

Euro boost for Hearts ahead of Aberdeen clash

Interim boss Liam Fox hopes Yan Dhandá's goal deep in injury time in Azerbaijan to edge Dinamo Minsk 2-1 in Hearts' opening UEFA Conference League match marks a turning point for the Tynecastle club.

The squad have jetted direct to Aberdeen after the closed-door match against the Belarus club at a neutral venue and now prepare to face the high-flying Dons in the William Hill Premiership at Pittodrie on Sunday (15.00).

It's another tough ask, particularly with a long travel time in between, while Jimmy Thelin's men have had a clear week, but Fox is up for the challenge in his third game in charge of the squad since the dismissal of head coach, Steven Naismith, plus assistants Frankie McAvoý and Gordon Forrest.

His troops have been boosted by late strikes to earn a 1-1 draw with Ross County at Tynecastle last Saturday – Lawrence Shankland on the mark – and now this welcome Euro win which snapped a ten-game winless streak.

Fox told BBC Sport Scotland that his men faced some really good players in Azerbaijan but kept going to the final whistle and were rewarded. The celebrations in the Hearts dugout in the empty stadium spoke volumes.

Fox added: "What pleased me the most was the players hung in."

There were, he said, some decent moments in the game and believes that hanging in can sometimes take you a long way.

Fox said: "When you are down there, you just need to keep working and keep believing it's going to turn. Hopefully, this is a wee shot in the arm."

Well, they will need one heading for the Granite City as Aberdeen are second in the 12-strong table with 18 points from six outings, the same total as pace-setting Celtic who have a superior goal difference of plus 20 against Aberdeen's plus eight. The Parkhead men have also played six games.

Hearts prop up the rest with two points from seven starts and are a point behind Kilmarnock, two adrift of St Johnstone and three back from Capital rivals Hibs who are ninth. Hearts have a goal difference of minus eight with only St Johnstone and Kilmarnock having a worse number of minus nine.

The Dons go into the clash after a 2-1 win at Dundee, Tony Docherty's men pushing the men in red hard in a tough 90-plus minutes at Dens Park.

Aberdeen striker Pape Habib Gueye, who was sent out on loan to Norway by former Dons boss, Neil Warnock, and he has hit the ground running since returning from Kristiansund and is Scotland's top marksman with five goals, is ruled out after surgery on a muscle injury. He is sidelined for three months.

Aberdeen, however, have former Hibs striker, Kevin Nisbet, who is on loan and is finding form with two goals in four games, including the opener against Dundee.

Past history looks good for the Jambos who have won five of the last ten meetings between the clubs, Aberdeen winning four. Hearts have scored 16 goals and Aberdeen 11 during that spell but the last nine league clashes between them have all

been won by the home team.

Aberdeen's English-born midfielder, Leighton Clarkson, feels that no European football has benefited the Dons domestically this season and the ex-Liverpool youth player's assertion could be tested on Sunday if Hearts midweek tonic in Europe lifts the side.

Aberden could open a 19-point gap over Hearts if they win but Thelin told the media: "We can talk about the table when we have one game to play at the end of the season, not now."

Meanwhile, off the pitch, Hearts bosses are continuing to look for a replacement head coach and are considering up to eight names to replace Naismith, according to BBC Sport Scotland.

Opne candidate has been interviewed and Andrew McKinlay, the club's chief executive, declined to put a time on how long the process will take.

PICTURE: Liam Fox near the Hearts' dugout ahead of last Saturday's home game against Ross County. Picture ***Nigel Duncan***