

Hearts wait for Shankland ahead of Euro clash

Lawrence Shankland is an injury worry for Hearts as they head into Thursday's Europa League play-off clash with Czech opposition Viktoria Plzen (19.45) looking to turn round a one goal deficit from the away leg.

The Scotland international has a knee problem from a contact injury and Steven Naismith, Hearts' head coach, said they would give the star striker, who fired more than 30 goals last season, every chance of making the squad and also of appearing in his 100th game for the Jam Tarts.

The 29-year-old forward picked up the knock in Sunday's defeat at Motherwell and Naismith described him as a big player for the club.

He revealed that experienced Shankland reported the knock after the game and added that his record in the last two years has been impressive for the Men in Maroon.

Looking back on the season so far, the head coach said the goals conceded had been "cheap" and the three goals lost at the weekend were "really, really poor", but Naismith added: "We went 41 games without conceding a goal from a free kick and we concede two in one game.

"Those two goals were really sloppy. We get a goal back and we

lost a goal through an individual error and that took the game away from us. One of our problems at the moment is that we're conceding cheaper goals than we have been in the past.

"We have some new players but it is a process and we need to make sure the new players understand it."

Naismith said: "When you are not winning games there is going to be criticism, especially at a club the size of Hearts, but I am comfortable with that. We have a good group of players that can be successful if they cut out soft goals and take more of our chances."

He desperately wants to succeed under the floodlights at Tynecastle on Thursday and he expects a similar game to the away tie when two teams worked opportunities when they had the ball.

"We caused them problems and we need to be defensively better than we have been, but they have dangerous players who can cause you problems."

And he said that if his team starts well then there could be another night of success at Tynecastle in Europe. The former Scotland international told fans: "We will put a team out that we think will win the game. It will be another tight affair."

Playing in the Europa League, he stressed, was something the Old Firm – Celtic and Rangers – do and the chance does not come around too often for other Scottish clubs that is why the coach is so keen to grasp the opportunity.

Craig Gordon, Hearts' evergreen goalkeeper, stressed the importance of the fans in the tie and he said: "It is exciting and a great opportunity for us. These are always massive nights at Tynecastle and it is a great start to kick-start our season.

"What better way to do that than under the lights at

Tynecastle in a European tie.”

The Scottish international stopper emphasised the necessity for the squad to stick together. He added: “It is about getting everybody together and moving forward. If we can get a win and get through that would give us the shot in the arm we need.”

And the 41-year-old hot-stop added: “It is up to us to go out there and give all we can to give the fans the success they want. We need the fans again. If we can have everybody sticking together they Hearts are at their best, when everybody is pulling together we are a force to be reckoned with.”

PICTURE: Lawrence Shankland at Riccarton by ***Nigel Duncan***