

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

George Heitz

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone. Appreciate you all joining us today for the end of season press conference. As a reminder, we'll send out a link to a recording of today's call shortly after we're finished. We will also send a full transcription in I think as well. Before we jump into the Q&A portion of today's call we'll start things off with an opening statement from George. For the Q&A portion we'll do things a little bit differently we'll go around the room to insure that everyone has a chance to ask a question. So no need to raise your hands, I'll go ahead and you know mute your line when it is your turn to ask a question and with that I will turn things over to George for his opening statement. George.

GEORGE HEITZ: Yes, hello everybody, thanks for joining us today and thank you also for covering us the whole season. It has been a special season, we all know, I don't want to speak too much about that. Obviously we are still a bit disappointed because our goal was clear, we wanted to make the playoffs, especially with 10 teams in the eastern conference being in the playoffs in the end. Nevertheless, I promise you one thing, we work, we will work hard and to bounce back we will worked hard to improve and then make it better next season. But thank you for being with us, thank you for being interested in what we are doing in times that were also difficult for all of you guys, we know this.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, George. We'll go ahead and get started with questions.

Q. I guess just looking ahead you guys as of right now I believe have 27 players under contract plus the new signings who will be under contract officially in January. How do you guys have any flexibility to make the team, to improve the team with already that many players under contract?

GEORGE HEITZ: Thank you for this question. One thing that we absolutely will have a focus on is continuity, because it's one thing that we think that lacked. Also due to what we did last winter, we had I think until now 18 new

signings since I have joined the club, which is too many. We cannot be successful with that. So we think that we laid the foundation and we would really like to keep most of the players that we have this season. Of course we will also try to strengthen the squad, the roster by signing maybe two, three more players.

Q. You mentioned making a few more signings this off season. What areas are you most looking to upgrade?

GEORGE HEITZ: This is what the agents always ask (laughing.)

No, look, I don't like to discuss the roster building in public, because I think it's not correct, it also, it's not so good for us to go on the market and everybody knows what we are looking for. This could be a disadvantage. Look, you follow our team and I think that you can, you could bet and you would probably know what we are looking for. Definitely someone more in our offense and someone more in our defense.

Q. Curious about the possibility of, is there a way to buy down Ignacio Aliseda's contract and bring in another designated player, quality player to this team?

GEORGE HEITZ: As far as I see it until now there is no way to buy him down, which is also not our intention because I think we shouldn't discuss too much about designate a player or not designate a player, we should discuss about the whole roster, about the whole team, about the qualities that we have and we should not depend on one or two players. Obviously, every team has one or two or three outstanding players, but that doesn't necessarily mean that this must be a designated player.

Q. This year you had two homegrown players Pineda and Djordje who played over a thousand minutes each, Pineda over 2,000 minutes. But when you go further down the line the remaining players, five of them, contributed just 43 minutes total. I think I have I think five, maybe I'm missing one. What's the plan with those homegrown players, if they're not going to be getting minutes with the first team do you see somewhere to further their development?

GEORGE HEITZ: Yeah, I completely agree, they need minutes, they need to play. If they cannot play here we will

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have to find solutions, could be loans or probably would be loans, we'll have to see it on an individual basis. I would really like to see them in the pre-season and we are confident that all of them have the potential to play. Obviously, it's not so easy to make them all play at the same time. But another thing that is clear to me is that our average age is still too high, we tried to work on that, but we will have part of the way to go there to get where we want to be.

Q. Along the same lines of a couple of these questions, with most of these roster slots filled and potentially when Brad comes back you guys will be up to 29 players. Do you expect more players to go out on loan or permanently and one more roster question is if I have it right you guys do you expect like any of those guys to be getting green cards or will you need to kind of address that as the off season goes on?

GEORGE HEITZ: Okay, I start with the second one because it's the easier one. We have currently seven players who are in the final stage of getting a green card, final stage of the greened card process, seven players. Which gives us a certain flexibility regarding international slots.

Yeah, we have many players, I agree, but everybody knows that in soccer it can, in a week, within a week everything can look completely different. We might lose players within a week, we might sign another player within a week, everything is possible. So this is not etched in stone, this is absolutely clear, our roster is never etched in stone. Nevertheless, we would like to have continuity, I think this is something that this club really lacked and you can see it in other clubs who have continuity. I think almost every successful club this season in the MLS has a certain continuity in roster but also staff.

Q. Looking back you were brought in official low hired December 20th, so how much did that influence your team building, your coaching search and even your I guess learning of MLS rules when you had to get so much done in not that much time before the season started?

GEORGE HEITZ: I'll also start with the second part, learning of the MLS rules. They are extremely, extremely complicated for someone who comes from abroad, this I have to admit. We have, with Eddie Rock, someone who is our brain regarding this, so it is way too complicated for me, I'm learning, I'm learning every day, but we really need someone who is, who full-time works on this and this is Eddie Rock, who I really appreciate what he's doing.

The other thing is, I told you a year ago, no excuses and of

course, of course everybody can see this was not so much time, but I think I'm not in a position that I should complain now. We had so many good things that we found here, starting with the owner who has been unbelievable supportive throughout the whole year and so I am not in a position that I should complain.

