

Major League Soccer Media Conference

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Caleb Porter

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We welcome MLS Cup Columbus Crew head coach Caleb Porter.

Coach, to kick us off, you just wrapped up your last training with your team ahead of MLS Cup tomorrow. What does this mean for the club to be here today in this moment after this unprecedented 2020 season?

CALEB PORTER: It's been a long journey to this point, long year, very challenging. I think we were counting as a staff, like, 115 training sessions we've had. It's first and foremost very rewarding to have a year like we've had, all the challenges that we've had, our country's had, our world's had with the pandemic, social injustice issues, then of course our own team adversity that we've had to manage. It's very rewarding to be here in a position on our home field to be the last team standing raising a trophy.

This is where we wanted to be. This is where we talked about being. This is where we expected to be. Now we have the opportunity to do what we wanted to do. Not many teams get to this point. We're hoping to grab hold of this opportunity, a rare one that not many teams get to play at home, to win an MLS Cup. I'm confident that my group's going to have a good performance.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

We'll get started with Q&A.

Q. This season with injuries, positive tests, adversity is no stranger to you guys. What was the team's reaction when they found out Pedro and Darlington wouldn't be available? What has been the message to your team the last couple days?

CALEB PORTER: I found out yesterday actually in the middle of training that our second player of the week, I won't tell you the order it happened, there's no reason to, but obviously losing Pedro and Darlington, we lost one of those two early in the week. We had a positive test. Then we had two straight days of all negatives. We had another positive that popped up. I learned that in the middle of training yesterday.

Of course, it's a big loss. It's a big blow. Those two guys have been key players for us on a personal level, a human level. If you just take away the soccer, I just feel for them. Obviously they're healthy, so that's first and foremost the most important thing. But I just feel for them on a personal level, a human level, that they can't be a part of an MLS Cup that they so deserve to be a part of. A big reason we're here in this position are those two guys.

On a professional level, my job is to, no matter what happens, find a way to win, get my group prepared to win under any circumstances. I've done this a long time. I've had a lot of things pop up. You have to be mentally strong. You have to keep your group mentally strong, as well. It's why I work on the mentality and the resiliency and the unity of a team every single day, because I know in football there's a lot of adversity, there's a lot of things that pop up, there's a lot of ups and downs, there's a lot of disappointments.

The best teams and the best players, the teams that raise trophies, are the teams that can ride through that rollercoaster and not crumble, not break, become unbreakable. Those are things we talk about a lot. This was no different.

We're going to find a way to perform well and to hopefully win, even though we've of course lost two of our very best players.

Q. Given what you were just talking about, how much do you rely on your experience and the experience of guys who have either played in an MLS Cup final or other big similar games to kind of lead the team at this point now that you're in the championship game, losing two key guys?

CALEB PORTER: Again, I think the key difference in teams that make it this far, teams that find ways to win games, find ways to put themselves in positions to win trophies, the key is the mentality. A part of that mentality is the confidence, that belief. That's real. Those are words thrown around, but you never make it to this point unless you have a good mentality, you're mentally tough. You never make it this far unless you have true belief you can be here and confidence, not fake, but real confidence. Our group has that.



Of course, we rely on that. We rely on our experiences all the time. It doesn't ensure that in football when the whistle blows those experiences will automatically mean you'll win the game. But it does help to know you've been here, you've done that.

I think it's no coincidence when you look at the two teams that are here, there's a lot of experience. For sure Seattle is going to expect to win. They're going to believe they're going to win another one because they've already won one.

I also know hunger is a key. This is a very hungry team I'm coaching. They've been hungry all year. Never been more proud of a team, their resiliency, the way they've come together, how much they give, the fact that they just keep rolling with the punches.

I mean, this week's no different with the players we've lost, the news. I had to tell them at the end of training yesterday. I could look in their eyes, We're going to do this for Pedro and Darlington. Nothing is going to stop us. You want to see that in your group.

We know it's a big challenge. We know we're playing a very good team. That's, historically speaking, been one of the best teams in MLS history. But fortunately history doesn't decide a 90-plus-minute soccer game. It gives obviously confidence, for sure. We all have that. But the game is going to be decided on the day. It's going to be decided who plays best on the day, who makes plays, who executes. That's going to be the story.

We're hoping to execute and perform and step up and find a way to win.

Q. Could you give us a little insight into the way your relationship with Brian Schmetzer has evolved over time. You have known each other professionally for quite a few years. Sounds like more recently you've come to a little bit more of a friendly understanding.

CALEB PORTER: I don't think Brian and I ever had a problem ever. I don't know where these people dig up those videos and gifs. It's a great story, but it's not really what's happening. I think there has been some talk a little bit about Brian and I.

I didn't know Brian at all until we did a pro license together several years ago when I was in Portland. He was the assistant coach. We played against the Sounders obviously. It was a rivalry. But we didn't say two words to each other other than, Good game, so on and so forth. I didn't know anything about him. He didn't know anything

about me. There was no problem ever. Certainly no animosity from my end.

