

Major League Soccer Media Conference

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Caleb Porter

Press Conference



Columbus Crew 3, Seattle Sounders 0

Q. For months you said the goal was winning the team, mission accomplished for you and the Crew. It's your second club title and second for the club. How did you do it?

CALEB PORTER: A lot of work. What a long journey to this point. Started last year. You know, last year, first half of the year was rough. It was a rough start. Obviously it was a transition. But you saw midseason that we started to get our playing style going. We started to get players that could execute, and the mentality that is so important to winning started to grow.

And then this year, it carried right into this year from day one. We didn't lose a preseason game. I think we won the first five games. I really think there was a period where we won 1-in-7, as much as everybody was panicking, we weren't as a staff and we weren't as a team. And in some ways that probably made us tougher, made us stronger, like the entire year, all the adversity that we had.

This is a pretty special date, 12/12, and it's a very special stadium. 16 years ago, 2004, as an assistant coach at IU, I won on this pitch on December 12th, ironically, in my mentor Jerry Yeagley's last year. People don't talk about Jerry Yeagley because he's never been a pro coach but he's one of the best coaches, soccer coaches, ever, and won five national championships.

I started learning from him and I cut my teeth with him and won a championship on this field on 12/12, ironically.

Ten years ago, 2010, on 12/12, won a National Championship at Akron. You know, a city that no one talks about a lot up the street; a city that I was proud of, Akron, we won a National Championship. And then obviously five years ago, we won a championship, not on 12/12, on 12/6, but on this field.

I don't know, you tell me, is it meant to be? I believe so. I really do. I look for a story. When I take jobs, I want it be passionate about those jobs and my overwhelming feeling

after the match was for the fans, what they have been through to save the team.

I was very motivated to bring a trophy back to them because I took one from them, obviously, in 2015 on this pitch.

Q. You talked about your team's mentality, but obviously you received a bit of a body blow late in the week with the news about Pedro Santos and Darlington Nagbe. What was your approach to kind of keep your team mentally strong, and also going back to that earlier injury, how much did you draw on that in terms of your message within the last few days?

CALEB PORTER: Yeah, you know, I believe a championship is won in the day-to-day process: How you play; the mentality that you have. You know, our guys became winners this year. I said that after the last game. A lot of good players, a lot of good teams, but not all those players are winners, champions, and not all those teams are championship-caliber teams. You need to have a special fiber, and you need to fight and work and have a strong mentality, winning mentality, every single day.

I believe that's the difference. Every team in this league now, they play pretty good, they have good players, but the psychology of winning, that mentality every day, and that vision, to do something special, you know, that's what sports is about.

So when we have adversity, and I say this all the time, you can be PTSD or you can be PTG, and PTG is post-traumatic growth. I actually believe that you grow more than ever in adversity. I grow more than ever this year, my team and my players have grown more than ever, and so when we have adversity like this week, we use it the right way. We handle it the right way because life, there's a lot of adversity. There's a lot of ups and downs. You get bloody. I'm an under dog, I've been bloodied a lot, won a lot.

I've had to fight for everything I've gotten. You know, being a college coach, not being a pro player very long, one year, I've had to prove myself. I had to come to this league and prove myself.

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today. I do it for the guys in that locker room. I love every one of them. That's what life's about. That's why I coach.

Q. Part of the idea of keeping the way you want to play and the belief in how you were going to play despite losing those guys is having faith in the guys stepping up. One is a 19-year-old kid who has started two games this season. What did you say to those two guys, and especially to a kid like Aidan who is going into such a massive moment, the youngest ever to start in the MLS Cup? And three years ago, I was in Crew Stadium and I saw Aidan holding a sign that said "Save the Crew Academy." He was part of the movement. Can you comment on his journey to this point?

CALEB PORTER: Yeah, I mean, I believe in young players, if they are good enough. I think there's a lot of talk about playing young players. I like to play young players. I played a ton of young players. Some of those are foreign. Remember Marco Farfan, he was a homegrown kid, 17 when I gave him his debut. Alex Palas was 18 when I gave him his debut. Obviously I played Sebastian Berhalter. I played Aidan Morris.

