

Confident Cochrane on steep learning curve

Alex Cochrane smiled after being reminded by a member of the media pack that he had been red carded on the last occasion Hearts met Celtic in the cinch Scottish Premiership.

That was on August 21 at Celtic Park and Cochrane walked in the 89th minute. He was followed by Toby Sibbick two minutes later and Cochrane said: "Thanks for reminding me for that one."

Kyogo Furuhashi opened the scoring after 13 minutes with his right foot from inside the six-yard box after a ball from the right, and Giorgos Giakoumakis added a second in the 94th minute, bundling the ball home when Hearts were down to nine men for a 2-0 win, one of nine the Parkhead side have collected out of ten starts in Scotland's top division.

Ange Postecoglou's men had 594 passes on that occasion, Hearts had 262, and Celtic had 70 per cent of the possession, Hearts had 30 per cent.

Now, the Hoops now have 27 points and sit in pole position in the table while Hearts are seventh with four wins and two draws in their ten games.

Manager Robbie Neilson reminded the media this week that his men are only three points out of third position and 22-year-old Cochrane, a defender still learning his trade, is relishing the prospect of running out of the Tynecastle tunnel

to face The Hoops again.

The Brighton-born player (pictured second from the left in training by **Nigel Duncan**) remains confident that the Boys in Maroon can climb the table significantly once their lengthy injury list eases and he admitted: "The results have not been as we want, but when we do have a poor result we can bounce back quickly. We have injuries in key positions at the moment, but we have quality in the team.

"This weekend, we have to go into the game with a winning mentality. There is no doubt that they (Celtic) are a quality team and we have to be at it from the start. Give them a chance and they will punish you."

Cochrane has been switched into a centre-back position to cover for Hearts' current injury problems and he said: "It's been a learning curve for me and I've never done it before, but playing in the centre-back role is only going to benefit me in my future career."

He acknowledged the help that team-mate Stephen Kingsley has offered and Cochrane, a former Brighton and Hove Albion player, who has also played for East Grinstead Town and Union SG, stressed the importance of being defensively strong on Saturday against the current league pace-setters.

He added: "We have to be alert and concentrated from the start. Given past experience, if you give them a sniff then they will punish you. If we have a strong defensive performance we can build from there. Going forward, we have the talent to hurt them and, on Saturday, we will have the crowd behind us."

Looking at the Hearts squad overall, the defender believes they have players who are able to fill in for absent colleagues and added: "There is no doubt that the players who are missing fill key positions for us, but we can't use that as an excuse. It is what it is. We are happy to be unselfish

and help each other.

“The players who have stepped-in have done the job and have done well and, as a team, we have to move forward together. There is no lack of belief in the squad.

“The mood in the camp is still positive, we never let our heads go down. If you let negativity filter in then performances as a team could drop. We are staying together.

“We are getting in the right positions and we are creating chances but we need to tuck them away and we have quality players like Lawrence Shankland, Stephen Humphrys and Barry McKay in that department.”

The players, he added, were still in good shape despite their hectic domestic and European schedule and Cochrane said: “I prefer playing game after game. Physically and mentally I feel good.”

Cochrane is positive about the introduction VAR and added: “You can see the benefits it has had in other leagues and, hopefully, it will help us and help the league.

“My feeling is that it will take time to get used to it. I don't think it will make much difference to playing, you have still got to play the game and see what happens.”

He added: “You might have to be a little careful. There will be controversial moments, but I'm looking forward to it.”