

Oda could make Hearts comeback against Celtic

Neil Critchley views Celtic as Scotland's No 1 and it is The Hoops who visit Tynecastle on Saturday (kick-off 19.45) in front of a likely packed and passionate Gorgie crowd and a national Sky Sports audience.

It's a massive test for the struggling Jambos and Hearts' head coach could be able to call on 23-year-old, Japanese forward Yutaro Oda who has trained this week.

Costa Rica-born striker Kenneth Vargas has suffered plane problems returning from international duty – he had not arrived by the press briefing on Friday lunchtime – but Kye Rowles, not used by Australia in midweek but who travelled, and Scotland duo, Craig Gordon and Lawrence Shankland, are all in contention for places.

Critchley said he is no stranger to using analytics. Of course, Jamestown Analytics, have just signed a deal with Hearts and the Englishman looks forward to using that data to improve the club.

The former Blackpool boss said Hearts can now use that knowledge and expertise for opposition analysis, how Hearts benchmark their own performances post-match, and also for recruitment going forward.

He added: "It is exciting, and I know what a big aid it (data) can be, so it is a big announcement, fantastic for the football club, and it plays a big part of what we do in our processes working forward. If you look at the clubs this company has been involved with, they have all progressed."

Meanwhile, Critchley confirmed that he has read the comments attributed to Vargas about his future while he was away on international duty, and the response of the player following the reaction to the publication of those comments.

He said: "I have not had a chance to speak to him yet. When he does return I will be speaking to him, obviously. I read his initial comments but I also read his initial response to his own comments and that is something as a club we will deal with internally."

The immediate focus is Celtic, however, and Vargas, said Critchley, still has a chance of being involved in the William Hill Premiership clash, but he said: "Yutaro (Oda) has trained enough to be considered for selection.

"Calem (Nieuwenhoff) is a good few weeks away yet as he has not trained since March and he needs time to regain confidence in himself.

"Shanks (Lawrence Shankland), Craigie (Craig Gordon) and Kye (Rowles) have all returned fit and able and ready to go."

The recent cold snap has not had any real impact on training this week. Hearts were on grass earlier in the week at Riccarton and, in the last few days, they have trained at Tynecastle which, of course, has a blanket.

Focusing on Celtic, he said: "They are a fantastic team, the best in Scottish football at this moment in time, and they are in a really good moment. In fact, they are unbeaten this season (in the league) and they have only conceded three goals in the league and one of them was a penalty.

“We know the challenge that is right in front of us but we take confidence in some of our recent performances.”

Critchley added: “If you look at Celtic’s team, they have been consistent in who they pick and how they play and, even if they reshuffle, they still have quality players to bring into the team.”