

2022 MLS Cup: LAFC vs Philadelphia

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Banc of California Stadium

Los Angeles FC

Steve Cherundolo

Pregame Press Conference



first year coaching. Before the season, your expectations, what you thought the league was going to be, did those expectations went far, they came up short? What was your biggest lesson?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: Well, my expectations, I was preparing for a USL season with Las Vegas Lights again, to be honest with you, had finished their roster, was partaking in the MLS roster for LAFC, as well, and then obviously things changed pretty quickly.

Expectations were absolutely to make the playoffs. That should always be a goal here in LAFC, in LA. How far you can take a team, a lot depends on do you stay healthy, what does the roster look like, do things gel, and do we get a lot of things right on the field as far as loading goes and tactical presentation goes.

I think a lot of positive decisions were made for LAFC this season. So, yeah, maybe it exceeds expectations, but something we try to instill within the players, the mentality and the mindset is always to keep going, to always get better and to maximize our potential, and I think we're still doing that.

Q. Philadelphia is obviously unique, playing those two forwards and playing with the diamond. You have decisions and options at center back between Chiellini and Ibeagha as we saw in the last game. Is the consideration who affects how Philly plays more or is it internal of that decision between Giorgio and Sebastian?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: It's always both.

Q. Supposedly again, LAFC are going to be favorites this year and Philly is underdogs, but it seems a lot more neck and neck, and it seems like LAFC in the past have always suffered from excessive praise and being favorites. This season seems different. Can you talk about the winning mentality and just the temperament of the players?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: Yeah, the narrative of Philly always be an underdog is a little self-made. I think

Q. How good is this Philly team? Everybody sees you guys on national TV all the time, knows all the big names. But Philly, as well as they've played, I think a lot of people might watch them tomorrow that haven't seen them. How good are they?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: We have seen a lot of them. It's a very good team. I think the record over the past three seasons speaks for itself.

For those who haven't seen them, they will understand, as well, what the rest of us already know. It's a great team. It's a team who's quite dangerous any moment of the game. Can change the game, can score goals, they never quit, they work extremely hard.

They're very clear in their identity and what they do well, more importantly what they don't do well. So it's a very well-coached team and a team with a strong mentality.

Q. Looking back in your first year as head coach, what would you say is the biggest evolution you've seen from this team? And second, what's the status for Giorgio and Gareth?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: Everybody is on board, so I think the biggest development in this roster and mentality of the group I think this year is clear: This group likes to win. We like to try to win every game we take part in. It's something that was important to myself as a player and trying to instill into our team.

At some point towards the end of preseason, I think we all kind of landed on the same page in regards to how we want to treat this year, found ourselves as a group, and haven't looked back since. That's something that we are all very proud of at LAFC.

Q. You've never played in MLS. This is literally your



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Supporters' Shield champion in '20, being in the finals last year, in the Cup finals this year, I'm not sure that flies anymore.

But I think this team is hungry, and this team really enjoys winning, enjoys other's company, enjoys playing well. And just something we've challenged them with on a daily basis, a weekly basis is not to settle just for mediocrity and just to play in this league and play a good role in this league. It is to try to play our absolutely best.

I think we saw some of that last week, and we are looking to do that tomorrow.

Q. You mentioned everybody is available. What's Eddie Segura's situation?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: Aside from Eddie.

Q. Jim talked about how important Daniel Gazdag was, especially receiving balls in the middle of the field and controlling that, and that was a key matchup for him. Do you see that as well important to the determining result on Saturday?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: Yeah, very important player. He links everything for them. He's creative but he's also very prolific, a player we have to keep tabs on, much like we did Driussi from Austin last week.

It's a key factor to the game. He's a fantastic player, has had a great season, is at a good moment. And players like that can change games like this.

Q. Wanted to ask about Carlos Vela, who's a foundational player of this team, and back in 2017-'18 as he comes in, what is this opportunity for him specifically? And what has most struck you about him as a leader, on the field, off the field, and just building towards this over the last five years for him as a player?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: You're going to have to ask Carlos that, but I can tell you what he means to the group. He's our captain, and Carlos has come up in big moments for us this season when we've needed him.

He wants nothing more than to win a championship. And it's also more than just Carlos, there's Latif who has been here since day one, there's a handful of employees who have been here since day one, and obviously our fans.

For all of those who have been in here since day one, this means a great deal to them.

Q. Jim commented on the fact he's been following you for a long time, and he's been following -- really impressed with the job that you've done here. Curious if that respect is mutual. What's your point of view on how he's gotten to this point, facing you in a championship?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: Of course. Yeah, like I said, they've been very successful over the past couple years with a very clear identity, and that is extremely difficult to do as a manager and a coach.

It takes discipline. It takes hard work. It takes a vision. Not just on his part but in the front office, as well.

