

Critchley wants 'fighting spirit and passion' from Hearts

Neil Critchley, Hearts' head coach, heads into his first home derby with Hibs on Boxing Day (12.30) after an important, but narrow, win over St Johnstone at Tynecastle on Sunday.

The Englishman (pictured by *Thomas Brown*) felt his men were "fantastic" in the first half and played as a real team with and without the ball, and he will naturally look for an action reply against their Capital rivals.

The Men in Maroon also shrugged off major disappointments in the game, including James Wilson's disallowed goal in the first half and the penalty given against James Penrice, to win 2-1 and Critchley said the players rolled their sleeves up and showed great spirit.

So did Hibs at Pittodrie on Saturday when the Easter Road side claimed an important road win with a 3-1 scoreline, and they had to come from behind to do so with Martin Boyle outstanding with a smartly taken goal and two assists.

David Gray, Hibs coach, was a face in the crowd at Tynecastle on Sunday, and Critchley said it was an important win after a disappointing week in which the Jambos crashed out of Europe.

But the former Blackpool boss said Hearts showed a real

response to the Euro disappointment and the win over the Perth-based club in the William Hill Premiership also exhibited fighting spirit and passion.

Critchley reminded fans that the Tynecastle team had a number of young players, still learning their trade, on the pitch last Sunday including James Wilson, who is 17, Daniel Oyegoke, aged 21, Musa Drammeh, who is 23, and Malachi Boateng, a 22-year-old.

The coach told Hearts TV: "When your backs are to the wall you roll your sleeves up and show what you are about and your strength of character and I thought we showed that in abundance (against St Johnstone).

"We need everybody to be together and helping each other." Those attributes will be needed on Thursday.

Hearts are tenth in the William Hill Premiership with 16 points Hibs two places above them on 18 points. Both clubs have played 18 games, but injuries could factor highly in team selection. Definitely out for Hearts are key defender Frankie Kent and Stephen Kingsley (hamstring), both long-term injuries.

Aussie midfielder Calem Nieuwenhof could return in January after a lengthy lay-off and Gerald Taylor, who has started light training but is weeks away, while experienced defender, Craig Halkett, has a recurring back issue.

Hearts fans hope, however, that key midfielder Beni Baningime can make his comeback after missing recent games with a knee injury.

Hibs skipper Joe Newell was substituted at Pittodrie as was Warren O'Hora (ankle issue) and Lewis Miller has also been suffering ankle problems but did make an appearance off the bench.

Mykola Kuharevich is a doubt following an injury suffered against Celtic but Kierin Bowie is definitely sidelined for Hibs after surgery.

So, what is the form guide? Hearts have won two and drawn one of their last five matches in all competitions, beating Dundee and St Johnstone but drawing with Petrocub and losing to Copenhagen in the UEFA Europa Conference League, and suffering a league reverse at Kilmarnock.

Hibs have won three of their last five, beating Aberdeen, Ross County and Motherwell in the process. They have also drawn with Aberdeen and lost to Celtic.

The sides last met on Sunday, October 27 at Easter Road with Kukharevych netting after 65 minutes only for Wilson to score the equaliser with four minutes of regular time remaining.

Hibs had seven shots on target and Hearts had two, but Critchley's men enjoyed 65 per cent of possession against 35 per cent from their rivals.

Furthermore, Hearts strung 519 passes together while Hibs had 289.

Three yellow cards were issued to the visitors and Hibs were handed two with Hearts having six corners and Hibs one and in the last five matches both teams have one once and there have been three draws.

Fans please note. A mobile barrier will be in place outside the away turnstiles and this is to ensure crowd safety.

At full-time, Hearts fans will be directed to Gorgie Road and Hibs supporters towards Russell Road.

The barrier will be removed as soon as it is safe to do so.

Fans are encouraged to arrive early so as to avoid queuing and help ease the flow of people into the stadium.

Anybody deemed to have consumed excessive amounts of alcohol will be refused entry and fans are reminded not to bring any prohibited items into the stadium, including pyrochechics.