

Neilson desperate to repay Hearts fans for their loyalty

Hearts jetted to Istanbul followed by around 1,000 Hearts fans and manager Robbie Neilson is determined that his men are up for the UEFA Europa Conference League game, their last in the round-robin section of the competition.

Neilson desperately wants to repay the fans for their support during the club's European adventure and many have travelled to Switzerland, Italy for the clash with Fiorentina in Florence, Latvia see the game against RFS and now to Istanbul.

And, if Hearts can defy the form book and win in Istanbul, they they will collect a shade over £400,000 and even a draw could net a sizeable, six-figure sum of nearly £150,000.

It was Fiorentina who ended Hearts' qualification hopes last Thursday with their narrow 2-1 win over previously unbeaten Turkish combine in Florence, and the result was achieved before Hearts kick-off against RFS.

However, Neilson has stressed in all his media clips this week that this trip is important to everybody connected with the Men in Maroon.

Hearts training at The Orium before boarding their flight to Turkey for the UEFA Europa Conference League clash on Thursday. The manager still has injury concerns, a situation which has

dogged him for most of the current campaign. Craig Halkett, so influential in defence, trained this week, but the manager is unlikely to take any risks. The centre back limped out of the stadium in St Gallen after being injured after only six minutes into the game against FC Zurich in the Europe League, play-off, first-leg which the Swiss side won 1-0.

Stephen Kingsley, who cut a dejected figure when he left the pitch in last Thursday's 2-1 win over RFS at Tynecastle, is now out for some weeks, probably until after the World Cup, with a hamstring issue. Stephen Humphrys, injured in the first-half against Celtic, is another worry for the manager.

Neilson is keeping his cards close to his chest and indicated that possibly "one or two" of his crocked players could be ready for Thursday, but Hearts entertain Motherwell in a tough cinch Scottish Premiership clash on Sunday at Tynecastle (kick-off 15.00) and the manager will want his strongest possible side on the park.

Then, it is a trip to Ibrox to face Rangers on Wednesday, November 9 (19.45) followed by the visit of Livingston to Gorgie on Saturday, November 12 (15.00) on Matchday 16 or 33.

The Jambos then have a gap because of the World Cup until Kilmarnock come to Tynecastle on December 17 (15.00) which should allow some Neilson's injured players to recover fully. So, it is likely that a number of men already carrying knocks will be asked to put their bodies on the line once again in Istanbul.

The Turkish side remain in pole position in Group A with ten points from five games, the same points as Fiorentina but with a better goal difference of nine against five for the Italians.

Both front-runners have scored 11 goals each but Istanbul have lost two and Fiorentina six. Hearts have scored five and lost 13, the worst total in the four-strong group. RFS have scored

two and lost eight.

Thursday's hosts won 4-0 at Tynecastle in their opening match in the competition and the Turkish side are second in the Turkish Super Lig, three points adrift of pace-setting Fenerbahce, having won seven and drawn two of their 11 starts in the domestic competition.

At the weekend they disposed of Giresunspor, who are in the bottom three, while Hearts have won their last two, the narrow victory over RFS in Europe and a 2-1 success at Dingwall over Ross County on Sunday, a boost to confidence.

Whatever happens on Thursday, the match could be a career milestone for 39-year-old Craig Gordon, the club's captain. Gordon made his European debut in a 1-0 win over Bordeaux in the 2003/04 season it would be his 22nd game in Europe for the club, a mark only previously reached by two players, goalkeeper Henry Smith and centre back Steven Pressley, if he plays

A reminder to Hearts fans not travelling that the kick-off in Turkey is 15.30 in the Basaksehir Faith Terim Stadium and Hearts bosses have received confirmation that fans can make their own way to the stadium and free buses will be available for supporters who wish to use them.

PICTURE: Hearts trained on Wednesday morning at The Orium with the thermometer at 5c and it was no wonder that JG covered up to beat the cold.