

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Georg Heitz

Ezra Hendrickson

Press Conference



welcoming me to your city. For those of you watching on Zoom, sorry you can't be here. But thank you, also.

I'm very honored to be chosen as head coach of this team. I have a lot of people to thank. First, I want to start by thanking the owner, Joe, and his family for entrusting me with this duty to be the head coach going forward for this team. It's a very historic team, prestigious club, and so I'm very honored for that.

Georg, Sebastian, Eddie, Alex, these guys who have helped me along the way who was with me during the interview process, I want to thank them for also having faith in me as far as leading this team going forward. It's a great city, like I said. I'm happy to be here, and I'm really looking forward to great things here in Chicago.

I think we have a good foundation, a good core group of players and one of the things that attracted me to the club is being able to work with these players. I've worked with young players a lot in my time as an assistant coach, and I'm looking forward to that as well as building the team with some additional players.

It's great times. I'm happy. I'm excited and I hope you guys are excited and the fans are going to enjoy what this team is going to be about going forward. It's going to be some growing pains, but just know that we'll get this thing right and get this team back to where they belong, and that's to be one of the top teams in this league.

Like I said, it's a big soccer city, and we need to make sure that our fans enjoy that entertainment style of soccer that we're going to bring here starting next year.

Q. You touched on growing pains, and this is the Fire team undergoing through another rebuild after going through one in 2020, and it's a club who hasn't won a trophy since 2006. Why take on this role knowing the challenge ahead of you, and how do you hope to tackle that challenge?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, when I look around the club and see the people who are in charge of changing the course of this club, I was very encouraged. I think they have very good soccer minds, and who knows the league, who knows what type of players are going to be successful in this league.

GEORG HEITZ: Thanks, everybody, for coming. Thank you for the ones who watch us on livestream. It is indeed a special day. We started very thorough in my opinion, a very thorough and detailed process back in September I think, beginning of October, to find a new head coach.

You know, when you change your head coach, you get flooded with names, which also shows you that the job you have to offer is an attractive one, and I think it is a very attractive one if we bear in mind that we had more, or let's say, several hundred applications for this job.

All this doesn't make it easy because it takes time. It's very time-consuming to narrow it down. We did this in several steps and every time we spoke to Ezra, we were left with a very good impression afterwards.

Ultimately, we invited him to come to Chicago. We met. We spoke again, and in the end, we spoke for two days I think, and then to finally find out that this might be a good fit.

I am convinced that this is a perfect fit for the Fire. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank my colleagues Sebastian Pelzer, our technical director; Alex Boler and Eddie Rock, who were so supportive in this whole process, who were very active and who also gave me the confidence to go through this.

Ezra, a very warm welcome to our club. We are really happy to have you here as our new head coach with all your knowledge that you have of the league, of the game. You are a real football mind, a bit obsessed like many of us, and I think this is something we need.

It is a privilege to have you as a coach in this club. Welcome. (Applause).

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, first of all, thank you very much, Georg, and thank you guys for being here and



When I came in and spoke in my interview process, I told them about my philosophy, my style of play and the type of players that, you know, I would be looking to work with and to bring into the club. They were in alignment with those things, and so I think there's a bright future for the club.

Like I said, the core group of players, when you look at Chicago, a lot of people talk about the Phillies and Dallas when they talk about homegrowns and having very good young players. But I think this club is right up there with those clubs as far as that pathway of homegrown players coming through the first team. So that was very attractive for me.

I just see a lot of potential. It's an opportunity that I wanted to take, and you know, go forward with. But like I said, you know, having an owner like Joe that's invested so much and is willing to invest so much is also a big factor, because if you don't have that backing, then it becomes difficult.

You know, I've been on several teams -- I've been involved in this league now for 25 years, either as a player or as an assistant coach, and I know that it takes an owner with a vision and resource and willing to help out in that aspect for the team to be successful.

When you put all that together, the soccer minds that's running the day-to-day operations and you have an owner like that, you have a sit like this and the type of players that we have currently, it's exciting times for me, and I'm just happy to be here and to be in charge of getting us where we need to be.

Q. You've worked under some of the best coaches this league has ever produced, Sigi Schmid, Caleb Porter. What have you learned from them and how will you apply some of those lessons with the Fire?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Like you said, I've learned from some of the best. I spent most of my years as a player or an assistant coach with Sigi Schmid and I worked for Brian Schmetzer, and most recently Caleb Porter, and these are guys who have been very successful and won championships in the League and been leaders of very successful clubs.

I'll take a lot from each one of them but at the end of the day, it's going to be what I've learned compounded with what I bring to the table as far as a coach and my style and my philosophy that's going to lead this team going forward.

So I'm very grateful to have had those experiences and learn from, as you say, some of the best most productive

coaches in this league. So I think when you put that with my knowledge of the game and how I like to see the game play, I think it's a good base and a good foundation for me to start this process and begin my new career as head coach.

