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Stefan Frei

Press Conference



Q. What was it like to face off against Raul in training all the time, and if you had a favorite story about Raúl either on or off the field to show how special he is for you guys?

STEFAN FREI: Raúl is a competitor, I'll tell you that. I think one of the first trainings I had with him, I think it was in Atlanta and we were playing a small side of games and ball ended up bouncing about three yards in front of me and he blasted it as hard as he could right at my chest and I made the save, I'll have you know but I think everybody was a little bit like, whoa, like even himself was a little taken aback. But I think he's such a competitor. He just wants to score. He did the same thing a couple days ago to Steph in Cleveland and pegged him in the head from three yards out. He's do-or-die. He doesn't care. He wants to score a goal. He wants to compete and win. That kind of edge that, drive, is what you see on the field on weeks, you know. You see him make that extra sprint, that extra determination to get there. He just wants to put it all out there and succeed. It's good to have him on the squad.

Q. This is something you've had to deal with a lot over the years, a lot of moving parts on defense. How do you adjust to a new starting 11, especially in the playoffs when consistency is something that's kind of preached, I guess for lack of a better phrase?

STEFAN FREI: Yeah, I think there will be turnover every season. That's just part of it, you know. Players move on. Players are tired. Players are injured. New players come in and it's just part of the game. I think for us, I would argue the opposite. If you look at this -- you know, this spell of MLS Cup appearances, we have a good amount that have been there from the get-go. I think it's five-ish, somewhere around that neighborhood, that's been there in 2016, and guys who have joined the squad since then along the way.

It's slotting in those new pieces and making them understand what makes this team tick as quickly as possible. We talk about players gelling with each other;

that's definitely one thing, we need to figure out each other's new tendencies, what works what does a player prefer, what does he not like to do. But it's also important that those new players quickly get up to speed in terms of, you know what this team -- what the expectations is to be on had team.

We pride ourselves on being a hard-working squad that never gives up and keeps fighting till the very end, as evident by our last achievement against Minnesota at home. And so with that, I think we've always succeeded in bringing those new pieces in and bringing in that new speed when it comes to that.

I think we also take pride that we know from the very beginning of the season that your squad has to be deeper than 11 players to succeed, and so whenever we have those situations where, you know, players go out, international duty or are injured, we have someone that needs to step up, I think we sense opportunities there to gain some wisdom, some experience that, will hopefully come to help us in the long run. Lo and behold, it comes through again. We have had guys who started against Minnesota that maybe you don't think would start in the beginning of the season, and here we are successfully getting through and playing against Columbus in the final again. I'm always happy to see that depth and that competitiveness that runs deeper than the first 11.

Q. Trying to get a sense of how you will see this match against Columbus early on. It's been since March you've faced them but you know Caleb Porter and the way they like to play. Will it be a battle of who can take over first, I guess?

STEFAN FREI: That's the question, right. Obviously we want to be in control from as early on as possible. I'm sure they would argue the same thing. But that's the beauty of the game, right. I think soccer, there's no time outs when things are stacked against you, and it's a game of ebbs and flows. There will be a spell where they are in control. There will be a spell that we are in control.

The question is, what you do with that, right. I think we have found ourselves in difficult situations this year where we had a lot of possessions and we didn't know what to do with it and we are going out into crosses and we weren't successful there. I think we have gathered a lot of

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experience on what we -- how we want to do things and how we can adapt if something doesn't work.

But make no mistake, I think they are going to have their moments. They are a very good side. Finals are always a testy affair. People don't want to make a mistake. They are on edge a bit. They know the severity or how big this moment is, and so, yeah, it will be an interesting game. It will be a final.

Q. There is a time when Caleb was the coach of the Timbers where there seemed to be maybe not animosity but certainly a healthy rivalry between Brian and Caleb, and it sounds like maybe they have settled some of their differences or come to a better understanding since then. But do the players get a since of any kind of rivalry between coaches like that, and do you have any insight into how they might be different or how they might be similar?

