

Duncan: 'This is just the beginning'

Fine margins are crucial in top sport, including hockey, and goalkeeper Lucia Caruso made two brilliant saves in the first quarter of Scotland's clash with Italy in Pool C of the European Championships, A Division, which ultimately cost the Tartan Hearts an automatic place among the elite of European hockey in two years time.

The highly-talented, yet unorthodox, 25-year-old showed consistent form throughout the competition in Germany. So much so, in fact, that the coaches voted her as the Goalkeeper of the Tournament.

That is despite Italy finishing bottom of the competition in eighth position with Scotland, who drew 1-1 with Italy despite battering them for most of the 60 minutes in their Pool C clash, ultimately finishing one place above them in seventh.

However, had just one of those shots hit the backboard then Scotland could have guaranteed their qualification for another adventure against the big guns in summer 2025.

Now, the Scots face a tricky, nerve-wracking road back with

little margin for error. They must play in a qualifying tournament next summer against as yet unconfirmed opposition at a venue to be named in September.

The Tartan Hearts flew back to Edinburgh on Sunday, undoubtedly buoyed by their 2-1 success over Spain which meant they finished Pool C with four points, the same as the Spaniards but with an inferior goal difference, and one behind Ireland who topped the group.

It was Scotland's first win over Spain in eight long years and their first success against a country in the top ten at a European Championship since 1991.

Yet, there was no hiding the disappointment of coach Chris Duncan as the victory was, he said, "bitter sweet" given that a victory over Italy would have moved them onto six points and into the top six.

For the record, The Netherlands won their fourth straight gold medal beating Belgium, who were looking for their first Euro title, comfortably 3-1 thanks to a whirlwind start in the final with two goals in the first five minutes.

The Netherlands are the first nation to qualify for the Paris Olympics next summer and hosts Germany were third after beating England 3-0 before a highly-partizan full-house .

Overall in the well-attended tournament, Ireland were fifth with Spain sixth and they move forward to the next European Championship in 2025. Scotland are looking in currently but really hope to be there as the players loved the experience in Monchengladbach.

Among the stand-out performers for the Scots was experienced goalkeeper Amy Gibson, Gibbo to her friends, who capped a tremendous tournament with a penalty stroke save in the last two minutes in the win against Spain which moved Scotland back to No 17 in the world, one place ahead of Italy.

She was disappointed that Scotland do not show their true potential in the 4-0 defeat to Germany on opening day, a game in which she produced one of the outstanding saves of the tournament, the 5-0 reverse to Ireland and also a 5-0 defeat to England.

But the win over Spain was special and 34-year-old Gibson, now in the later stages of her international career, said: "To beat a team in the top ten is something we strive for so it was brilliant."

Duncan said that the victory underlined what the girls have achieved in the last 18 months. They have played Australia, ranked No 2 in the world, Germany the world No 5, England rated No 6, New Zealand, ranked No 9, China, rated No 11, and Canada, ranked No 15, and he added: "We've run some top teams close, pushed top ten sides close and not got over the line – until now.

"We have real ambition about what we want to achieve and how we want to play. Yes, it has been a tough tournament losing to Germany, Ireland in particular, and England and drawing with Italy when we dominated the game, but to finish on a high like this is something the team and staff should all be proud of. This is just the beginning."

For one man, however, it is the end of international hockey involvement as Neil Menzies, a stalwart for Scottish Hockey for many years, and coach for the Scotland under-21 women's programme, is retiring.

He is also an assistant coach to the senior women and the occasion was marked by a touching presentation in the departure lounge of Dusseldorf Airport on Sunday by the girls he has worked so hard for down the years. Best wishes Neil.

PICTURE: Katie Robertson shows the determination to succeed underlined by Duncan in the huddle before the historic win over Spain. Picture by **WorldSportPics** courtesy of EuroHockey