Q. What was your take on this season and how would you evaluate how coach Raphael Wicky did his first season with the team?

GEORGE HEITZ: We had a long discussion two days ago, I congratulated the coaching staff, the whole coaching staff, it's not only about Rafa, it's about the whole coaching staff. In my opinion they did a great job. What we have to clearly improve is we have to convert our chances, we have to convert our performances into points. Many times after the matches the coaches of the other teams came to Rafa and told him, hey, great team, but we had lost the game, so (laughing.) This is not, this is not why we are doing this. We want to be a winning side and we have to work on our winning spirit. This is definitely clear.

I didn't have the impression that we were outplayed in many games, I think we had really quite good performances, but definitely there are some areas where we have to improve one thing is very simple, that's set pieces. Another thing that comes to my mind is also something quite simple, but when you score I think the next five to 10 minutes are crucial after you have scored yourself. And there you should not drop concentration, because otherwise you immediately concede goals. I don't have any figures yet ready, we are working on that, but I'm quite sure that we conceded many goals after having scored, immediately after having scored and we have to improve there. Roster-wise, we would like to have a bit more competition, ideally you have competition on almost every position and that's what we are working on.

Rafa will also try everything to collect more points next season and he knows the league better now, I can he knows what he expects of us next year better. Some things were out of his hands. The whole situation, which I already told in the beginning, I don't want to speak too long about the pandemic, but it had a huge impact, obviously, on all professional sports. And I think they dealt good with that, the coaches, it was extremely difficult for them. Because we had -- you know you trained, then you stopped, then you trained again. I think we had three pre-seasons in 10 months now, which is a bit too much work.

Q. Can you walk us through your thinking at the forward position? Obviously some moves announced yesterday. Why let C.J. go to free agency, why keep

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Elliot Collier and then talk about what you see in Offor.

GEORGE HEITZ: C.J. is not only a great, has not only a great personality, he's also a very good player, obviously. We told him weeks ago we wanted to be honest because he deserved also that we are honest weeks ago, that we would not provide him with an a new contract, not because of his performances, it's simply we have to see the whole picture and one thing that I mentioned before was we want to lower the average age this is one thing that we absolutely want to do and the other thing is also we always have to bear in mind our financial possibilities within the salary budget. So these are the main reasons why. And it's got nothing to do with anything else. He will always have my full respect, he's such a great person also to discuss other things than football our soccer, sorry.

Other question was Offor, Offor is a young striker, he's a tall striker, nevertheless, he has a certain speed. One thing that we need to give him is time because he comes from a small league, the Latvian League is a small league, but we consider him and our scouting department considers him a very interesting option because he also has in a smaller league but he also has statistics that are interesting for us. He speaks English, which is always an advantage when you come here and it helps a lot, English and maybe in this league also Spanish can help but English is better. That was Offor. What else was the question?

Q. Yes, the decision to keep Elliot Collier.

GEORGE HEITZ: We see quite a lot of pot ale in Elliot. He can dribble, he can pass his opponent, he has a certain speed, he'll have to improve his statistics, that's clear. He's the first one to admit, he knows he will work hard to do this, he's a great guy and still has room to improve.

Q. I know you talked about kind of what Rafa's learning so far in the league. I wonder, from your perspective, a lot of these moves you made originally were before the season started, have you learned something about maybe the profile of players that you want to recruit that you think could perform better in this league or that you think fits this league better? Has there been anything that's kind of altered the types of profile players that you're looking for?

GEORGE HEITZ: I mainly got confirmation from what I thought and we have to focus even more, I think you need players who are really able to, who are competitive physically. This is very important. This league is very demanding physically. Also, when you play Saturday, Wednesday, Saturday, I think this is not so easy for someone who is physically not absolutely ready. This is

one thing, and as in other leagues too, speed is getting more and more important. And the third thing maybe, and maybe we really lack a little bit is winning spirit. I don't know how many players have won trophies in this squad. But I would assume not too many and maybe we have to find ways to implement this winning spirit. Also a bit more maybe self confidence also. I mean you cannot have a season without a road game win. This is impossible. And you cannot expect to be in a comfortable situation if you never win a game abroad.

Q. I'm pretty interested in obviously your new signing, how does the club identify a player like that who is a Nigerian playing in Latvia, like can you walk me through the process of how he's even brought to your attention?

GEORGE HEITZ: Yeah, during the season, I mean we have an owner who is really willing to invest also and invest in know how also, so during the season we established a scouting department, which had not existed before and in our scouting department they identified this player and we always speak with the coaching staff with Rafa and his colleagues about possible new signings before we sign a player, obviously because it doesn't make sense to sign a player that the head coach doesn't want to have on his squad. You will be punished in the end because he won't make him play. And they like to also very much his profile, so this is really, this is, it came from our scouting department.

Q. Looking to this off season you said you're hoping to sign maybe two or three new players. In MLS this off season it's anticipated there is this new youth fund coming in to play with a bit more flexibility for young players. What kind of flexibility, how does that change your approach, would you say, to how you guys are approaching this off season with that new vehicle, if you will, to bring in younger players?

