

2022 MLS Cup: LAFC vs Philadelphia

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Banc of California Stadium

Philadelphia Union

Jim Curtin

Pregame Press Conference



JIM CURTIN: Welcome, everybody. First and foremost, a big congratulations to Steve Cherundolo, LAFC. A lot of familiar faces on the other side of things. Incredible season for them. Ante Razov, Oka Nikolov, John Thornington, amazing job.

2018 had this goal to get to this game. We find ourselves here. We're excited. We know we're probably the underdog, a position that we're comfortable with and used to.

I think it's very unique that you have the two best teams get to the final. It doesn't happen a lot in sports with the amount of upsets and maybe parity in our league that exists, but overall I expect a great final.

You also have two of the best fan bases, the most loyal fan bases. Full credit to LAFC's fans that every time we come here, they make it as intimidating an environment as there is, and it tends to bring the best out of us in this building. I think we've had some great games here and great matchups.

We expect a great final. Again, two great teams that have worked very hard to be here, and again, look forward to tomorrow's challenge.

Q. When you speak with LAFC players, they say that you guys are the most difficult team to prepare for. Having said that, what do you have to say and how do you prepare to face LAFC?

JIM CURTIN: That's a great compliment to hear that we're difficult to play against. We're a team that I think you guys have seen are comfortable not having possession. I think a lot gets spoken about just how good an attack LAFC has, incredible attacking players.

But the thing I'm most impressed with with their group is

just how well they counter press and they defend together as a team, and that leads to their transition. If you're not careful with every pass, if they pick you off, they can turn it into big trouble for your group.

I stressed it to our group today in film. The first goal in this game, as it often is, is critical.

But whoever concedes the first goal, it's also very important in a final to remain calm and stick to your plan because LAFC has shown if you concede one to them and lose focus and you throw bodies forward, it becomes two, it becomes three, it becomes four. Similar to our games, as well.

And I complimented our guys, as well, when we score first and teams now open up and start to come, it becomes two and three and four. And even in our Eastern Conference final we scored three goals in 13 minutes. The floodgates can open quickly for both teams.

It's an incredible team and incredible challenge. So many unsung heroes in their group, like ours, that people think the guys who win the awards, the Best XI, but there's so many great role players on both teams, and usually in finals that can make the difference.

Q. Back in 2020 when you finished first in the East, there was some sort of debate, controversy where you didn't play a full slate. Is there something that's gratifying about not just winning the Eastern Conference but also being treated and referred to as one of the two best teams in Major League Soccer this year?

JIM CURTIN: Yeah, look, I think what both teams did this year, the Supporters' Shield is a highly important award in our league, and LAFC and us went down to the same points in a tiebreaker. It's very difficult to win the regular season, Eastern and Western Conference, but then to now win also the single elimination games, to lift the Eastern and Western Conference trophy is a new challenge.

Whoever wins MLS Cup tomorrow, there will be another challenge: Can they win the Champions League? So this



is the beauty of our game. If you win the Champions League, can you win the Club World Cup?

It never stops, right? You guys will always have a challenge as to what's next. That's the great thing about soccer, there's always a next challenge. Regardless of who wins or losses tomorrow, you'll wake up and push to try to improve your group.

It's really a hard accomplishment that both teams did. It shows consistency in a season. And like I said, it sets up for a really fun day tomorrow.

Q. I'm thinking about the 3-3 match you had here right before the pandemic. These two teams, have they been on a collision course? Does it feel that way? Talk about how you came out so strong from the pandemic, how you came out on the other side.

JIM CURTIN: Yeah, I've spoke about that game probably so much that people are sick of hearing it, but that was a special game I think for the league in a lot of ways.

There was incredible goals in the league. I think it was us kind of finding ourselves a little bit as a club, and that catapulted us into believing we could beat anybody. Because that LAFC team, if you go back through the roster, was stacked. That was a great team, and that was a great game.

You then had the awful pandemic situation, but that game kind of galvanized us. It had debuts for players like José Martínez, who no one knew who he was in this league. But he played an incredible match in that game, and that's kind of projected him and moved him forward, and it really moved our club forward.

Yes, it was one game, but it was as thrilling and exciting of a game as we could play. And I think it did put us on the map, so to speak, and it propelled us to the success in the 2020 season, lifting our first trophy in the Supporters' Shield, and then getting a little better each year, taking steps and winning multiple playoff games to now reaching an MLS Cup final.

That game meant a lot, and I'm sure people are sick of me talking about it, but it was a really great night.

Q. You said a moment ago you think your team might be the underdog, and Philadelphia is very comfortable, fans are very comfortable when they hear their team is the underdog against a wealthy team from Los Angeles. How much of an underdog are you really? Because you ran them even all season, and everybody is looking around saying you guys are really good.