STEFAN FREI: No, I don't. Honestly if the opponent is the Portland Timbers, then I don't really care who is the coach; I'm not going to like them. That's just how it is. I'm pretty sure they would say the same thing about us, our coach, our players, our stadium, our fans and everything. That's just because it's an organic rivalry there. I don't know if it's the fact that Caleb moved on from Portland had something to do with them, like you say, maybe making up and being on better terms now, I'm not sure.

But that's a special game. Whenever we play against them, that's a special rivalry and you sense the tension between those two organizations. And so, yeah, of course, of course there is no love lost between those sides; when it comes to coaches, I wouldn't expect anything different. Whether they are buddy-buddies now or not, you'd have to ask him, I'm not sure. Quite frankly I don't really care, I'm focused on the squad we are about to face. I know what he brings to that squad in terms of how he wants them to play. He's a good coach. I think they have a clear system in terms of how they want to play and approach the game.

So yeah, I give him respect on that end, for sure, a good coach and that's obviously won this trophy before and itching to get another one. It will be a good test on the coaching side but as well on the player side.

Q. Obviously all your focus right now is on the match, but one way or another, next week you'll be relaxing at home. Given what a tremendously difficult year it's been, do you have a sense of relief that the season is ending in a little over 48 hours?

STEFAN FREI: Great question. You know, I'm supposed to sit here and say, oh, of course, we want the season to

go on to the very end, and thankfully for us it has.

But yes, you're also excited to finally just be able to relax. It's been a crazy year, and I feel guilty for saying that, too, because it's been a crazy year for everybody out there with the pandemic, and a lot of other things going on.

For me to complain about being able to go to my job, and a nonessential job on top of that and to be able to play this beautiful game is a privilege, but it hasn't been easy, I'll tell you that. It's been difficult to adjust, adapt. Still, you know, be able to somehow find normalcy in terms of preparing for games and try to find results to hopefully make our organization and our fans proud, and, yeah, it's been a strange year. I'm excited to finally be able to relax at some point, but it sure would make it nicer to be able to do so with a trophy under our belt.

A couple more days to go and then we'll get into that.

Q. Thank you for doing this. I would like to ask you in your opinion, how does Brian Schmetzer transmit a winning mentality to the team, him being one of the more successful coaches in the League?

STEFAN FREI: I think he's always made it clear to the squad that whatever you want to achieve -- I think he's been able to convey the sense that this is an opportunity, and not be too pushy about it. Obviously he wants us to win and he wants the franchise to get trophies, but I think it's very important for players to realize how precious these moments are, and if you can, realize that, it changes a little something in you.

I think ever since I've had -- for me personally speaking, I've had a bad injury towards the end of my career in Toronto that, was a bit of an eye-opener for me. At that point I was able to get just a handful of trophies with the Canadian Cup and that's what we always played for is hard work and so again, I just realize that, you know, wow, you have precious few moments to achieve things in this year. So I was very blessed from the moment I came to the Seattle Sounders to be able to add on a consistent basis to the trophy cabinet.

But with that, I never lost that sense of, you know, it's a very fragile time, and moments can arrive or they may not arrive. You know, you can have the best year as a team, even. You can have a stellar year. One thing happens and you don't advance, and that's the end of your season.

These moments are precious, and I think he conveys that moment or sense of you are urgency really well to the squad and has focus on every game throughout the year to build up to that, but when we do get closer to possibly



having such an opportunity, that we are all fully aware where we are currently.

Q. The back in March -- the lethal connection through Columbus, how can your defense attack that getting into Saturday?

STEFAN FREI: I think Zardes has always been a good player. I really like his game since he's joined Columbus Crew. I think he's multifaceted. He's strong in the air. He makes smart striker runs, you know, peeling off a guy's shoulder in the back. He has lots of tools in his bag and we have to always make sure we know where he's at. We have to contest crosses and our defensive efforts in terms of limiting crosses and set pieces can improve, I know that.

So I think that will help a long way if we could maybe limit the service to him. But that's it. Good players will find their moments. I know we have to disrupt him and a number of other players as much as we can. You know, Santos and Zelarayan those are top, top players, so we have to get under the skin of all those players and make it as difficult as possible and limit their chances.

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