GEORGE HEITZ: It has not been confirmed yet, but obviously this helps a lot or it would help a lot one thing that is important for me is this year or for the new season we would like to have the new players or maybe except for one, we would like to have them at the beginning of the pre-season. This was also one of the problems that we had and this was not Rafa's mistake, it was more my mistake that we didn't have all the players in January. It was nearly impossible, yes, but nevertheless it caused some problems. I think when you've seen our matches, in the second half of the season we performed better than in the first half of the season. This is because it takes some time, when you have new players especially, don't forget, when Aliseda and Gimenez arrived I think they trained two or three times with the team and afterwards were locked in

their apartment for a couple of weeks. This is what happened to them. And again, no excuses, we have not made, we have not reached our goals but it is something that we want to make sure that it doesn't happen again, that we need, that we cannot use the pre-season for these reasons and so we really, really want to sign maybe two more players until January 1st.

Q. You guys talk about the desire for continuity and everything, but why do you want continuity from a team that won five out of 23 games this season?

GEORGE HEITZ: (Laughing.) That's a good question. That's a good question. (Laughing.)

No, look, I think, but this is my perspective, that we didn't end up in being in the table where we belong with this team and we have to analyze the reasons why this is the case, but we really think that even against the best teams in this league we were quite good, obviously not good enough, but we don't think that we lack a lot to be competitive, even with the best teams in this league. This is why. But the question is brilliant.

Q. You talked about looking for maybe two or three players. How is your evaluation of players on other teams within the league and using something like trades, which isn't too common in the rest of the soccer world to, acquire some of those guys?

GEORGE HEITZ: I think one of the problems that I see in this league with all the regulations that you have is that it makes it very difficult to get the really interesting players to your team. It is complicated because obviously everybody wants to keep their good players. And it's not -- in Europe we have a free market. When I want to sign a player from Bayern Munich, and I have the financial means, I can try to sign him. This is not so easy in this league here. So we would love to have more players who have already made experience in this league, but it's not so easy to find, to get the ones that really help.

Q. One of the things that Rafa said many many times this season is that you guys were very close, if you had just finished your chances, if you had just not committed as many mistakes defensively. Sounds like you think the continuity can play a big part in improving those things, but I have to wonder, even in the last game with some of the defensive mistakes with some of the marking mistake, communication mistakes is it ask just continuity or does that back line need help or different players to be able to get it where you need it to be?

GEORGE HEITZ: I think the last game is not a very good

example, because in the last game we were clearly not ready and not ready meaning we were definitely not the better side. We deserved to lose this last game because we made too many mistakes. We were, in my opinion, I had the impression we were a bit tired, I mean this last game, you know, we have in the back line, don't forget we have signed the Columbian Under-23 National Team player with Carlos Teran, who, after two months, due also to this pandemic finally could come to Chicago and join us. But his last game had been in March, back in March, so it's not so easy to integrate a new player during the season. And a new player who has not been training for months and not been playing for months so we have definitely this player I think our back line is better than what they showed in this last game against New York City. This was really not what they expect from themselves, what we expect from them, this was simply not good enough. But I think we should not take now really this last game and as a benchmark.

Q. Somebody mentioned the youth transfer fund earlier in this. I know it's not decided 100 percent yet whether that will come into effect next year or not. How much does that impact your planning? Do you have kind of a plan A if we have this money at our disposal to use, we'll use it. And then a plan B if we don't? Or do you have confidence that it's going to go one way or the other?

GEORGE HEITZ: Basically what we're looking for is young players, whether we have this fund, yes or no, we want to sign young players, because we want to lower the average age of this team, but young does not necessarily mean that the quality is good enough, only with young players, if they are not good you won't win anything. Obviously we have several solutions for all position that is we would like to cover, but that is nothing special, I think you can expect this from a professional sports team and from a front office, a scouting department, that we work on several options and in the end who we can sign could also depend on these funds, yes.

Q. A little bit different, you come to the country, you mover here, and then all of a sudden there's this pandemic. What was it like for you just getting as a human being, trying to get used to a new job, a new league and then a country that was pretty much in different phases of lock down because of a historic pandemic? What was this whole experience like for you as a human being?

GEORGE HEITZ: Well, as for all of you, definitely not easy. I think, again, I should not complain because I'm a very privileged person and we had so many people within the club who supported us, who reached out to us and so I

should really not complain. And I have a certain age, I think that it was way more complicated for some of these really young players who came here and immediately they were in a very special situation. But I should not complain. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the whole year, I learned a lot, not only regarding regulations of the MLS, but also, you know, this was new to all of us, all of the managers also within this league. What do you do when your players and coaches cannot do when they are prevented from what they are used to do. This means training, we could not train, and that was not so easy to solve, but again personally, I felt I always felt very privileged. I still like this country.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, appreciate your time this afternoon. Thank you guys, media on the call, for joining us as well and we appreciate your continued coverage of the club especially through a difficult year. As always if you guys need anything, please feel free to reach out to the Chicago fire communications department. Thank you all.

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