Q. You've been in the League and won a lot of trophies. The trophies that you have won and the teams that have won championships have taken different approaches to roster building. Curious what your ideal approach to building a roster is. I know you're the coach and Georg is the sporting director GM, and that's not exactly your purview, but I'm sure you'll be involved in it. What is your ideal approach and how do you value league experience? We've seen teams around the league still playing, New England, in particular, have relied heavily on that and had a lot of success this season in particular?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: It's going to be a collaborate effort once we get together. Like I said before, there's a lot of soccer minds here in Chicago currently, and with my experience in being around successful teams, I'll bring that to the table but it's not going to be so much what I want to do. It's going to be a collaborate effort.

Now, someone has to make final decisions, and ultimately it usually lands on the head of the head coach. But it's going to be taking input from all angles. We have guys like Frank Klopas still on staff that's embedded in Chicago and this club, and we are going to look to guys like that to help us form a team that's competitive, a team that's competing for trophies year-in and year-out.

So it's going to be a collaborate effort with input from myself and the sporting guys and my staff once that's all put together. I think we have enough talented soccer minds in this organization to make this team very formidable.

Q. I know you were focused on your job as an assistant coach with the Crew last season, but from the games you played versus the Fire and maybe any film you watched, both in the season and in preparation for your interviews, what are some of the things that stuck out to you in regards to things that you think need improving the most moving into your first year as the Fire's head coach?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, first, I want to say, I'm going to repeat that we have a lot of good, young talent. But sometimes you need leadership and you need someone to kind of help bring in those players along. Sort of an extension of the coaching staff, because as a coach or coaching staff, you don't really sometimes have all that it

takes to help with young players.

I think maybe that some leadership, some issues that might need fixing as far as in the locker room. But like I said, we are working right now currently to bring some guys in to help nurture these young players in, and then we have guys like Bornstein here who are great leaders who we are going to look to to help bring along the young talent.

But it's a process and we are doing a lot behind the scenes to improve the team in that aspect. But I think that's one thing we need to improve because the team is so young and a lot of inexperienced guys is to make sure that we have a good mixture of experienced guys to help bring the team along, because like I said, there's going to be growing pains. We want to win every game but it's not going to happen that way, but you need leaders in the locker room when things aren't going so well that can, you know, lift guys up and say, hey, come on, let's go.

That's something that, you know, we've been starting the process of looking at bringing in additional help to help the core of guys that we have currently.

Q. If you can get into the head coach search process a little bit more, what specifically about Ezra stuck out as him being the best candidate for this job and how many final candidates did it come down to?

GEORG HEITZ: We ultimately had three finalists in this process and Ezra was obviously one of the three. You understand that I won't mention any name; that's clear.

What stood out? I mean, I think the whole assessment was not easy for the candidates because we had some tricky questions that we asked, and he did great in all the interviews that we had with him. He really did great, be it tactically, be it also -- you know, when you hire someone, you want him to be hungry, hungry for this job, and this was a feeling that we all had; that he's very hungry; that he's very keen on becoming our new head coach. This was also very, very important for us.

One thing that I always say in such processes is I always try to be in the shoes of a player, and I ask myself, could this guy motivate me as a player, I would run for him, and I'd definitely run quite far for Ezra (Laughter).

Q. After largely focusing on international talent in the last two off-seasons, does hiring a long-time MLS veteran like Ezra indicate a shift in philosophy to a greater emphasis on domestic talent?

GEORG HEITZ: Not necessarily. I do not completely agree, because when you see our homegrowns, for

example, when you see how many homegrowns we have signed, then you'll see that we absolutely also bet on domestic talent.

It's just with all the regulations in this league, it's not so easy to get talents from other clubs that really help you getting better. This is a little bit a problem that we have because it's not a free market like in other leagues in this world.

But we are open. You know, it doesn't matter where someone comes from. We want to have the best fits for our team. If the best fit comes from a competitor, then we try to get the best talent. But it's not that easy.

Yeah, we are at the moment working on signing new players. We already signed a player 12 months ago, almost 12 months ago, Jhon Jáder Durán from Colombia, a young striker. We will definitely focus a little bit more on experience in this off-season, that's for sure, because I completely agree with what Ezra says. We need more leadership in this group. That's something that is obvious.

Q. I guess either one of you guys can answer this. When we last spoke with Gerard (ph) he mentioned there were three players he was waiting for the new coach to invite input on before the club decide what had to do with, that was Wyatt Omsberg, Jonathan Bornstein and Gaston Giménez. You mentioned Bornstein a second ago. Has there been any decisions on those three, and Ezra, what you thought of those three players.

GEORG HEITZ: Let me answer first. I think it's not the moment to speak about the roster. I think it's the day where we welcome Ezra to this club. He has already spoken about Jonathan Bornstein. This also means that you can be sure that Jonathan will be with us in the next season.