So everybody in the organization seems to be moving in the right direction. It was always hard to comment on somebody's work looking from the outside in, but the few conversations we've had, and also in the immediate past, I think it couldn't happen to a better guy.

So he's a great coach, a good person. Nobody speaks poorly of Jim, and I wish him all the best. Except for tomorrow, obviously.

Q. Congratulations on making it here. Just two-part question. I know you've been asked, this is the third time you're going to be asked, is this now the biggest game of your coaching career? Second, you've handled expectations and the pressure with this club and obviously this city, I would say, really well. Where did that come from, your demeanor to be able to calm those nerves and be able to meet those expectations and exceed those expectations in your first year?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: It's not up to me whether I've met expectations or not. That's up to others. I'm naturally a calm person; that helps. I know myself pretty well at 43, and been in this business awhile. I know what I can do, and I know what I cannot do.

I felt, amongst with the rest of the staff this year, that we could get this team moving in a new direction, and I think we've achieved that.

To answer your first question, I think the first answer was no, the second was maybe. I'm going to stick with along those lines and say I hope not.

Q. You are often a coach who likes to deflect the praise off to other coaches or your players, but after the Western Conference final Kellyn and Ilie especially were very complimentary of you, making it very clear that this is your team. And that sparked a lot of talk about you potentially taking over the USMNT in the

future in the next round for the 2026 World Cup. Is that something that has ever interested you? Are you interested in the national team route at some point in your career?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: I'm really focusing on LAFC right now. And I appreciate it from Kellyn and Ilie. They had a nice fruit basket on their desk the next day. But no, this is a business where it's not planable. It really isn't. I wouldn't have thought I'd be sitting here. Two years ago I was in cold Burgwedel just outside of Hanover mowing my lawn.

It's really difficult to plan things in this industry. What comes next will come next, but right now myself and the rest of the staff is laser focused on winning the game tomorrow.

Q. When I was out here in April, you had said at one point, when we were talking about pressure, "Pressure is nothing more than just an idea; I don't really think it should change the way we work or make decisions. In some ways it's made up or superficial; if you don't believe in it, it can't hurt you." As you've gotten through this chase for the Supporters' Shield, working through the postseason, coming up to MLS Cup, is it feeling a little more tangible, either for you or for the players? And if so, how are you navigating it?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: I really believe what I said, so no. Yes, there's more of you in this room, there's more chairs. Maybe there aren't that many chairs normally, but they're full.

So I understand the hype, and for some, they will feel more pressure. But it doesn't do any good during the game. So that mentality, that idea we share with our players during the 90 minutes. Before and after, everybody is allowed to feel and do what they want, but during the 90 minutes they need to be focused and get a job done.

Q. Are you satisfied with the selection of the referee for tomorrow's game, and what are your hopes or expectations for the officiating approach in the game?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: Yes, of course. I don't really have a preference either way. I think the goal of officiating should always be to make it fair and consistent and to not affect the result of the game. So if we don't remember who the referee was tomorrow, he's done a fantastic job tomorrow, or the team has done a good job.

Q. But if their players are misbehaving, you're going to have to notice the referee, right? Do you think it's right that --

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: That's purely hypothetical. We don't know what's happening tomorrow. If we don't know who's refing tomorrow, they have done a fantastic job.

Q. Philadelphia obviously was known for their attack but also known for their strong defensive work, and their great goalkeeper led the league in fewest goals conceded. What makes them so tough to play against and break down? Obviously a lot of those guys in the back line have played together for a long time now, as well.

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: As a former defender and looking at myself, I'm a back, as well, similar attributes as a player, I think with defenders the game is pretty clear, black/white, there are rules to follow and rules you don't follow.

Watching Philly play, they're extremely disciplined and they follow the rules, in the back four and three in front of them, and it's a tough nut to crack.

The offensive end of the game is decided also in different moments, in a little bit of creativity and sometimes chaos and organized chaos as some like to put it. So that's not black/white. It's more of a gray.

But defensively I think Philly does extremely well as they are tactically disciplined throughout 90 minutes and make very few errors and work their ends off, and that's a big difference in this game.

Q. You guys are the Supporters' Shield winners, obviously, and the team that you have in front won a lot of individual awards. That's something that your players have spoken about, after Austin, Kellyn and Ilie mentioned that Chicho in their opinion should have won MVP and you should have won Coach of the Year. What's the chatter about that in the locker room, and does that serve as extra motivation for them?

STEVE CHERUNDOLO: I don't know if it does. It certainly doesn't for me. I really think winning the Cup, winning the final is anything any athlete wants, and individual accolades or trophies or recognitions are truly, truly far, far back.

So winning the Cup tomorrow is where our focus is, and that's it.

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