I don't -- I don't -- (thoroughly sprayed with champagne by Crew player) so if a guy is good enough, you know, I'm going to give him the chance, but if he's not, I'm not. You know, I'm lot a lover of playing young guys just to do it, but Aidan Morris is a winner, he's a fighter, I knew it. I knew it in the games I played him and I've seen him in training.

When I knew Darlington was out, he was the guy that was going to go in. He's an IU boy. You know, IU breeds champions. They breed winners. He's a home grown kid and I thought he was unbelievable today. Got around, tackled. Tackling and defending and winning duels for some reason has become a curse word, but in any good team, any good team in the world, they have a guy that's going to win balls, and he won a ton of balls today. So did Artur. Those two guys were key against Lodeiro. They have an exceptional midfield.

You saw we came out, we pressed, we didn't sit back. But when we had to be in a low block, we organized. This team has been prepared for every phase, and you saw that today. We went a little more direct. That's what the game called for. I thought that gave them a lot of problems and we played in transition a little bit more.

So that was the main tweak. We knew we weren't going to have as much of the ball without Darlington and Pedro, so we decided to play a little more direct and decided to play in transition. I tell my guys all the time, ideally if you tell me how I want to play, we're going to be up the field with the

ball for the whole game and press possess; we don't have control, counter pressure. But if we have to, we can play in transition. If we have to, we can play in a low block.

And there's nothing wrong with that and that's good, tactical football. And teams that are not the top four never league in the world have to do something, and for some reason in our country sometimes when you do those things, you know, you're not playing the right way.

But for me, I don't believe in that. It's about being adaptable.

Q. I hope you're able to dry off soon after that. It wasn't just Lucas or Aidan or Derrick kind of stepping in there, but you've got contributions when you needed it all over the field. Do you feel like this was overall the kind of most complete performance you guys have this year?

CALEB PORTER: Unbelievable. We were not going to let history and the past, as much as I have the utmost respect for Seattle sounders and Brian Schmetzer and is Lodeiro and Jordan and Raúl -- I mean, are you kidding me, these are unbelievable players, Roldan and Stefan Frei, we were not going to let the past determine today.

This was our year. It was going to be our year, it was going to be our day and our trophy and that was the message before the game. I don't care what they have done in the past. It's going to be decided on, today.

I think we showed that. We came out. We fought. We had intensity in the match, from the opening whistle. We had two corners in I think the first three minutes. Pressed. Countered. You know, we did what we needed to. We fought. And we're talking guys like Luis Diaz who, when I got him, I don't even think he knew how to defend at all. And he was tracking back and digging in and grinding and Gyasi is battling for balls in the air and Jona Mensah, what a beast, he is -- heading the ball out.

I think there was a little bit of extra motivation to do this for Darlington Nagbe and Pedro Santos. Those two guys, they were key to us getting here, and without them, it was a tall order, but I think we used that to galvanize the group even more and give us a little bit more hunger than we had already, which was a lot.

Q. Your opening press conference, you told us you wanted to bring trophies to this club and put them in the trophy case. Out there after the game, on the stage, in front of the fans, what's going through your mind given how you came into this job with that kind of a statement?

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CALEB PORTER: Yeah, No. 1, the players. My feeling for them, being in the locker room with them every day, being in the trenches, if you will, with them, every single day and all the times that we've talked, trained, played games, won, lost, been on Zoom calls.

You know, for me, that's the first thing I think of is the players and, wow, unbelievable group of guys. I love them all, honestly, like a family to me. Some people say that, but it's true for me. I love every single one of them. I can't tell you how proud I am of all of them, how much they gave this year, and they will remember this forever.

You know, I believe in leaving legacies, making history. That's what sports is about. You know, we've left a legacy. Everybody is going to remember 2020. Everybody used to talk about 2008. That's still going to be a year that everybody talks about and all those players that were on that team, they will celebrate.

