

Decision time for Critchley ahead of Dens visit

Hearts last visit to Dens Park proved disastrous with a defeat in August which started a spiral leading to the dismissal of Steven Naismith as manager.

The Tynecastle team were three goals behind by half-time following goals by Scott Tiffoney after 23 minutes, an own goal from Gerald Taylor two minutes into injury time in the first-half and another by Luke McCowan from a penalty three minutes later. McCowan is now a Celtic player.

Frankie Kent, now on the sidelines, replied after 61 minutes, but Hearts were unable to break through the Dundee defence thereafter and that result kick-started an eight-game losing run which saw the Gorgie club slip down the William Hill Premiership table into the basement area.

Strangely, Hearts had 61 per cent of possession that day against 39 per cent from Tony Docherty's men. The Jambos also had 385 passes against 266 from Dundee, but it is goals that count.

Enter Neil Critchley as the new head coach and the club have started 2025 well with an unbeaten run lifting Hearts up the table after several weeks in the bottom two.

Former Blackpool boss Critchley would love a road win on Tayside on Saturday (kick-off 15.00) to continue the climb up the 12-strong table. The Jambos are ninth with 27 points from

24 matches having scored 28 goals and conceded 33.

Dundee are one place above the Capital combine and also on 27 points but from 23 outings in which they have netted on 37 occasions but let in 41, the third worst defensive record in the 12-strong William Hill Premiership.

St Mirren are seventh with 30 points from 24 fixtures with Hibs in sixth spot also on 30 points from the same number of games.

Critchley eyes a top six slot by the end of the season and has not given up hope of achieving a place in Europe next season. He is not the only one who craves that as Jambos fans enjoy trips to teams in Europe and love Euro nights under the lights at Tynecastle.

Dundee, however, will not be a push over. Manager Tony Docherty has added to his squad and has guided his men past local rivals, Dundee United, into the fifth round of the cup thanks to a goal by Simon Murray after a minute of the fourth round tie.

Murray continues to be a threat and the Men in Maroon now have a problem in defence with Craig Halkett sidelined for some weeks after suffering a hamstring injury after only 11 minutes in last weekend's 3-2 win over Kilmarnock. Jorge Grant netted the game winner.

The loss of Halkett, plus injuries to Stephen Kingsley and Kent (pictured by **Nigel Duncan**), and the departure of Daniel Oyegoke to Italian side Hellas Verona, plus the move by Aussie defender, Kye Rowles, to a club in North America, means Critchley has decisions to make.

Does he throw 24-year-old Austrian-born newcomer Michael Steinwender into the fray or give 21-year-old Lewis Neilson, recently recalled from a loan spell with St Johnstone, another chance? He came on to replace Halkett against Killie.

Dundee boss Docherty indicated to the media in midweek that there is a real buzz around Dens as injured players return. Five men were welcomed back into full training this week encouraging competition for places.

Victor Lopez, Imari Samuels, Cesar Garcia and Sean Kelly have been added during the transfer window and Docherty said: "There is a real strength to the squad. There is real competition for places at a pivotal stage of the season."

Meanwhile, tickets for Hearts' home clash with Rangers on Sunday, February 16 are on sale to fans with 15-plus loyalty points.