JIM CURTIN: We believe in ourselves. So again, Las Vegas is pretty accurate. They usually have their finger on the pulse of who's the favorite, who's the underdog.

I think home field advantage is what skews it in their favor because they're an incredible team in this building. So we know how difficult it will be and how hard they make it for you here with their crowd behind them.

But our group is brave. I want our guys to go on the field with courage, to not be scared. I think we've kind of taken pride in ourselves that we respect every team, but we fear nobody.

Yes, the names and the quality of the opponent is there for sure. And it's LA, it's Hollywood, let's all be honest, I'll probably walk by and our players will walk by and see some celebrities they've only seen on television before sitting on the sidelines, sitting fieldside.

Once you get past that and the opening whistle blows, it's about 90 minutes, and making that -- making the game as comfortable for our players has been our goal and keeping things the same. So we didn't change much this week, outside of being in nice, beautiful LA.

We tried to keep it as normal as possible. So these guys know what they have to do. They've worked incredibly hard to get here, to get better each and every year. We've taken big steps forward, and now it culminates in our first MLS Cup final.

Q. A couple of days ago you had a comment saying that this league, you could see them being a top league in a couple years. What is your personal opinion about the parking situation happening on the final?

JIM CURTIN: Look, I'm glad you brought up the first part because what I said, and I got a million texts about this, all of a sudden you get an alert on your phone that says ESPN says Jim curtain says this is the best league in the world by 2026.

What I was getting at, I was talking about -- I said this league has the potential to be a top league in the world, not this league is the top league in the world. There's a big discrepancy there in words.

And again, with the context of that, I do believe, with the ownership groups that are here, with the men and women that are in charge that are winners in all their endeavors, with the facilities like you see here, with the locker rooms, the training facilities, with the players that are wanting to

come here, with the coaches that want to come here, this is a great place.

I answered that question and said it in response to do you ever want to coach in Europe. Of course you want to test yourself at the top leagues in the world, but there's still areas in our league that are far superior to certain parts of what goes on in Europe and some of the lower leagues.

And our facilities, I'll just say, are good. I've been to a lot of places in the world, and this is a great league and one that is only going to get better and better. So thank you for bringing that up.

As for parking, I am not a parking expert. I do recognize that USC has a rich football tradition, and I'm sure a lot of people pay and donate a lot of money to have their tailgate spots ready for tomorrow, but I can't speak to the parking side of things.

It's a shame. You want everybody to have the best experience possible, but I'm sure -- you see how this club is run and how well it's structured, and they'll figure it out and it'll be as smooth as possible for everybody, and it's going to be a great game at 1:00.

Q. As a coach who has now won two Coach of the Year awards -- congratulations on that, by the way -- and a longtime coach in this league, what is your perspective on Steve taking his team in his first year in this league to an MLS Cup final, winning the Supporters' Shield, and everything that has come with that?

A. It's incredible because this league is unique. Steve has been an underappreciated player in our national team history and just kind of quietly went about his business, was a captain at a club in a Bundesliga team, for those that don't know, at Hannover and is literally a God there.

To understand and recognize how hard that is for an American kid and how brave it is for a guy that's basically my age, it's an amazing accomplishment as a player. To come into this league as a coach, to have put in his time and got his experiences over there coaching and step into a great club like this and go right to the top is not easy.

He navigated a season where they had a lot of great players come in and out and didn't really miss a beat.

He deserves a ton of credit for what he did. He's an incredible coach. I think more importantly, also, just in the brief encounters and talking time that I've had with him, he's a great person, which in this game is, I'll just say, a dying breed -- normal, good people have success and can

be done that way.

I'm proud of him. I think he's done an amazing job. But again, great coach, great person, and an incredible season for Steve.

Q. How is Alejandro? Is he available, and what's his status? Secondly, just for the Union coming in here as a team, what do you think will be the singular difference against LAFC? As you're talking to your players, what's kind of the preach point of here's what tends to decide games against this group?

JIM CURTIN: Yeah, as far as Alejandro goes, he's doing everything to be a part of the game. We talk about it all the time, you never know when you get another opportunity like this. He's not the youngest, but he's gotten better and better with years, and he's had an amazing season for us.

Even if it's for five minutes to close out the game, he wants to be a part of it, and he's going to do everything he possibly can to be prepared for it.

I can say now it will be difficult to start the match, so we'll navigate that. I'll have a discussion with him literally in two seconds here out on the field. But he's giving everything to be a part of it. He'll still do all the things in the locker room to help us out, to calm the guys down, to get them amped up when they need to get amped up.

He's the heart and soul of our club. If he's not able to start and be part of it, I think the guys will have a little extra in there for Alejandro.

So we'll have a realtime decision in about 10 minutes. And I'm pretty truthful and open, and I don't hide stuff or I don't believe in being deceptive with you guys. It's literally going to come down to the last minute for him to be a part of the game.

