

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Xherdan Shaqiri

Georg Heitz

Ezra Hendrickson

Press Conference

GEORG HEITZ: Hello, everybody, first of all, thanks for attending and thanks for attending via Zoom. It is a special day for us obviously.

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank our owner, Joe Mansueto, because without his supportive, very, very supportive attitude, this would not have happened. We would not be here today with Xherdan.

As you all know, Xherdan and I have known each other for years. The last time we worked together, he was a boy. Now that he arrived here, it turned out that we have a man here, and he is definitely one of the players who attract people, who you pay foreseeing them play, and maybe I'll end with that.

Come to the stadium on the 5th of March, our home opener, dear fans. I promise you that Xherdan is the kind of player that will entertain you and this is also about entertainment here. He cannot do it on his own. It's still a team sport. He needs his teammates. He needs his colleagues in order to be able to perform. We expect a lot but we expect a lot from everybody in this team. Thank you.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Good morning, thanks for taking the time to be here with us today. This is an interesting time for the City of Chicago and for the Fire organization. As a coach, I'm very excited because not too many coaches get the opportunity to coach someone like Shaqiri, so I'm very happy and excited that he's here. I think he is going to do great for the club and the fans are going to love him.

In football, a player like Shaq is what we call a special player; a player with that ability to change a game in a second with a brilliant free kick or a brilliant shot, a knife,



cut-and-pass, to help someone with an assist. It's very good to have a player like that on the pitch. Like I said, I think he's going to do well for the club and I'm very, very excited to be part of this organization and have an opportunity to coach someone of this type of calibre.

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: First of all, thank you to everyone for coming and also for me a special day to be here in the U.S. It's a new country for me and I'm really, really glad. I always was a big admirer of the MLS. The opportunity came with Georg, he told you before, that he know us a long time and we always had a good relationship and the contact was always good here.

Yeah, I would like to thank, also, to the owner, Joe Mansueto to make this map because there are always, yeah, more people involved in this business, and I want to thank him, also, and can't wait to meet him.

Yeah, thank you to Georg and to Ezra, too, to make this happen. I'm really, really looking forward to work with this club to go forward, to bring the glory back to which I can could he where maybe the last few years it was not here.

So I want to bring that back and try to be successful with this team, and yeah, to help this team, who is also very young, and my goal is clear that I want trophies. I want to go to the playoffs and yeah, this is my goal.

Q. I wonder if you can tell us, when Georg originally reached out to you what did you think about the opportunity? Did it take some convincing? Were you initially very excited to hear about it?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: Like I said before, I was always a big admirer. I think many, many top players played already in the MLS, and yeah, the league is getting better and better, and for me, it's a good league. I wanted to go away from friends and yeah, the opportunity came with Georg who like I said before, we were always in touch and in contact with my brother who is my agent, and yeah, convincing of course, I was thinking a lot, of course.

But Georg came with a big project, and yeah, I was really excited, and yeah, I wanted a new thing to try and so the opportunity came to come to the U.S. and to come to this club to help, to bring the glory back, and yeah, this is my most important thing. I want to be successful. I want to

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bring to this club, yeah, new goals and to be successful.

Q. Question for you, you mentioned following the league before, but how much have you learned of the MLS with some of the unique challenges that exist within this league, long distance for travel, stadiums with artificial turf, the stadium you play in you share with an NFL team. How prepared are you to deal with that in probably the first time in your year?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: I'm looking forward to know better this league, of course, and yeah, I know that some places, the stadium, they have turf. But normally in football sometimes you have to play on turf.

Obviously I know the very good pitches in England, we know everybody now it is in England, the football pitches are amazing. But every team has to play there and every team has to deal with it. I'm looking forward to try every pitch the best and to bring success to this team with this club in every pitch.

Q. When you set out to change this club, this team this season, this off-season, what was your vision? And just were there any philosophical changes from your first build a couple years ago?

GEORG HEITZ: I think we lack, or we lacked winners. And to have not only Xherdan, we have other players who are winners, but Xherdan definitely has one quality: He's a winner. He has won a lot in his career.

We wanted to bring a couple of really highly skilled players, and with also mentality. We need more confidence on the field, and we are really looking forward to seeing Xherdan, but also the other new players and the players who are still here to perform in the upcoming weeks.

Regarding Xherdan, it's not only about technique. We all know that he's technically very gifted, but it's really about also leading this team together with other experienced players so that we feel more comfortable in the games this season.

Q. We've talked about leadership and Ezra has talked about the importance of leaders coming on to the team. How are you looking forward to working with these young players, and what experiences have you learned in your career so far that you think you can bring to this young side?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: This was for me or not for Georg?

GEORG HEITZ: Ezra?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: For me?

Q. It's for Xherdan. I was asking, Ezra has talked about the importance of bringing leaders into this club. For all your experience of playing across the world, what kind of leadership qualities have you developed that you can bring to this team and to these young players?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: Yeah, I saw already the team in the training camp, and there are a lot of young players. I like to work with young players and to help them. Of course with my experience, I can give this team a lot, not only on the pitch, off the pitch, too.

So yeah, I'm really looking forward to work also with the young guys and yeah, I want them also to get better every day and yeah, this is also important for me to work and to give my experience to these young players, and yeah, to give them the confidence to go in a game to win. This is the most important for me; that they want to work every day hard and to help this team.

And, yeah, to try to win something, this is also important, to go in a game with a lot of confidence and I want to give them this confidence that in every game, you can win, and this is important to go in a game that you want these three points.

