

Italy focus for Scotland's Euro women

Coach Chris Duncan told Scotland's success-hungry women's hockey supporters from Germany: "Our real battle starts now."

The Tartan Hearts square-up to Italy on Thursday (12.30) and Spain on Friday (13.45) in two crucial cross-over ties which will decide their final ranking.

The bottom two sides in Pool C, in which Scotland now are, will not be relegated as happened prior to 2021 but go into a EuroHockey qualification process next summer where the winner will qualify for the 2025 EuroHockey Championships.

Italy are ranked No 17 in the world, a position occupied by Scotland earlier this year, and Spain rated No 8 on the planet. Scotland have slipped two places to No 19 and Spain take their three points earned into Pool C which gives them a head start.

The Italians finished bottom of Pool A against The Netherlands, Belgium and Spain with zero points while Spain earned three points from their jousts against the same teams to finish third.

Scotland propped up Pool B with no points after losing 4-0 to hosts Germany, 5-0 to Ireland and 5-0 to England.

Edinburgh-based Duncan said: "England were a cut above physically and we were not able to compete for the whole 60 minutes, but we competed well in quarter one (which ended

0-0). We need the ability to do that consistently, to compete ball after ball, minute after minute, quarter after quarter and that sets top teams above where we are in the rankings.

“The reality is that we have to compete, we are trying to come up with aggressive approaches, game plans and tactics but that will take time. Their possession was huge and we did not manage to disrupt them enough and at times we tried to slow them down and get pressure on the first ball.

“The biggest issue was that we had to cover such big spaces defensively when we got the ball we were not able to consolidate, we were looking for the right options but were not able to execute it technically because we were tired.

“We have played two of the world’s top six ranked teams in Germany (No 4) and England (No 6) and we played Ireland who have a huge programme compared to ours. It is not about making excuses. We are living in reality here and we are trying to compete and thinking long term.”

He admitted: “Yes, this first phase has been tough. That is tournament No 1 over and now we are into tournament No 2. These games (against Italy and Spain) are huge for us and I have said to the girls that the tournament starts now.”

Duncan confirmed that Scotland were the lowest ranked team going into the tournament in Monchengladbach, Germany, and said Italy are ranked around Scotland but Spain are ranked considerably higher.

He added: “That does not matter. It is 11 against 11 and we have to come up with a game plan to outwork the opponent. We look forward to that challenge and will keep being brave in the way we play but it is tough at the top. We are learning that the hard way but the only way we learn that lesson is to go out and hopefully get better as we go forward.”

Scotland desperately want to hold onto their A Division

status, said Duncan, but he added: "It is not just about being in A Division and playing the best teams, it is about competing with them. We accept that it is going to take quite a long time to get to that level and we all understand that, but we have got to start somewhere.

"We are trying to be aggressive in our pressing, we have noted that other teams just sit back and keep games tight. Would keeping it tight benefit us in the next five or seven years? No. We want to be here, we want to be part of it.

"You have to be up-beat, it (the results) have obviously damaged our pride a little bit, and we had chances early on, like one against Ireland, then possibly the game would have been a little different, but it wasn't.

"We always knew we were the lowest ranked side in B Pool, we tried to use that as an advantage and use the underdog tag as an incentive, but now the last two games are huge. We played Italy in a warm-up game and look forward to taking them on on Thursday."

PICTURE: Millie Steiger (blue) closes in on an England player during Scotland's 5-0 defeat in the EuroHockey Championships, A Division, in Monchengladbach, Germany. Free-to-use picture **by WorldSportPics.**