

Critchley on Euro exit: 'we lacked quality'

The word quality jumped out in Neil Critchley's immediate post-match summation as Hearts crashed out of Europe. In the Jambos case, it is lack of quality, particularly in the final third.

The effort was evident, they were aggressive, but poor decision making at key times, lack of pace and penetration and poor game management proved their downfall on a depressing night in Gorgie.

The Men in Maroon could have made history by progressing to the knockout stage in the UEFA Europa Conference League.

Instead of riding high on a wave of euphoria, they left the field to a chorus of boos from disgruntled fans. They expected, Hearts failed to deliver.

Critchley's face spoke volumes. The 46-year-old was obviously hugely disappointed by the performance and so were thousands of the faithful who suffered at Tynecastle and at home on their TV screens.

Frustrated Critchley said the game was in the home side's control at 2-1 but he added: "We lacked the nous and experience on the pitch to see us through."

Petrocub's leveller was a case in point. It was caused by an opposition player being allowed to stand unmarked at the back

post.

Craig Gordon made a great block but the ball was pinged back towards goal and, arguably, it was a soft penalty award.

James Penrice, one of the home side's better players on the night, was unlucky to see the ball glance off his arm.

The fatal error, however, was not keeping tight on the player at the back post and the strike was, ironically, on one of the few raids the Moldovan club made on Hearts goal in the second half.

Results elsewhere left Hearts out in the cold and this is a results business. Two wins early in the European campaign put Hearts in a prime position to qualify.

Four defeats in a row have been hugely costly to the Tynecastle team, not just in revenue terms going forward, but also in denting moral in the dressing-room and among the faithful.

Scotland's coefficient in Europe has also been damaged, but now Hearts full focus is on domestic football, starting on Sunday.

The critical nature of Sunday's home clash with St Johnstone (kick-off 15.00) is clear when you look at Hearts' position in the William Hill Premiership.

The Tynecastle club prop up the rest in the 12-strong division with 13 points from 17 fixtures. St Johnstone are one place above the Jambos with 14 points collected from the same number of games.

Both teams have identical recent records with one win, a draw and three defeats. The Perth side have scored 20 goals and let in 32, the third worst total in the league, while the Men in Maroon have scored 18 goals and shipped 26.

Two clubs are above the Saints on 15 points, Ross County in tenth spot, and Hibs whose win over the Dingwall side at Easter Road last Saturday elevated them into ninth position.

Of course, manager Simo Valakari has had a clear week to prepare. He wants to create something special at St Johnstone and believes in teamwork and collective power.

Valakari also seeks to play exciting football and engage the fans.

Last Sunday's 1-0 defeat to ten-man Kilmarnock at Rugby Park was a real setback for the ambitious Jambos, but Critchley, can look to the last meeting between the clubs.

Then Jambos edged St Johnstone 2-1 at McDiarmid Park on Saturday, November 2, when an own goal from Nicky Clark after 23 minutes broke the deadlock.

Clark scored from the penalty spot to level at 1-1 after 68 minutes but Kenneth Vargas claimed the win for the visitors with a strike after 76 minutes in a match in which the home side had five shots on target to Hearts' two.

Valakari's men enjoyed 62 per cent of possession against 38 per cent and the home side connected on 539 passes. Hearts had 335.

Hearts have been focused on Thursday night's clash with Petrocub but Craig Gordon, one of the senior men in the club's dressing-room, is determined to steady the ship and secure the much-needed win on Sunday.

He revealed that the team spoke about Sunday's Rugby Park defeat in the dressing room immediately after the game and they have also talked about it at Riccarton this week.

Critchley is also keen to see a response and he added: "We have a really important period coming up with lots of games in a short period of time. We've obviously reflected on what

happened at the weekend and we need to do a lot better than what we did (at Kilmarnock).”

Critchley has presided over 14 matches since he took charge and has only celebrated four wins and secured a draw against the Moldovan champions who finished bottom of the Conference League with only two points.

Three of Hearts’ next four games are at Tynecastle. Critchley said his men did not do enough against Petrocub. They must do enough on Sunday and in subsequent games to move off the bottom of the pile.

Lawrence Shankland, Hearts’ skipper, told TNT Sports, after the draw in Europe: “We didn’t do enough. I didn’t feel the boys didn’t try or work hard, it was just lack of quality.” That word again.

Hearts must find that quality and a cutting edge quickly.

ALL PICTURES BY THOMAS BROWN





