

Naismith: 'we have to use home advantage'

Craig Gordon, now Hearts' record holder in European football, with 23 appearances, sat in his goalmouth with head in his hands as Viktoria Plzen celebrated scoring deep into injury time which could prove crucial in the Europa League play-off.

A speculative ball was floated in from the right edge of the penalty box and one of Hearts' new signings, 21-year-old, London-born, Daniel Oyegoke, who had come on as a substitute after 75 minutes, diverted the ball from his thigh and into the net via the upright.

That was six minutes into injury time and cruel luck on a dogged Hearts side who had competed well in the Doosan Arena against a Czech Republic side who were in Group C of the Champions League in season 2022/23 against sides of the quality of Bayern Munich, Inter Milan and Barcelona.

Hearts enjoyed 50 per cent of the possession on the night and the Scots grew into the game against a seasoned outfit who are playing in Europe for the 15th straight season.

Indeed, in the final minutes of the first half skipper Lawrence Shankland had two goal-bound efforts saved.

Costa Rica-born forward Kenneth Vargas also had two glimpses of goal during the game which he failed to convert so Hearts should go into next Thursday's return with some optimism after a solid defensive display, apart from that late blemish.

Steven Naismith's side still have a chance of qualifying for the main draw in Europe's second-tier competition for the first time in two decades and Hearts' head coach spoke to Hearts TV and BBC Sport Scotland and said: "Overall, our performance was really good."

He added: "That was more like the Rangers performance than it was against Dundee and Falkirk. It is a blow when you lose a goal late, but we knew it was going to be a tight tie and it is going to be a tight tie next week."

The former Scotland international argued that Hearts had the better chances on the night at the packed 11,700 stadium and, ultimately, it comes down to the last kick of the game.

Hearts, he claimed, caused the opposition problems in possession and he said: "We are at home (next week) and having the atmosphere at Tynecastle will really help us. We have to use that to our advantage. We have a really good squad and there are loads of positives."

Earlier, Gordon (pictured at training on Wednesday before flying out) had two quality stops, one from Milan Havel at his near post and another from Pavel Sulc in the second half.

Jorge Grant also cleared a goal-bound shot from Sulc and Frankie Kent and Stephen Kingsley also made significant interventions as the going got tough, but Plzen have started the season well, losing only one goal and scoring 12 in their five league games and they are unbeaten to hold second spot in the table.

They will know they are in for a torrid time at Tynecastle where the stakes are high and as Naismith said: "The game is

in the balance.”