

Critchley: 'I am delighted for the players'

Hearts trained on Sunday with their Europa Conference League clash against Omonoia on the horizon on Thursday (kick-off 5.45) at Tynecastle, buoyed by Saturday's 4-0, confidence-boosting win over St Mirren, a result which proved a welcome tonic to the 18,000-plus fans who packed the stadium.

Neil Critchley, the club's coach, could not have dreamed of a better start to his new career, and said: "I am delighted for the players. They have been so receptive to the work we have done and there were signs of that on the pitch."

The way the players have taken on the ideas of the new coaching staff has really impressed Critchley and he added: "They had good energy, kept the ball well, passed the ball well and they were threatening. The first goal was massive.

"We have not scored the first goal this season. Kenneth (Vargas) scored in the week (for Costa Rica) and came back in good spirits. Second-half, when we went 2-0 ahead, we could have controlled the game better. I would rather see us dominant and the best form of defence is attack, keeping the ball and pushing them back.

"They got balls on top of us a little bit (in the second-half)

but I did not feel under any undue pressure. Sometimes, balls coming forward can mean one moment can hurt you, but we got a couple of goals near the end.”

He stressed that Hearts were at home and the aim was to be positive and the coach revealed: “They (St Mirren) surprised us in how they lined up, but we changed at half-time and the second goal (scored by Daniel Oyegoke), I don’t know where that came from, I was not expecting that, but it came from changing the play from one side of the pitch to the other.”

Commenting on the reception he received from the Tynecastle faithful, the 46-year-old said: “I loved it. I am going to have to prove myself to the supporters here, I totally get that, and I will. They will learn over time, hopefully, who I am as a person and what I can bring to the football club.”

The three points lifted Hearts off the bottom of the 12-strong William Hill Premiership, Hibs are now bottom, and Critchley conceded that moving to 11th spot was a confidence boost. There was also an element of relief. It was an important day.

The ex-professional footballer was pleased with the contribution of all the four substitutes who came on – Cammy Devlin, James Wilson, Alan Forrest and Adam Forrester – and he commented on the energy of Forrest.

Teenager James Wilson had been “a real livewire” in training and the coach said: “I was not expecting him to score like that, but they all count and I am delighted for all the players.”

Blair Spittal, he felt, epitomised the team against St Mirren, pressing hard and the coach likes his mentality, but the ex-Motherwell player tweaked his leg in scoring in injury time. Critchley believed initially it was cramp, but the medical team will assess that.

He also praised the two centre backs, Frankie Kent and Kye

Rowles, who played their part and were, he said, “perfect” in protecting goalkeeper Craig Gordon, and he also mentioned, Yan Dhanda, who he knows from his days at Liverpool with the under-age teams, and James Penrice.

Critchley said: “I know what Yan is capable off and Penners (James Penrice) has been brilliant. Beni (Baningime) had good control in the middle of the pitch and Shanks (Lawrence Shankland) showed creativity for the first goal, but this is a squad game.”

The head coach is desperate to build on Saturday’s win and Critchley commented: “We have a brilliant game to look forward to on Thursday night. There may be changes.”

For the record, Omonoia are currently fourth in the Cypriot First Division and they come to Tynecastle on a downer having lost 1-0 at home to a goal from Paralimni player, 24-year-old, Guinea international, Thierno Barry after 29 minutes.

PICTURE: Blair Spittal in training and coach Neil Critchley said he “epitomised” the team on Saturday. Picture **Nigel Duncan**