As far as now what I say to the guys or what's going to be the difference in the game, look, we know who their key guys are. We know who scores their goals. Obviously you can't stop a Carlos Vela for 90 minutes. He's going to find moments in the game.

You can't stop a Bouanga for 90 minutes. He's going to find moments in the game where he's going to hurt you. You just hope those positions on the field where he's receiving the ball are in areas where we can try to force him to play square and backwards and give up the ball.

But again, in the biggest games, the best players have to be the best players, and we think we have some really tough weapons that they have to worry about, as well.

It's going to be a really great game. There's no one thing that I can sit here and tell you guys that's going to make us win because it's a game of mistakes, it's a game of being disciplined and executing what you did all season to get you here. Hopefully we can do that.

Q. So Ale doesn't go tomorrow, likely Jack McGlynn, who's had some big moments in the playoffs this season and all season. What has his development been like this season? How have you seen him grow from preseason to where he might be starting MLS Cup tomorrow?

JIM CURTIN: Look, with all the young players, and I say this quite a bit, there's no such thing as too young or too old. There's only good and bad in this game. I really believe that.

Jack is a really, really talented player. If we decide to go with him from the start, we have full confidence that he can do the job. Incredible soccer player and can play a final pass, as you guys have seen. Has played in some big-pressure games already for a young kid, has taken a penalty in a big playoff game and scored it.

I don't worry about his confidence. I don't worry about his nerves. Do we have to maybe tweak things if Alejandro is unable to go? Do we have to maybe have Leon slide a little bit more and be a second six and protect a little bit? Of course, that's natural. We have a game plan in place for either of them starting.

There's even the possibility of being a little more defensive with a Matt Real who could do it. It depends how we want the first 15 minutes of the game to go and what messages we want to send to ourselves and to LAFC. We'll make a decision here, but we're comfortable with all those scenarios that we just discussed.

Q. You talked about José Martinez; how do you describe the impact of this kid in the team?

JIM CURTIN: Yeah, you can see I smile when you say his name because he's a kid who came from Venezuela. I won't go too long because I could talk for an hour on José. But look, José came to this club as not a big signing or a big recruit but through his heart and his passion during the pandemic.

He went away to Miami and had some relatives down there, and when he first came, he wasn't fit, it was a new league, it was culture shock, it was chaos and craziness. He saw and adapted to the league. Then we had the shutdown for the pandemic, so he went for two, three

months down to Miami, and he came back and it was like a different human being.

It was a killer, it was a guy that was in such good shape, and it's so funny how simple sometimes this game can be. I said, Hey, man, what did you do down in Miami? And he stone-faced looked at me, and he said, I ran. On the beach I ran every day.

He came back and was so much more fit than everybody else on our team that his level accelerated so fast. Then you guys see the warrior on the field that he is and the defensive presence that he brings, and sometimes those right on the edge of a red card all the time tackles.

But you need that in a team. He represents, I think, what we're about. I think he represents the city of Philadelphia very well. He's beloved by our fans and a player that maybe didn't get the big accolades in the season, probably deserved them.

Maybe some people that vote, other players don't like to vote for José because they don't like to play against José. I think that's the reality of life, but for me that's the ultimate compliment.

Back to the first question, LA said we're a difficult opponent, and that's what we want to be. That's the ultimate compliment.

José is an incredible player, can play, for me, I think, in any league in the world. I think his talent is that high. And he's a winner, and he wants to win more than anybody. Very happy to talk about José, and I'm glad you singled him out.

Q. Jim, Daniel Gazdag had some rough moments when he first came to MLS. It was a new league, he was coming off an injury with Hungary, and this year he's exploded into a new player, huge production. What's impressed you most about him and his jump from 2021 to 2022?

JIM CURTIN: Yeah, look, I love this league because there's a million different ways clubs can do it. You can build your team a ton of different ways. Daniel came into our group having played 50 games in a relegation battle with Hungary and played with his national team, so it takes time.

People don't understand sometimes new cultures, new cities, bringing your family. Sometimes it's maybe a newborn child, as well, that you're getting used to and navigating. These guys are people. They live every day. They have highs and they have lows. They're not superheroes.

He took a little bit of time, but then once you saw a kid that understood how he wanted to play, understood that if he defended well, it would lead to all the attacking chances that he gets, and then 20-plus goals later and double-digit assists later, he's arguably an MVP type of player in this league.

Humble, great kid, works so hard, is kind of that guy that we need to put on the ball a lot tomorrow, as much as possible. Ilie Sánchez in there does a great job, but we have to try to find ways to get Daniel the ball in that center part of the field, and that will be a real key.

If you see Daniel on the ball a lot tomorrow, I think you'll see us have success. If we can't get him on the ball, it's going to be difficult for us to create.

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