

Scotland brace themselves for Chile test

It was 2.30pm at Peffermill Playing Fields, Edinburgh. The thermometer hovered around zero under a lead-grey sky, but the wind chill made it feel a lot colder. Fingers froze. A day to be inside, with the central heating on, watching a movie or sport on the small screen.

Yes, it is late January, in the middle of a Scottish winter, but was decidedly chilly. Coach Chris Duncan's voice pierced the air, exhorting his Scotland women's team to work on shape and plays while, at the same time, being acutely aware that hamstring and other issues can occur in such low temperatures.

The girls rubbed their hands and word chilly was used often. However, it is a different spelling that Duncan and his squad have etched on their minds. Chile, South America, is their next port of call for the 2025 FIH women's Nations Cup from February 23 to March 2.

They have to train, no matter the weather, flight delays to in-coming players as happened on Friday with Storm Eowyn, which caused chaos to public transport throughout Britain, and Duncan is keeping his fingers crossed that the squad make it to London next weekend as they have crucial warm-up games arranged with England at Bisham Abbey.

That will give the coaching staff some indication of where they are and what they need to do before they head for South America.

The Tartan Hearts need competitive games to build-up for what will be a supreme test against quality sides who may be full-time – Scotland's squad is made up of students, solicitors, doctors and teachers, to name a few – and other teams who have prepared in warmer climates.

And it is forecast to be warm in Chile, looking at the long-term forecast. The average daily temperature in Santiago, the capital city, can hit 29c in mid-February. Scotland, ranked No 16 in the world, their highest place for several decades, are in Group B with Ireland, New Zealand and South Korea. Group A features Canada, hosts Chile, United States and Japan.

Duncan believes the grouping gives Scotland an opportunity to test themselves against teams in the top echelon of world hockey.

So what are Scotland's chances? Ireland are No 12 in the world, New Zealand tenth, Korea 15th. Scotland have played Ireland in recent years and performed well against them. The Tartan Hearts, the nickname for the women's squad, lost narrowly to New Zealand in the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, but the match will be remembered by many for a 'goal' ruled out by the video umpire.

Scotland were 1-0 down early in the first-half but earned a penalty corner. The video umpire said the ball had not left the circle, but spectators posted on social media to show that it had, and the referee supervisor later admitted a mistake had been made.

The Kiwis eventually won 1-0, Rose Tynan scoring from a penalty corner after ten minutes. That result still hurts those players who remain in the squad include Great Britain

squad players Amy Costello and Jen Eadie plus Scotland striker, Sarah Jamieson.

Make no mistake, this is an expensive trip which includes a 14-hour flight from London and Scottish Hockey are not awash with funds. In fact, they have launched a gofundme appeal to offset costs.

The target is £10K and money is coming in. To date, £4,755 has been raised, including an anonymous donation of £2,000. It is much appreciated.

A number of the Scotland players have not played a competitive game since the outdoor season shut down in November. Yes, they have been keeping fit, some playing indoor hockey, but there is a huge jump between that and top level outdoor hockey in a totally different climate and against team ranked in the top 15 in the world.

Duncan is delighted with the preparation and application of the players in the squad, one flew in from Belgium last weekend, several from London and others from all over Scotland, and they trained under the watchful eye of the team physio.

She shivered on the sidelines as the girls worked out with a drone piloted by Gareth Ikin, the director of hockey for Uddingston Hockey Club, at the controls. and tagging plays which will be gone over by the coaching team which includes Duncan's assistant, Jimmy Culnane, director of hockey at Wimbledon Hockey Club in London.

Duncan said: "It is a huge challenge for us but one the girls are relishing. They play hockey to compete with the best and the teams we will face are among the best on the planet. Who would not want to be in Chile?

"The girls have worked extremely hard in trying conditions. That is not an excuse, that is a fact, and we will be playing

full-time teams. Another fact and not another excuse, but a measure of how far our players have come as a squad.

“We aim high, and rightly so, as we have some great talent in the squad. The girls have earned the right to be in Chile and it is the job of the coaching and support team to get them there in the best possible shape and ready mentally and physically to compete.”

He added: “We aim to win every game. Yes, that is sometimes a tall order, but there is no point in going all that way just to make up the numbers. We are going there to compete and believe we can compete with everybody in the tournament.”

FLASHBACK: Sarah Jamieson and Heather McEwan celebrate a goal for Scotland