Well, 2020 is going to be a year in this club's legacy that everybody is going to talk about and these fans are going to remember it and these players are going to remember it. Life is short. Life is short. Sports and bringing a group together, doing a night of community to make memory with that group of guys in the locker room, that's what it is about. It's about that. It's not about the money. It's not about as much as you think, ego, fame. It's about the simple stuff, winning together and bringing a community together and igniting the fans.

When you think about how fans are going to feel today, that's the second thing I thought about when I ran down the sideline. Because I took one from them in 2015. I came here to bring one back to them and give them a trophy, and I was so happy for them. It makes me feel really good that they get a trophy tonight. Because I promised them a trophy, and I was happy that I could bring it to them.

Q. Obviously when you won that first title here, actually, in Columbus, funny enough five years ago, how much after that did you start thinking to yourself, I can't just win one, that it's not just a fluke? And when you ran around the stadium, you were celebrating but it felt like there was a release for you. How did it feel to let go after all that you dealt with and having to take punches and sucking it up to put on a brave face for the team; was that a release at that point?

CALEB PORTER: I think so. The older you get, I think you realize how hard it is to win a trophy. I used to think it was easy, because when I was at Indiana, we won, we were in the Final Four every year and we won two as an assistant and then I went to Akron, I was in two finals and

won one there.

When you're young, similar to Aidan Morris, you don't think about the magnitude sometimes and what you're doing. You just expect it, and I do. I expect to win every game. I expect to win a trophy every year. Sometimes maybe people think that's naïve or bold or brash.

I learned to win at IU. I carried that to Akron, I carried that to Portland and I carried that here.

I hate losing. I mean, there's nothing I hate more in life. I'm scared of actual failure. I'm scared of losing. I hate it. So it drives me every day.

And so when you win a trophy and you realize, you know, after doing this a long time, which is I can't believe a guy like Bruce Arena how many times he's won because it's unbelievable; Schmetzer, what he's done in a short time. People don't realize how hard it is to win a trophy.

And I think, again, the fans, I just felt so good for them, so good for them because they deserved that. They have been through a lot. And to some extent, I think were never going to like me until I took a trophy to them. I knew that a little bit when I took the job that there would be a little Catch 22; they would be happy I came, but only if I won a trophy for them.

Q. There was a moment on camera with you and Jona Mensah, and he was clearly emotional, could you share any interactions that you had with your players in that moment?

CALEB PORTER: All those guys, every single one of them I love. Love every single one of them. You know, I don't know if you're supposed to love your players. I do. You know, maybe that's a fault of mine. Maybe in some ways, I think I said it at Portland, I knew it was going to be either me or them. I chose to leave. I think a cycle is there, you know, whether it's three, four, five years, and coach leaves, players leave or both. And I'm a loyal, loyal guy.

And when I have guys that perform and give what I need them to give to win trophies, it's special to me. Really, really special to me. Seeing Jona Mensah become the player that he's become this year, for me, the best defender in the League, a warrior, a captain, an unbelievable leader, and I'll tell you that -- I tell what you, he was crying after the game, crying. Here's a grown man, and he was crying because of Darlington Nagbe not being able to be there and he wanted to win for him. That was a big motivation. Those two guys are like best friends. They have a special bond, those two guys. And so I think he wanted to win for Darlington today.

Q. You've talked a lot about a bunch of your players, I don't think you've had the chance to mention Lucas just yet. He was incredible tonight. Can you just describe his performance for us?

CALEB PORTER: Unbelievable. I've coached good players. This guy is unbelievable. If you rewatch the game, I don't think he had a wrong step for 90 minutes. He just got the ball every time. He carved space for himself all the time. We shared a great moment after the game. He said something that I'll never forget. He told me I changed his life. And I told him he changed my life. I brought him here to win championships. I brought him here. He seemed to be looking for something new to stimulate him, reinvigorate him. These guys are people. Yeah, they make money. Yeah they have to perform. They are people. A lot of time I've seen this with guys, they are cutthroat, they sell their souls a little bit and they lose their way. You know, he came here and I think he looks like a new man. But he's an unbelievably special player. I mean, unbelievable.

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