

Easter Road awaits resurgent Hearts

And now for Hibs on Sunday at Easter Road. It will be a Derby debut for Hearts' new head coach, Neil Critchley, and the Jambos go into the William Hill Premiership fixture on a high after back-to-back wins at Tynecastle which is buzzing.

Saturday's 4-0 romp over St Mirren in the league was followed by a 2-0 victory over Cypriot side Omonoia in the UEFA Europa Conference League in Gorgie on Thursday night, and how the fans celebrated at the final whistle.

"Bring on the Hibeas" rang around the stands as Hearts' jubilant players left the field after a superb performance against opposition which was not allowed to get a foothold in the game.

Hearts came out on the front foot and a free-flowing move in the first minute signalled their intent. Thereafter, their high press and fast tempo unsettled the visitors and the fired-up Jamobs refused to take their foot off the gas.

Not surprisingly, the home fans in the 17, 178 crowd loved it.

Their favourites played with real intent and aggression and produced some neat-passing, slick football, causing the opposition problems, and they thoroughly deserved to win the

game which puts the club in a strong position with a maximum six points from two games following their 2-1 success in Dinamo Minsk in their opening UEFA Europa Conference League game.

On this occasion, goals from Alan Forrest and the outstanding, Blair Spittal, his first counter in Europe, had the fans on their feet and new coach, Critchley (pictured), enjoyed himself hugely.

The former Blackpool boss said: "It was a great evening, I loved it from start to finish. I thought we were fantastic first-half. Second-half without the ball we looked relatively comfortable for most of it."

He does want his men to keep the ball better, but the Englishman added: "Clean sheet, and that is really important, two fantastic goals, a comfortable evening, and this was an all-round team performance."

The home side knocked at the door several times before breaking through after 16 minutes, Forrest finishing off a flowing move involving hard-working Cammy Devlin and ex-Motherwell man, Spittal, and the former Livingston player sent the ball high into the net from outside the right hand post with his left foot, not an easy finish but extremely well executed.

Seven minutes later Spittal blasted the ball into the net after being fed by Lawrence Shankland who did not get the reward of a goal for his efforts, he came close, however, but his frustration showed.

The skipper, who walked a tightrope all night after being booked after only two minutes, was denied by Omonoia goalkeeper Fabiano who dived full length to his right to send the ball for a corner, his best chance of the night.

The Men in Maroon dominated possession and harried the

opposition in all areas of the pitch. Spittal was influential and the player created a chance for himself soon after his goal when he picked up a loose ball and drove towards the Omonoia goal before letting fly. The ball flew wide from 25 yards.

The visitors were not completely out of the picture and Swedish-born Filip Helander, a former Rangers defender, was dangerous at set-pieces and, on one occasion, he crashed into the six-yard box to send a header just wide.

Shankland then shimmied then shot from near the penalty spot just before the break only to see defender Senou Coulobaly deflect the ball away from goal.

The visitors enjoyed more of the play in the second session but wasted several chances, Willy Semedo blasting over, substitute Andronikos Kakoulli catching a glimpse of goal but shot weakly and another substitute, Alioum Saidou, shot wildly when in a good position.

Omonoia did hit the post through Saidou but the play was pulled back for offside and Hearts substitute Jorge Grant thought he had found the net from close in for Hearts' third following a move down the left and a neat pass inside from James Penrice, but it was also ruled out for offside cutting short celebrations.

Critchley made five second-half substitutions and they all played their part. The coach underlined in the post-match briefing that the players train together as a collective and that leads to an understanding of what is expected of them when they play in the team.

He added: "The players, if they are called upon, are ready physically, that's really important, and from a tactical point of view."

Earlier, the new coach shuffled his pack for Europe, making

four changes to Saturday's starting line-up, and he may make changes again for the derby.

Statistics say Hearts are sitting in second-bottom spot in the 12-strong table with five points, the same total as Hibs who prop up the rest because of an inferior goal difference of minus six against minus five for their Capital rivals.

Critchley understands the importance of the game and said: "From Day One it is drummed into you. The staff, who have been here for years, make it clear what the derby means to supporters."

The pressure is on and Hearts want to continue their resurgence. Hibs are desperate for a spark to ignite their season. Something has to give from high noon on Sunday.