

Euro woe continues for Scottish clubs as Hearts skid to defeat in Italy

It's been a disappointing week for Scottish teams in Europe, with Celtic and Rangers both going down, and the sorry story continued when Hearts suffered a similar fate in Florence, losing 5-1.

The Edinburgh side lost four goals in a nightmare first half, but recovered to net early on in the second and were far more competitive in the session which ended 1-1.

The Italians may have scored eight goals with only one in reply against Hearts but, at least, the Gorgie side saved themselves from Hearts' worst ever defeat in Europe, a 5-0 reverse to London cracks Spurs in 2011.

Hearts remain in third place with three points in the Group A table with Fiorentina now on seven and the Turkish side Istanbul Basaksehir on 10. They beat RFS, who prop up the table with two points, 3-0 and all teams have played four matches.

Earlier, injury-hit Hearts were forced to reshuffle their pack for this UEFA Europa Conference League, Matchday Four, clash.

Stephen Humphrys was selected up-top in place of Scottish international Lawrence Shankland, a decision made by manager Robbie Neilson after reviewing the footage from the 3-0 defeat

by Fiorentina at Tynecastle.

Neilson also stressed to his men the importance of imposing themselves on the Italian side early on and they certainly had support behind them with several thousand Hearts fans in the stands.

Standing behind flags including the Penicuik Heats, Polwarth Tavern and supporters from Musselburgh, the fans gave the players a tremendous welcome in the 43,000-capacity stadium in which there were a number of empty spaces.

That was possibly a legacy of the Italian side's recent form, including a 4-0 home defeat by third-placed Serie A side, Lazio, on Monday which drew heavy criticism.



Stephen Humphrys (left) and Orestis Kiomourtzoglou about to start training with Hearts at Oriam on 12 October 2022 PHOTO Nigel Duncan

And Hearts started as their manager had hoped, on the attack. A left-foot drive from Humphrys from the edge of the 18-yard box after only 31 seconds following a well-disguised pass from

Barry McKay beat the Italian goalkeeper, but cannoned off his left-hand post and Hearts were unable to capitalise on the rebound.

Fiorentina reacted positively and broke up the park. Craig Gordon (pictured by **Nigel Duncan**) was tested with a glancing header and after five minutes the home side struck, just as they did at Tynecastle.

A cross from the left had Hearts defence struggling and Luka Jovic made them pay with a glancing header for 1-0.

It was important that Hearts re-grouped quickly, but the Italians kept on coming and the Jambos survived a penalty claim.

Fiorentina threatened every time they drove forward and the home side kept the revamped Hearts defence under real pressure, forcing them into desperate clearances.

The slick-passing of the Italian side also caused real problems and after 12 minutes the home side crashed the ball of Gordon's left-hand post.

It was panic stations in the Hearts rearguard and Christian Kouame was denied before the Scots were forced into a change, Nathaniel Atkinson, injured early on, had to leave the pitch and Toby Sibbick replaced him after 16 minutes.

Hearts continued to be hemmed in and they had little chance of reliving the pressure as the Italian maintained their press high up the pitch. They also dominated possession.

Barry McKay was involved in a free-kick award when he tackled Nicolas Gonzalez. It was a soft award but it was given in a dangerous position to the left of Hearts' box.

They were punished as Cristiano Biraghi netted with a left-foot shot which gave Gordon no chance. Time 22 minutes.

Hearts rallied and Humphrys latched onto a ball in the Italian half and drove forward, but his shot from the left edge of the box went agonisingly wide.

It was a rare attack for the Tynecastle men who were involved in a real test of character. They stuck to their task, but the home side broke through again as Hearts found it difficult to get hold of the ball.

Goal No 3 arrived as Gonzalez counted, a neat, three-man passing move on the edge of the box allowing him to side foot home from six yards after 32 minutes. Gordon had no chance.

Worryingly, there was still an hour to go and the Italian side kept on coming. Their first thought was to drive at the opposition, and it hurt Hearts.

Gordon was forced into a diving save to keep the score at three but No 4 arrived soon after when Antonin Barak netted in 38 minutes, side footing home with his left foot after a cutback from the left in the box. Gordon's expression spoke volumes.

Sadly, there was a huge gap between the defence and attack for Hearts and the Italians clinically exploited that, breaking through regularly, and Neilson made two changes at the start of the second period, Orestis Kiomourtzoglou coming in along with Connor Smith.

The Italians also made two changes as Hearts considered damage limitation after a nightmare first session when the Italians had ten shots on goal, seven on target, against three by Hearts with one on target.

The home side had 68 per cent of possession against 32 per cent from Hearts and they had 304 passes against 146, showing their superiority.

However, Humphrys reacted positively, breaking through onto a

finely-weighted pass from Andy Halliday and coolly finishing with his right foot only 1min 16sec after the restart following a move down the left-hand touchline.

It was a perfect start for the visitors and a great lift for the travelling fans who increased their volume in the stands.

The Scots began to grow in confidence, but there was still a long way back for the Boys in Maroon, however their forward press prompted a mistake and allowed McKay sight of goal. The danger was snuffed out.

Still, there was positivity in Hearts play, a welcome sign. The connection between defence and attack was improved and there was less activity around the Hearts box.

In fact, most of the play was concentrated in midfield with the Italians kept to the outside.

Reinforcements came off the bench as legs tired, pacey Euan Henderson and Shankland coming on, but seconds later Kouame had sight of goal at the far post but blazed over.

Then Cochrane brought down Riccardo Saponara and the referee had no hesitation in awarding a penalty 12 mins from time. It became 5-1 when Gonzalez netted his second, coolly sending Gordon the wrong way and chipping the ball into the net.

At the other end, Shankland almost attempted a long-range lob which was inches over the top with the goalkeeper scrambling.

Overall, the Tuscan team at 16 shots on goal, ten of them on target, against five from the Capital club with two on target.

They also enjoyed 69 per cent of possession while Hearts had 31 per cent and, significantly, Fiorentina had 594 passes against 271.

Hearts must now re-group ahead of their league trip to

Aberdeen on Sunday.