

# **Naismith opens door for young talent to shine**

**Youth will be given a chance to shine under the new regime at Heart of Midlothian. That's the assurance from interim manager Steven Naismith during a packed press briefing at The Oriam.**

The 36-year-old said he is a big advocate of bringing young players on and stressed: "I was a young player at Kilmarnock and I got my chance. I have worked closely with the Academy and there are players in the Academy of quality.

"Will they get a chance? It is up to them. I have a meeting with them (on Thursday pm) and I will tell them that things will change as regards what is expected of them. If they are in the first team group today they will come in, use the first team facilities and train as a first team player.

"Tomorrow, if they come back in and they are doing their job in that environment, they will get that opportunity. If they can cut it and be there, which I think they can, they will get more. If they can't they will need to go back and work harder to get back in. It is as simple as that."

Overall, the Irvine-born coach said he has experienced a real buzz and excitement at the opportunity which has come his way and he added: "It is probably the closest I have felt to the big moments in my playing career when you get that excitement and adrenalin rush."

The ex Kilmarnock, Rangers, Everton and Norwich City player, who has 70 appearances for the Men in Maroon, scoring 24 goals, confirmed that he received a call to come to the club on Monday, 24-hours after news broke that Robbie Neilson had been relieved of his duties at Tynecastle.

He said: "Monday turned into a long day, Tuesday was a long day and so was Wednesday. Yes, it is a great opportunity. It is a massive club. I was in a fantastic role, the national team, the B team (at Hearts) and this has come along, but I have crammed a lot into the last few years."

The man who has made 417 top flight football appearances believes he is therefore "well-equipped" to take on the job but confirmed that he has had to change after switching from coach to interim manager.

He sent a text to Neilson, the man he still refers to as "the manager" or "the gaffer", after the news broke of his departure following Saturday's 2-0 home reverse to St Mirren, and Naismith said the visit to Hibs on Saturday is a "great game" to start with.

Naismith added: "I have a lot of respect for him (Robbie Neilson) and he made the journey for me into coaching as easy as it could be.

"It is a strange dynamic when you become a coach, you feel vulnerable, you feel not equipped and you are not equipped, but the gaffer (Robbie Neilson) made it comfortable for me to blend in."

The former Scotland under-21 and Scotland B team player, who has 51 caps for the national team, also praised Neilson's achievements at the Gorgie club. He said: "As a manager, what he has done for the club in the last 2.5 or three years is massive. Hearts are in Europe and that is something the club strives for every year. Over time what he did will be appreciated by the fans."

Naismith is in post for the next seven games and he said: "It is an opportunity for me. I am only here until the summer. It has come early and I do not know if I will enjoy it to the level I want it to be. Time will tell.

"What I do know is that I want to be a manager. I had a fantastic role before I took this one up. I liked being involved with the national team and Hearts so, if I go back into that role, I will be delighted.

"If, during the course of this role, I think, I am ready, I have enjoyed this, I love it, then things may change. At the moment I want Hearts to do well in games."

Since confirmation came of his new role the interim boss said he has received a number of calls from people he has been associated during his career and said: "It has been overwhelming and it gives you a lot of confidence."

Asked what has gone wrong recently when Hearts have lost their last five games in the cinch Premiership, Naismith said: "What went wrong is that we lost games of football. As basic as it is that is it. The stakes are high and perception changes very quickly.

"I spoke to the manager that is what he said. He understands what football is. What I have seen in the last three days is a really good squad with good ability but it is lacking a bit of confidence, playing safe. Looking back at the last few weeks, the first thing I said to the boys was that they were coasting.

"So, we need to get back to enjoying the game. Not receiving the ball and being uptight. Get that out of your head as that only causes problems. That is the message from the start."

He believes the next seven games will be the hardest seven success-hungry Hearts will experience all season and he added: "The club have made a change to try and get a reaction and I

firmly believe that from what I have seen so far we will. Time will tell.”

He assured fans that nothing will be left to chance come Saturday and for every game to come this season. The staff here, he said, are very high quality and the staff have worked round the clock for me. The prep will have been done properly.”

There is, he argued, much more to it than just the result (on Saturday) and Naismith added: “For me, the long-term goal for the club has to be bringing more youth players through and also bringing exciting, attacking football. Again that takes time. That is the only way the club can grow.

“The best example is Celtic. They went from appointing a new manager, to him being criticised massively, who stuck to what he believed and now they are massively growing and growing. That takes time.”

He believes that there will be an instant reaction and said: “It is not going to be perfect. We will work hard, we will try and play attacking, entertaining football. I have it in my head the way we want to play. Our thoughts are about winning every game, not drawing them.”

The new boss said he had experienced managers from Scotland, Germany and Spain so he has taken bits from them all and those items have moulded his coaching philosophy.

He has also learned from managers, coaches and players during his career which started in 2003 at Rugby Park and he said: “I taken bits from everybody. I have had a lot of advice from a lot of people. I am pretty blunt at times and hard and demanding. I will be honest with the players and I am sure they will understand.

“One thing I said to the players is that if you are not working hard enough at training I am going to tell you. If you

are doing really well in training you will get a chance. What we need this week is different from what we need next week so if we win on Saturday I am not sure it will be the exact same team which goes next week as every game is different.”

The Hibs clash (kick-off 12.30) was, he said, easy for everybody to get up for as it is a Derby and he added: “It is one we are looking forward to. There is a real excitement, there is not a nervousness, let’s go and play.

“If we win we win, if we make mistakes then we will be punished, but we have got a plan, we will execute that plan as best we can and we have had five or six days preparation.”

PICTURE: Steven Naismith takes his seat at his first press conference as interim manager at Hearts. Picture *by Nigel Duncan*