

Atkinson strikes late as Hearts bow out of Europe

Nathaniel Atkinson slotted home in the 90th minute to end Hearts' Euro campaign on a high, but, once again, soft goals proved costly as the Jambos went down 3-1 in Istanbul to Basaksehir.

The goal was the first scored against the Turkish side in their own stadium during the UEFA Europa Conference League, and it was set-up by enterprising play down the left by 18-year-old substitute Finlay Pollock who come on with ten minutes remaining.

He hassled the ball from a Turkish defender and drove towards goal before sending the ball square. Lawrence Shankland, another of manager Robbie Neilson's second-half substitutes, prodded the ball forward and the 23-year-old, Aussie-born Atkinson (pictured behind Euan Henderson and Robert Snodgrass in training by *Nigel Duncan*) who made no mistake from six yards.

The Hearts fans in one corner of the sparsely populated stadium burst into song to celebrate, but this was a rare opportunity for Hearts in a game which was dominated by the home side.

The club, who are second in the Turkish Super Lig, broke through after only four minutes and went 2-0 up in 33 minutes after another defensive lapse and the home side completed their tally with a third avoidable goal after 64 minutes.

Hearts finished third in the four-strong Group A and crave a return to European football. Certainly, the squad will have learned from their first European campaign for 18 long years, and the young players who were on duty in Turkey will now know what playing against strong opposition is like.

Inconsistent refereeing certainly did not assist Hearts and it was surprising that Youssouf Ndayishimiye stayed on the pitch after sinking his studs into Jorge Grant's shin during the first-half, but the Tynecastle team did not feed their strikers with enough quality ball to really trouble Basaksehir.

They pressed high, particularly in the first-half, with Jorge Grant working hard in midfield and Euan Henderson a willing runner up-front, but when it came to the 18-yard box too many moves petered out and the home goalkeeper had a comfortable afternoon while, at the other end, Bertrand Traore, on loan from English Premiership side, Aston Villa, was a threat down the right flank.

It was unmarked Ndayishimiye who opened the scoring after four minutes, sending a header into the net from close range following a corner, eluding a number of Hearts defenders.

Midfield player Serdar Gurler made it 2-0 after 33 minutes. A long ball from mid-way inside the Turkish half saw Craig Gordon rush from his line as his defence appeared to want to play the opposition offside.

The 39-year-old, playing in his 22nd European game for Hearts, equalling a club record, did not get enough on the ball which broke to Gurler who made no mistake, rolling it into the net with Toby Sibbick being unable to stop it.

Gordon made a great double save before the break, twice denying Traore with his feet at the near post, but a third arrived from Nerkey Ozcan arrived after 64 minutes. Gordon threw the ball out to Alex Cochrane on the left, mid-way inside Hearts' half. Cochrane was unable to control the ball which was picked up and quickly sent into the danger area. Ozcan took his time to pick his spot with his left foot for 3-0.

The statistics confirm the dominance of the home side who made

581 passes against 320 from the Jambos and had 13 shots with six on target while Hearts had five with two on target. Basaksehir had 64 per cent of possession against 36 per cent from the Scots but Basaksehir move on to the knockout stage as Group A winners.

Fiorentina, who beat RSF of Latvia 3-0 in their final game in Italy, finished second with an identical four wins, a draw and one defeat record but they scored 14 goals and lost six against the Turkish side's total of 14 for and three against.

Hearts were third with six points from two wins and four defeats and with the worst goal difference in the group of minus ten. RFS were minus nine. However, the fans sang loudly as the players saluted them from the pitch.

Later, Neilson conceded to BBC Sport Scotland that it had been a tough night, but Hearts were playing against an extremely good team. He added: "I expect them to go quite far in this tournament."

Neilson said his men lost a poor goal at the start of the game and added: "We lost another poor goal and, at this level, you can't do that, but this is a learning curve for us and we hope to be back next year when we can implement some of the things we have learned from this campaign (in Europe)."