But I wouldn't want this to be a media conference about our roster. We will inform about the roster at a later stage once we have really taken decisions on most of the players that are here or most of the players who will come or who won't come to our club.

Q. You've assisted for over a decade, glittering playing career, but you haven't gotten a full-time head coaching job until now. Was there a point where you thought it might not happen, and just emotionally what did it mean for to you finally reach that goal of being named an MLS head coach?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, I'm a very confident individual. Everyone who knows me knows that, and so I

never once thought, you know, this will not happen. I just knew that I had to keep working hard. I believe in hard work, and I just knew that I had to keep working hard and that one day this opportunity will present itself.

Ironically, it was my first time being interviewed in person for a head coaching job. So I just always prepared myself and always envisioned myself being in this position. Never once did I waiver. Never once did I, you know, felt like giving up as far as being a leader of a team in a head coaching position.

I always thought the opportunity would come and I always prepared myself that when it came, I would be ready for it, and that's the case right now. I feel very ready and just excited to get started and to just bring what I can to a team. My experiences, my successes that I've had to lead this team back to prominence.

Q. Obviously every manager that ever manager needs their first gig, and this is yours at the head coach level. What do you say to those who maybe look at your lack of managerial experience. I know you have a vast experience coaching and playing. But again, no head coach experience at the MLS level. What do you say to those who may be are a bit wary that you don't have any head coach experience at this level yet?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, I think there are always going to be detractors. I don't really focus too much on that. I'm a very positive guy. Maybe that's from being Caribbean; we just have a positive attitude about ourselves.

So I expect maybe there will be some people who will maybe say that, but I my for the most part, anyone who has seen me play, seen me work, work with me, know that I am ready. Yes, I have not had MLS head coaching experience, but for three years, I did coach the Sounders, too, so I got some head coaching experience there.

I know it's not the same, but from my years of playing and my years as an assistant coach and being in a successful environment, I bring a lot to the table. It's just a matter of being patient, and, you know, I would say to those detractors, show up to the games starting in February and you will no longer be a detractor.

Q. Would you like to get fans in Chicago more excited about soccer as a game? It seems that in most countries in the world, soccer is dramatically No. 1, but Chicago seems to be more excited about basketball, baseball, football; and how to get fans more excited about soccer as such?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, I'm a big believer in, you win, and people will get excited and people will come to games. We are going to play a brand of soccer that the people of Chicago that resonates with them.

But at the end of the day, you can play beautiful soccer all you want; if you're not winning, it's going to be difficult. Especially in a city like Chicago with so many other things going on, so many other avenues, so many other sporting events and so many other attractions that people can go to; if you're not winning they are not going to come.

We hope to be winning. There are going to be growing pains. I keep going back to that but we are going to win more than we are losing.

So I think at the end of the day, being successful is going to bring people to the stadium and keep them coming back to the stadium, and that's our focus going forward with this team is to be very successful and get our fans back to be engaged with this team and lifting trophies.

My biggest mentor, Sigi Schmid, that's one thing he always said is, "Fill the trophy case. You know, wherever you go, fill the trophy case." And that's something that we plan to do here in Chicago.

Q. With your hire, I believe now there are three black coaches in Major League Soccer which to me seems like a very low number. What do you think this hire means from that perspective both to other black assistant coaches, future black coaches who might want to become coaches some day and also the black fans who look at that number and think that is a pretty low number; that there's three black head coaches head coaches in this league.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I'm happy I've worked hard to get to this position, first of all. I'm very elated, very excited to have my hard work off eventually. I do think that it's a great thing to have minority leadership in organizations because I think sometimes you're not represented as well as you possibly should.

For me, if any coach or minority standing can see this as aspiration, see this as something to look forward to, then that's great because I think there are some great minority coaches out there.

So if I can be an inspiration to any of these coaches, that makes me happy and that helps me feel better about, you know, being here now, because like I said, having minority leadership in an organization is a good thing for all organizations.

I'm just happy that I've worked hard to get this opportunity, and if it inspire others to continue and work hard and not give up hope and believe in what they are doing, eventually they, too, can be in this position.

Q. "Growing pains" have been mentioned multiple times in this presser, but at the same time, Ezra, I think you were the one that said in a great sport city like Chicago, you need to be successful to get fans in the fans. This year, for the 2022 season what does success look like?

GEORG HEITZ: Thin ice (Laughter) I feel like every year, I say the same thing. But of course we want to make the playoffs. Of course. Because otherwise, we do not even need to start training in January. We want to make the playoffs. It's difficult to predict anything at the moment because we don't know who will be available and who will not be available for our team next season.

In the playoffs, I think this we experience again these days, anything can happen. If you have a good day, you can go far. If you have one bad day, your season is over. That can be terrible sometimes but definitely we want to make the playoffs.

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