

Hearts coach eyes top six slot

Hearts travel to St Johnstone on Sunday (12.00) once again looking for points to, hopefully, move them up the table and nearer the top six, a section of the table Neil Critchley, the club's head coach, is desperate to reach.

The Tynecastle team are ninth with 30 points from 26 fixtures but two teams are tucked in behind, Ross County with 29 points and second-bottom Dundee with 27 points. Both teams have also played 26 games.

St Johnstone currently prop up the rest with 21 points from the same number of fixtures and defeat is not an option. The pressure is on.

Motherwell, Kilmarnock and St Mirren are above the Men in Maroon, all on 31 points from the same number of games with fifth-placed Hibs on 34 points.

Critchley's men edged the Perth side 2-1 at Tynecastle on December 21, James Penrice after 16 minutes then Graham Carey levelled from the penalty spot after 53 minutes, but Blair Spittal secured the points five minutes later.

In early November, the Jambos also won another closely-fought game. An own goal from Nicky Clark put the Jambos ahead after 23 minutes. Clark levelled in 68 minutes from the penalty spot

but Kenneth Vargas popped in the winner with 14 minutes of regular time remaining.

St Johnstone have won two of their last five and lost three, Hearts have won three and drawn another, and over the last ten meetings, the Men in Maroon dominate, having won nine and lost only one.

The Jambos have scored 20 goals in that period and lost eight and have five clean sheets, but after their 2-1 victory over Motherwell, the Perth side could win back-to-back home league games for the first time since December 2023 should they see off the visitors.

Last weekend's 3-1 defeat at Kilmarnock was a blow but Stephen Duke-McKenna confirmed this week that the squad is sticking together.

Meanwhile, Hearts have confirmed that their Scottish Gas, Scottish Cup, quarter-final tie at home to Dundee will be on Friday, March 7 (19.45) and will be screened by Premier Sports.

PICTURE: Neil Critchley by Thomas Brown