fans.

“You have to be very careful that you do not get sucked into social media which, let’s face it, is very rarely a positive space, and you have to be calm in these situations.

“Since I have been here we have had other periods where people were making a lot of noise that we should be doing things and we did not do things. You pay attention.”

Finishing third is important to the Jambos and McKinlay said: “In other seasons you would be sitting thinking is finishing fourth a big deal to finishing third. Does it make a massive difference? You might make one extra round in Europe.

“The situation is that, depending on who wins the Scottish Cup, the third placed team, and we have experienced that, so we, more than anyone, know what comes with that financially and as a status of the club. It is important and we are very conscious of that fact.”

McKinlay said he had addressed the players at Oriam and said: “I very rarely speak to the players, that is not my job, but before I handed over to Steven and his team, the message I got across to them was that I had watched this group of players all season and I have seen them perform magnificently on occasions. I really know they are capable of it.

“I said to them that I know you are capable of it and I do not know what will motivate you guys for the rest of the season but do it for yourselves, have pride, and get us back to where we believe we should be.

“I genuinely believe we have a group of players which should be in third place and I believe we will be back to third place by the end of the season.”

Hearts also confirmed that McCulloch, Hearts’ co-assistant

manager, has left the club. McCulloch joined the Gorgie squad in August 2020 as part of Neilson's backroom staff and the statement said he played a "huge role" in getting them back to the top flight.

The statement concluded: "The club would like to thank Lee for all of his hard work and we wish him well in the future."