We did the pro license together, it was the first time I ever talked to him, first time he ever had the chance to get to know me and talk to me. I think what happened during that license, at least I can speak from my standpoint, I gained a lot of respect for him as a coach and as a person. I really liked my conversations with him. I think he kind of felt the same. Okay, this guy is a little different than I thought maybe.

You can't judge a book by the cover. I think it's very important you get to know people before you form opinions.

He's a good coach, he's a great guy. Clearly his team and his players love playing for him. I think that's the mark of a good coach.

It's interesting how people view a good coach. I view a good coach as someone who gets their team onboard and can get them to buy into what they want, listen to them. He does that. That's a good coach. That's a good leader. And he is one.

Q. This is not the first time this season you will be without Darlington. You were without him a portion of the regular season. How important was it now that you built the depth in the midfield during the regular season? How important is it to get a guy like Derrick back this week?

CALEB PORTER: We have a true team here. I say it all the time. I tell my guys they need to be ready. I told them before the tournament started a story a little bit of my time in Portland, how we made it through the MLS Cup playoffs and won a trophy. I told them a story of a bunch of the players that left a lineup in strange ways, whether it was Adam Kwarasey who had the flu on game day, Jake Gleeson to step in. Dairon Asprilla and Maxi Urruti being subbed in basically with three minutes to go, both of them set up the goal to tie Kansas City to force penalty kicks in the knockout game. Whether it was Jack Jewsbury having to slide in for Diego Chara. We wouldn't have won that trophy if it wasn't for our depth and guys being ready.

Already we lost Derrick for a portion, Eloy Room. When you look at Luis Diaz stepping in, having two of his best games. Andrew Tarbell these last two games. Shows these guys were ready, prepared every single day, mentally they were onboard.

When you look at the picture at the end of the year in 2020, everybody is in that picture, everybody plays a role,

everybody plays a part. Some guys don't play as many minutes, some guys just train, but everybody is celebrating at the end of the year. Everybody is a part of the legacy for that year.

I really preach that. I believe in that. I don't think you win without that. You can't win with 11 players. You need a whole squad.

Q. You've proven, going back to the NYC SC game, you have proven you can play without the ball. Is there evidence there that gives this team a little bit of a confidence, without a player like Darlington in the midfield, you can adjust? What are the instructions like for your center backs considering they're going to be on the ball and they won't see Darlington in the midfield?

CALEB PORTER: Good question. Again, we have a system, we have a game model. Our system and our way of playing overall shouldn't change with one or two guys out, otherwise it's probably not a very good game model.

We do rely on the talent of our players to execute. Also we prepare one, two, three guys to play in a role in our system, so they're very well-prepared on a daily basis to step in. They understand what we want in their roles. They understand both sides of the ball, how we want to play, the key phases that we train in our philosophy.

I would say our philosophy encompasses several phases of play. The game is a collection of phases. Whether you call it six phases, we train every phase. Some phases we focus on more than others because we prioritize those phases in certain games or just because in general we believe those phases are the best way to play in our vision.

But our team is very well-drilled in every phase. We can do different things in different games. I think that's the key to being a quality, modern team. You have to do a little bit of everything.

Our team is comfortable in that. It's not like we have one plan, and we lose a player, now, What are we going to do? We would never make it to this point if that's the case. We had 10 games without Darlington, I believe, nine or 10 without Lucas. We had to, like you said, adapt in certain games, figure it out.

I'll tell you this. We can't defend for 90 minutes plus against Seattle. That wouldn't be the right thing to do. Nor can we expect to have the ball for 90 minutes. There's going to be a little bit of balance in this game. They're going to want the ball. Of course, we're going to need to have the ball for periods. They're going to need to be

organized when we have the ball. We're going to need to be organized when they have the ball. It's a simple game. Then the transition pops up.

We're organized. We're going to fight. We can keep the ball. We've shown to be good defensively. Are we going to have that little bit of extra quality with Pedro and Darlington? We lose a little bit of that. But still overall our way of playing is going to be there. With one day of training, we're not going to all of a sudden reinvent the wheel, change everything we've done to this point.

Q. You said you found out in the middle of training about the second player. Were they on the field? It must have been an incredibly poignant moment. Were they already isolated?

CALEB PORTER: Yeah, they weren't on the field. To confirm a positive, you need a second test. After the first positive, the player wasn't in training, so we were waiting on obviously the confirmation. We received the confirmation during training.

Again, it was a tough couple seconds. It was even tougher when obviously I had the chance to go home, wrap my head around it. Got the group turned around. They were onboard.

As crazy as it sounds, we've been used to so much adversity this year, so many things that have popped up. I've had to tell them so many times, Hey, this guy is out, we got to figure out how to sort it out, and we'll be fine.

If it's the first time you're dealing with that, yeah, it's a shock. But we've dealt with it a lot. Obviously losing those two guys is a little bit different because they're really key. You never know what you're going to get certainly in this year. At times it's been a war of attrition for everyone. We're kind of conditioned to that. Otherwise, like some teams, we would have crumbled, not been able to deal with it.

We've dealt with it really well, and I'm very proud of this group for that.

THE MODERATOR: With that, we will wrap up the press conference. Thank you for taking the time to chat with us. Good luck tomorrow.

CALEB PORTER: Thank you. Appreciate the time today.

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