

Critchley: 'my focus is three points on Saturday'

Neil Critchley walked into The Chapman Suite at The Oriam for his first pre-match media conference and one member of the assembly quipped: "Welcome to the lion's den."

The 46-year-old, it was his birthday, by the way, smiled as he took his place behind the microphones and in front of the cameras.

Then the Crewe-born ex-player answered questions for nearly 20 minutes, talking about the expectation of the club's supporters, opening up on his first week as head coach to Heart of Midlothian FC, provided snapshots on his philosophy and the essentials players must give when they wear a shirt on the pitch.

He also alluded to the enormity of Hearts as a club and also to his delight at inheriting such a strong infrastructure, including the facilities at The Oriam.

Naturally, he hopes the Men in Maroon who he picks to start Saturday's game in the William Hill Premiership will receive the backing from the fans at a ground he has visited before, but he has not been there when the Jambos fans are in full voice.

Looking at the team long-term, yes, he has an idea of what he wants to see on match days, but that is not a structure that

is written in stone, it could be tweaked. Uppermost in his mind is the need to secure Hearts' first win in the William Hill Premiership.

Jambos fans will get a taste of the new era when Stephen Robinson brings eighth-placed St Mirren to Tynecastle on Saturday (15.00), and the newcomer underlined that he has watched football north of the Tweed in recent weeks after parting company with Blackpool. He had time on his hands.

Critchley (pictured at Riccarton on Friday by **Nigel Duncan**) has, however, enjoyed his first week at Tynecastle and he admitted that the first 48 hours had been hectic, but he praised "the people inside the football club" who had been "fantastic, really welcoming, really supportive, you can feel there is a real genuine feeling towards me and want me to do well".

He added: "At any big football club, when you are underachieving, there is an expectation and it is one I am comfortable with. The immediate focus is to win games of football and to get off the bottom of the league.

"What I can control is things we work on at the training pitch every day that gives us the best chance of deciding the outcome of the game."

The former midfielder put pen to paper during an international break and members of the squad have been "far and wide" playing for their countries. That will have an influence on selection, however, the majority of the squad have been around.

He agreed that it was not an ideal scenario arguing that you control what you can control, and the former Blackpool and Queens Park Rangers coach has worked for sessions with players available since his arrival on Tuesday.

Hopefully, fans will see some signs of the team Critchley

wants to create at Tynecastle in the future before the final whistle at around 4.45pm

The English-born ex-professional footballer has certainly been encouraged by what he has seen so far from the squad both in terms of their ability, but also their attitude and mentality. He added: "I haven't walked in and seen a team which is really low in moral."

Players, however, have to be open-minded at a managerial change and he said: "People can be resistant to change, but they have responded in a positive fashion and we hope to see some of that on the pitch but, of course, it is going to take some time to get to the team I want us to be in the future."

"There are certain things that a Hearts team can have, hard work, effort, commitment, passion, those are things are in our control, the tactical side is going to take a little bit longer."

Everyone at some stage in their career has got something to prove, and some contracts will soon be up for renewal, but Critchley's immediate focus is on improving the team, tactically, how they prepare, picking the players in the right positions, making them understand what is their responsibility on the pitch. The coach said: "Hopefully, you do that, and performances take care of themselves and their futures are decided for them."

Craig Gordon, Hearts' international goalkeeper and club captain, who has an enormous standing, not just in the Capital club but elsewhere in Scotland, has called on the Jambos faithful to give the new coach a chance and Critchley acknowledged that the statement from the long-serving player meant a lot to him.

The pair have spoken and the ex-Liverpool under-18 manager, standing in for Jurgen Klopp for two of the Anfield side's cup fixtures in the 2019 and 2020 season, said: "He (Craig) is a

fantastic person and there is a reason he is playing at the level he is playing at 41-years-of-age. I am delighted he is here and delighted he is in the squad and I get to work with him for many weeks and months which lie ahead.”

Asked point blank if Gordon starts against St Mirren, Critchley, who guided Blackpool to promotion via the play-offs from League One to the Championship in 2020-21 season, said: “Possibly.” Que for laughter among the press corps.

Critchley said that long-term absentee, Calum Nieuwenhof, was out on the grass doing some running which was a step forward for him. Yutaro Oda is sidelined for the next few weeks.

Overall, the new boss has much to ponder as he spends his birthday in a hotel north of the Border before pinning the team sheet on the dressing-room wall on match day. Jambos await.









PICTURES: All taken at training at Riccarton on Friday ahead of the St Mirren clash. Pictures by ***Nigel Duncan***