

Third straight Euro defeat for Hearts

Hearts suffered a disappointing 2-0 defeat in Denmark leaving their hopes of making the knockout stage in the UEFA Europa Conference League in the balance.

The Danish side dominated possession and only dogged defending prevented a bigger scoreline. Indeed, the Jambos, who have now lost their last three games in the competition, rarely threatened and their lack of pace in midfield and also a lack of physicality were shown up.

Copenhagen, sitting two places below the Tynecastle team in the UEFA Europa Conference League table before the game, strolled to a comfortable win despite them making six changes from their Danish Cup victory over Kolding on Sunday.

Hearts made three, Frankie Kent returning after injury, Musa Drammeh is not in the European squad list and Kenneth Vargas was preferred to teenager James Wilson.

Blair Spital and James Penrice, who have been effective down the left side for the Jambos, were considered key men and the former Livingston player was called into action early, clearing as danger threatened.

The home side pinned Hearts near their area, making it tough for the Tynecastle team to get out of defence, but they did break thanks to a timely tackle from Kent. Penrice was involved in the move, finding Vargas, but his pass inside to

Alan Forrest was poor and the Danish side swept upfield again.

Copenhagen passed the ball around patiently, looking for an opening, and Kent fouled Jordan Larsson 30 yards out. The ball was floated into the box and Gabriel Pereira had a free header but he sent it over the ball, failing to test Craig Gordon.

The Scotland goalkeeper was called into action seconds later, kicking the ball away after a darting move, then former Celtic star Mohamed Elyounoussi fired towards goal, but his shot was blocked and the same player was set up by a great piece of skill from on-loan Brazilian-born Robert on the left, but his shot was charged down.

Copenhagen were finding gaps in Hearts' rearguard and the Capital combine lived dangerously with busy Penrice having to be smart to prevent Elyounoussi from reaching a cross ball as the Danish side continued to press.

Skipper Lawrence Shankland was hurt in a tackle in midfield, but he seemed to run it off as Hearts looked to respond, but they gave the ball away cheaply, particularly in midfield. However, Neil Critchley urged Vargas to move upfield and the Costa Rica forward made a darting run into the Copenhagen half.

He fed Forrest whose shot was blocked for a corner and Spittal's ball into the box threatened but the Italian referee blew for a foul on goalkeeper Nathan Trott.

Daniel Oyegoke was felled by a heavy tackle but recovered. Shankland was then clattered by a reckless challenge from Gabriel who was fortunate to get away without a booking but nothing came from the free-kick.

Hearts, however, appeared to be growing into the game, but were unable to threaten Trott. Danger, however, came at the other end as Penrice blocked a goal-bound shot from close range with Elyounoussi involved.

A corner followed after Spittal knocked the ball out, but the ball was cleared. Kent and Rowles then had to deal with a darting run from lively 18-year-old Amin Chiakha. Kent, who recently returned from injury, fell to the turf in agony and had to be helped from the field. It looked a serious injury.

Teenage defender Adam Forrester replaced him with Oyegoke taking over from Kent at the heart of the defence. Suddenly, Hearts broke but Shankland failed to find Vargas who was free on his right hand side and Copenhagen countered with Malachai Boateng being booked for challenge on Thomas Delaney as the home side continued to dominate.

It was virtually one-way traffic and all Hearts could do was fire the ball long upfield to clear. Seconds later Hearts were under siege again, but they survived another real scare.

Hearts lack of midfield pace was telling and Copenhagen worked the ball from side to side to provide Viktor Claesson with an opening, but he fired well over the ball to the relief of the Jambos faithful.

Half-time arrived with Hearts still level, but with much to consider in the dressing-room, particularly in defence with the loss of Mr Reliable, Kent.

It was imperative that the Scots improved their retention of the ball, but Vargas was disposed just inside the Hearts half allowing Copenhagen to advance. Hearts paid a heavy price only two minutes in as Chiakha prodded the ball home from close range after a shot from Elyounoussi.

Both sets of fans faced a nervous wait while VAR made a lengthy goal check. This was a massive moment in the game and home fans celebrated after the referee pointed to the centre circle. Hearts were 1-0 down and really up against it now.

Forrester was then yellow carded for a heavy tackle on Robert and Shankland helped the free-kick from Elyounoussi over the

bar for a corner and Gordon made a brilliant block with his left leg near the line to keep the scoreline the same.

The assault continued but Hearts broke free and Devlin picked up a good position on the edge of the box and won a corner. Spittal's corner fell invitingly into the box and Copenhagen's Greek central defender, Pantelis Chatzidiakos, headed onto the bar for another corner. This one came to nothing.

It was a rare respite for Hearts who were soon back defending and Robert came close. Penrice was hurt in a challenge by Elyounoussi and required treatment before James Wilson replaced Vargas and Yutaro Oda came on for Forrest.

Minutes later VAR was back in business when Chiakha was bundled over in the box with Gordon standing his ground. The referee went to the monitor and controversially pointed to the spot.

Penalty specialist Kevin Diks made no mistake for 2-0.

Devlin went into the referee's notebook for a foul soon after and Copenhagen made changes to secure the points.

The Men in Maroon pressed in the dying minutes without making a real impression and they have one last chance of progressing when they play their final qualification game at Tynecastle on Thursday against Petrocub of Moldova (20.00).

PICTURE: Injury blow for Hearts as Frankie Kent hobbled off in Copenhagen. Picture by **Nigel Duncan**