

Scottish Hockey seeking more golden moments

Scotland's under-21 women can look forward to the World Cup next year after edging Ukraine 1-0 in the EuroHockey Championship II-B in Turkey, another step in Scottish Hockey's Pathway which they hope will lead to more golden moments.

Chris Duncan, women's national team head coach and programme lead, was in Konya with the under-21 squad, coached by Jimmy Culnane, and said the players coped admirably both on and off the pitch in challenging circumstances.

The girls faced a long flight from Edinburgh to the Turkish resort of Antalya, a five-hour bus ride over the mountains, a heat which rose to over 35c, the culture and the food and the pressure of playing in their first European final yet they enjoyed a 100 per cent record in the tough tournament.

The Scots opened with a 3-1 victory over Ukraine, edged Poland 2-1, thrashed the hosts 4-0 and then found a way, despite being down to nine players for a short time, to beat Ukraine again, this time 1-0, and take the gold medal to preserve their 100 per cent record.

Duncan explained that he and Culnane operate as a team. Culnane is senior assistant to the senior women and leads the under-21 squad, and he is senior head coach and an assistant coach to the under-21 side.

He added: "It's another example of how we link up our Pathway and try to deliver a co-ordinated methodology.

Duncan added that the girls progressed as a squad during the event and played their best hockey in the final but failed to take their chances, but it is the first time since 2005 that a Scotland under-21 women's side has qualified for a World Cup.

The venue has yet to be decided, but the planning has started and Edinburgh-based Duncan said the players can undoubtedly build on this achievement which is also significant for Scottish Hockey.

The organisation is building a Pathway programme, channelling young talent through from age-group teams to eventually the senior squad.

Duncan said: "It's 20 years since we had an under-21 team in the World Cup and this result was significant. To achieve success as senior level we need talented young players coming through and that is where the Pathway strategy comes in.

"Playing against international teams in major competitions, playing in the A Division, which our senior women did last year in Germany, is giving our athletes exposure at a high level, playing against top teams with different styles and coping with that and the pressure of being in high level competitions at different venues.

"That is vitally important for our athletes and playing at the top level means there is no room for dropping off, even for a second, or you will be punished. You have to be on you're A Game all the time from the first whistle to the last whistle and this is both physically and mentally hard, but it is something the athletes must learn and get used to.

"However, we want them to compete at the highest standard possible and be used to doing that against quality opposition. Undoubtedly, the gold medal in Turkey was a significant

achievement and another step on our Pathway.

“The under-21 team had to cope with the journey, the culture change, the food and the heat which was over 35c on occasions, and playing opposition with different styles, styles that they may not be used to, and that is not easy to do in a few days.

“They overcame those hurdles to be unbeaten in the tournament and the girls can hold their heads high and move forward from this. Playing against quality opposition consistently will help them develop as a unit and individually and, significantly, they progressed as a unit during the competition.

“They played their best hockey in the final but, unfortunately, they did not convert their chances, but that is history now. They won 1-0 and won the tournament and all that has gone on is in a learning curve.

“Hats off to them, the girls managed the game well despite being down two players deep into the final, and they achieved their objective, gold medal and promotion and a place in the Junior World Cup. They can be so proud of that.”

PICTURE: Scotland’s under-21 girls and the staff celebrate after winning gold in Turkey. Pictures courtesy of @IFSportsImages and **Ian Foster** @IanhF



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GOLDEN GOAL: Zara Kennedy slots home to secure a 1-0 win over Ukraine



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GOLDEN MOMENT: Two of the squad celebrate after being handed their medals in Turkey



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SUCCESS IS SWEET: The Scotland under-21 squad enjoy the moment in Turkey