

Well focus for Hearts after Euro exit

Hearts must recover from their European exit and focus fully on the visit of Motherwell to Tynecastle on Sunday (kick-off 15.00) after what Steven Naismith described as a harsh lesson dished out by their UEFA Europa Conference League play-off opponents, PAOK.

The club's technical director (pictured before a press conference by *Nigel Duncan*) praised the 900 fans who made the long journey to Greece and added: "We need to start giving them the performances which merit their support."

The European defeat follows a stuttering start to the season. Domestically, the Jambos won 2-0 at St Johnstone on Matchday One in the cinch Premiership and then lost 2-1 in the UEFA Europa Conference League, third qualifying round, at Rosenborg in Norway.

A no-score home draw with Kilmarnock followed but the success-hungry fans were cheered by the 3-1 home win over Rosenborg and the 4-0 victory over Partick Thistle in the Viaplay League Cup.

The 2-1 defeat by POAK at Tynecastle was a jolt to the system and so the 1-0 road reverse at Dundee in the cinch Premiership last Sunday was an even bigger dunt, Luke McGowan's goal

separating the sides despite Hearts having 65 per cent of the possession and 549 passes. The Dens Park side had 35 per cent of possession and 298 passes.

Thursday night was, according to Naismith, "a harsh lesson" and he added: "Over the course of the tie, we created some good chances but, when you give up goals like we have at this level with their quality of player they have, then they are going to punish you." PAOK did.

The former Scottish international said that Hearts knew before travelling to Greece that they had to be perfect defensively in the return and he said: "We not anywhere near where we needed to be."

Naismith told the club's TV channel that Hearts needed to make chances at half-time to attempt to nullify the threat of the lively Greek combine, but the game was over, he added, when the ball hit the back of the net for their third goal.

His overall assessment is that Hearts need to keep the ball better and the former Everton, Norwich City and Rangers player added: "We got in the game early on and had some good passing moves which caused problems for them, but we don't do enough of it and they dominate the ball and we gave up poor goals which have cost us.

"For the club (Hearts) to grow and get better we must learn from these moments. We need to put better performances in to get through to the group stages (of European competitions)."

He told the players (in the dressing-room at PAOK that they worked really hard to get in this competition and then it is gone. The only way of getting back into Europe is to play well, he said, . domestically to give Hearts this opportunity next season.

Casting his eye at the Motherwell clash, the 36-year-old coach said it will be a tough game for the Tynecastle combine

who are slipped to fifth in the table with four points from their three outings so far.

The Fir Park side are third in the 12-strong table with seven points from three outings after a 1-1 draw at Dundee on Matchday One, a 2-1 home victory over Hibs and then a 2-1 victory over Kilmarnock at Fir Park last Saturday.

And, of course, the Lanarkshire side have had a full week to prepare and not had the distraction of a long and tiring midweek trip to a foreign country for a tough tie.

Irvine-born Naismith said: "They (Motherwell) are a team who have changed slightly from how they played last season and it will cause us problems. If we want to be a big club that is competing in Europe and playing midweek and weekend games you need to get yourself up for it and that is what the players will need to do.

"After the game on Sunday we have a bit of a rest (for the international break), but we need to take care of our performances first."

Homing in on their European exit, Naismith said: The fans enjoy these occasions and it is disappointing that we don't have any more of that this season but, at Hearts, there is now an expectation.

"We need to start giving them (the fans) performances which merit that support and secondly becoming successful, whether that is domestically or getting back into Europe, to give them more occasions (like this) and we must fight to do that."