UEFA Women’s EURO 2017 in the Netherlands is edging closer – and the team of women referees are already in the best of shape for the tournament.

Almost 40 match officials who will act as either referee, assistant referee, fourth official or reserves have been at the outstanding Royal Netherlands Football Association (KNVB) campus in Zeist this week for their EURO preparatory workshop.

The agenda featured briefings, practical sessions and a fitness test to make sure that the match officials are all primed for the main event from 16 July to 6 August.

Both UEFA and the referees are confident that the first Women’s EURO finals to feature 16 teams will set new standards for women match officials – in tandem with the standard of football that will be evident on the pitch. The workshop in Zeist has raised the anticipation another important notch.

“You can feel the excitement everywhere, and I hope the referees can feel it too,” said UEFA Referees’ Committee member and experienced former top referee Dagmar Damková who, together with fellow committee member Bo Karlsson, has been leading the three days of preparations.

“I think that after the fitness test and conclusion of the workshop, everyone is going to feel that we are ready for the EURO. This event has given motivation to everybody.”

Damková welcomed the opportunity to gather the match officials shortly before the finals, especially as a team-bonding exercise. “I absolutely support the idea,” she stressed, “and I’m particularly happy for the assistant referees, because it brings them together with the referees onto the same page in terms of what to expect.”

UEFA’s care in preparing women referees is also reflected in the differences that Damková herself now sees since the time that she was taking charge of major women’s European and world matches. For example, a referee fitness team has been present in Zeist under the leadership of Belgian expert Jean-Baptiste Bultynck – they put the referees through their fitness paces, and will be constantly in contact with the officials, giving invaluable advice and instructions in the weeks up to the big kick-off.

“I reflect on how lucky the referees are today,” she said. “They are provided with material and other things that we didn’t have. They have so many opportunities to learn through online studies, practical sessions and [video] examples, as part of the general process of helping them to get better.”

Referees who will be taking charge of the 31 matches at seven Dutch venues range from experienced officials to newcomers who will be savouring their first taste of the EURO atmosphere.

Ukraine’s Kateryna Monzul will be taking part in her third Women’s EURO. She told us about what goes through her mind when she lines up with the teams and hears the national anthems: “It’s a really strong feeling. You can’t compare it with anything. At that moment, there’s only that moment and that time.”

Riem Hussein from Germany is going to her first EURO, and recalled the moment when she heard that she would be part of the refereeing team. “I was very surprised and a little bit shocked,” she admitted, “because I never thought it could be possible. I’m proud to be part of this.”

Another first-timer is Sweden’s Pernilla Larsson: “You can really feel that the tournament is getting closer. Not many referees get to go to a EURO – it’s like a fairy tale to know that I’m one of them.”