

Hearts Take Slender Lead to Estonia



Heart of Midlothian 2 FC Infonet 1

Europa League First Qualifying Round, First Leg – Thursday 30 June 2016 – Tynecastle

Such is Scottish football's standing in Europe, two of this season's Europa League participants – Hearts and Aberdeen – found themselves beginning their 2016/17 campaign in the month of June.

Hearts welcomed Estonian side FC Infonet to Tynecastle on Thursday evening. Initially, Hearts weren't expecting a big crowd and had planned on opening just the Wheatfield and Gorgie stands but such is the demand to watch the Maroons these days, the huge interest in the game meant Hearts opened most parts of the ground.

Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson gave debuts to new signings Faycal Rherras and Conor Sammon with 22 year old Jack Hamilton at last getting the chance to establish himself as a goalkeeper of some standing, maintaining a Tynecastle tradition of producing high quality goalies.

Despite the club's initial fears of a small attendance, more than 14,000 Hearts fans headed to Gorgie on the eve of the Edinburgh Trades Fortnight – with the away support numbering just two (but kudos to those two individuals who made the trip from Tallinn)

It has to be said the anticipation of the fans was not matched by the display on the field. This was Hearts first competitive match of the new campaign and, boy, did it show. The Maroons

looked edgy and out of sorts from the off with misplaced passes and half-hearted challenges aplenty. A mistake from Callum Paterson gave Harin an early chance but he snatched at the ball and the chance was gone.

It was an early warning sign that Hearts failed to take heed. After Juanma headed Paterson's cross from the right just inches wide, the Estonians, rapidly gaining in confidence, took the lead in the 20th minute. A cross into the Hearts penalty box found the dangerous Harin on his own and his brilliant finish eluded Hamilton to give FC Infonet a shock lead.

The home support were stunned. However, six minutes later, Juanma's chip into the FC Infonet penalty box was handled by Avilov. Prince Buaben made no mistake with the penalty box and Hearts were level.

Ten minutes later, the home side were in front. A corner from Jamie Walker was turned across goal by Paterson and was deflected off Kalimullin and the ball trundled into the net. The relief around Tynecastle – bar two hardy souls in the Roseburn Stand – was palpable.

The visitors had a chance to equalise when Kruglov unleashed a ferocious effort on goal which Jack Hamilton did brilliantly to keep out.

Half-time Hearts 2 FC Infonet 1

The second half was, to be frank, poor fayre. FC Infonet were dangerous on the break and, worryingly, looked to have more ideas than Hearts with what to do with the ball.

The Estonians are midway through their season and were considerably sharper than their hosts. Hearts can perform so much better and they will need to in next Wednesday's return leg in Tallinn if they are to progress in the competition beyond the Edinburgh Trades Fortnight.

Hearts Head Coach Robbie Neilson was in typically philosophical mood after the game.

“They sat in and made it difficult for us,” Neilson told BBC Scotland. “We were just wee bit off it, but it will come and we’ll be another week stronger and hopefully ready to go over there and take advantage of the lead we’ve got.

“To go one behind, it shows good character to come back again. It took the players a wee bit to get that competitive edge, but second half we were better.

“People look at these teams and say, ‘it’s Estonia’, but they’re tough teams, they’ve got good players, international players. It’s going to be a tough game over there.

“We’re ahead in the tie, it’s halfway and we’ve still got a lot of work to do. We’ll have another week’s pre-season under our belt and we’ll be another week sharper.”

Hearts: Hamilton, Paterson, Ozturk, Souttar, Rherras, Nicholson, Djoum, Buaben (Kitchen, 76’), Walker, Juanma (King, 64’), Sammon.

Infonet: Igonen, Kalimullin, Avilov, Appiah, Volodin, Voskoboinikov, Harin (Kulinits, 82’), Mosnikov, Kruglov, Dmitrijev, Mashichev (Haminu, 60’).

Referee: Vilhjalmur Alvar Thorarinsson

Att: 14,417

Top man: Jack Hamilton