

Hearts Secure Draw in Malta

Birkirkara 0 Heart of Midlothian 0

Europa League Second Qualifying Round, First Leg – Thursday 14 July 2016

After disposing of Estonian side FC Infonet in the first qualifying round of the Europa League last week, Hearts were back in European action with the first leg of the second qualifying round taking place in Malta on Thursday evening.

Scorching temperatures and a bone dry pitch meant the tie was always going to be challenging for Robbie Neilson's side. And so it proved although the Maroons will be pleased enough at securing a goalless draw against a team who took West Ham United to a penalty shoot-out in the same competition a year ago.

Head Coach Neilson kept the same team who thumped FC Infonet this time last week and they almost made the ideal start when Conor Sammon thought he had opened his scoring account for the Gorgie team only to be adjudged offside. Jamie Walker then came close as Hearts dominated possession although keeper Jack Hamilton had to be alert to clear a cross ball.

There was a blow for the visitors when Perry Kitchen had to go off injured – he was replaced by Don Cowie.

Half-time Birkirkara 0 Hearts 0

The searing heat contributed to the stop-start nature of the game with regular stoppages so the players could take water refreshment. Jamie Walker was again proving to be the main threat to the hosts and from yet another cross from the winger, Igor Rossi – keen to add to his goalscoring exploits last week – headed goalwards forcing home keeper Koprivic to make a fine save.

In the 63rd minute, Hearts captain Alim Ozturk fired in a typical effort from 35 yards but saw his effort smash off the crossbar.

Hearts substitute Sam Nicholson then created a chance for fellow sub Juanma but the home side cleared the danger.

Hearts will hope to finish the job in the second leg at Tynecastle next Thursday.

Birkirkara: Koprivic, Bubalovic, Sciberras, Marcellina, Srdan (Zarate, 90'), Plut, Bajada (Temile, 81'), Zerafa, Scicluna (Marrotti, 90'), Attard, Guillaumier.

Hearts: Hamilton, L.Smith, Ozturk, Rossi, Rherras, Paterson, Kitchen (Cowie, 30'), Buaben, Djoum, Walker (Nicholson, 81'), Sammon (Juanma, 74').

Referee: Ivaylo Stoyanov (Bulgaria)