Q. How complicated was this deal to get over the line for a player of Xherdan's quality, somebody who no doubt would have had other clubs trying to sign him? And for Xherdan, did you reach out to anybody about MLS before you made your decision, and have you spoken to the national team coach about this decision?

GEORG HEITZ: You want to start?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: I can start if you want, okay. No, of course, I was speaking to my national team coach, too, and for him, it's also important that I am fit; that I can play many games, and yeah, like I said before, I didn't speak or you have to ask my brother with who he spoke about the other MLS team. But for me it was the first day very important.

I knew that Georg is here in Chicago, and I knew before, also, Bastian was here who I played (with) in Bayern Munich, so I knew a little bit of the club. That's it was for me a no-brainer normally to come here because it's a big city, and, yeah, Georg is here.

They have a good coach with Ezra who wants to be successful, too, to win titles, and with the owner who wants

to go forward with the club. That was the main, main goal for me to come here, to be successful with this club and to bring the glories back where it was.

GEORG HEITZ: And regarding the negotiations, I mean, it's always difficult with any player. My former president in Basel once said, if it's easy, the player is not good. So it was not -- of course not easy, but it was always correct I think.

But the most important thing is that the player knows what he wants, and Xherdan made it very clear what he wanted, also especially after he had spoken to Ezra, and I think this was the most important step during the negotiations.

Q. For Xherdan, you won a lot and accomplished a lot at Liverpool and under Jürgen Klopp, what were some highlights of your time there and what were some of the things you learned specifically from Klopp who is considered one of the best managers in the game?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: Jürgen I know for a long time, since I played for Bayern, we played against him. He was a top coach, so it was big rivalry (ph) there. So yeah, I had a wonderful, wonderful three years at Liverpool. We won many titles. I had a really beautiful time, and can always learn from these big coaches.

Yeah, I'm proud that I work with Jürgen Klopp. I work with Guardiola; I work with Jupp Heynckes; I work with Hitzfeld, big coaches who won a lot of titles, who had a lot of experience, so you can learn a lot, and I'm very proud of that I learned so many things about them because every coach is a bit different, and yeah, it's only positive for your career.

So, yeah, Jürgen and I had a really good relationship with him, and yeah, he text me, too, and congratulate me for this transfer. We stay still in contact.

Q. From a fitness perspective and match readiness, how close are you being ready to play Saturday in the season opener? How close are you to being fully fit in that regard? And also you're coming in with huge expectations as a star player, big name. How are you the weight and expectation of all that?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: As you know, I was in the season with Lyon and I was playing already six months. I'm fit and ready to play. Let's see how it goes this week, and in the end, always the coach decide it. But yeah, I didn't play one game now with the club, but I want to be successful and I try to help the team if I'm going to play.

Q. For Ezra, I guess he's trained a little bit to this

point. What were your first thoughts of him in training, and you know, you mentioned it before, but just what should some fans expect from him when he does make his debut?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well I think the fans should expect a lot of goals and a lot of assists and just beautiful football.

As far as what he brought to the team and what I've seen in training, he's the type of player that -- it's a young team, and sometimes there's some inconsistencies in training, guys have not -- you know, it's up and down.

But from the minute he came to training, you could see it raised the level of all the other players. In his first day of training, we had probably our best session the entire preseason, and that's just from him being on the pitch and doing some things that, you know, Sparks everyone on.

I thought the players responded really well. So beyond just his personal, individual qualities, just that ability to lift the group and inspire these young kids is something I was very impressed with and I'm been very impressed with so far from him.

Q. Earlier in the off-season, you acquired Kacper Przybylko, a good striker, a dependable striker, albeit one who is not on a designated player contract. How much does that open things up for your roster building when you have a striker who is pretty good and has a good reputation, but isn't a designated player and doesn't take up a designated player's spot?

GEORG HEITZ: Yeah, it helped a lot, of course. It gave us some more flexibility. We strongly believe in Kacper. Kacper will be one of the players who will benefit hopefully a lot also from Xherdan. We will have to find him in the box, and I think this will be a good fit for us. Kacper is working hard, and we've been really happy with his performances and trainings, and in the scrimmages that we've had, and we think he was a very, very important piece for us.

Q. Obviously you're in your first role as a senior coach in the MLS. I just wondered what the prospect of managing a player of Xherdan's calibre is like. Is it an exciting challenge for you? Is it a daunting prospect?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, my sleepless nights will be less, I hope. It's always a pleasure to be able to coach someone with this type of quality. Like I mentioned before, he's one of those special type of players, and as a coach, that makes your job a little easier because now you have someone on the pitch when something is maybe not going



right and then just in a split second, he can change the fortune and change the fate of the game.

So it's always -- it's excitement for me and it's a pleasure to have him and I think he'll be good for the club and for the city. I think his play on the pitch is going to bring some excitement to the fan base and I think that's very important for us. We want to start off hitting the ground running so to speak and having him being in camp and ready to go from day one from match one, I think is a positive thinking for us.

So as a coach, I'm looking forward to, you know, watching him play, and enjoying every minute of it. I've got front row seats, so it will be good.

Q. I just wanted to ask you, from the national team perspective, you decided to leave the top five big leagues in Europe to join the MLS in a year when you are going to play with the national team. I just wanted to know what was your thinking about that? Are you looking to add more minutes and be sure to have a bigger role and play minutes, because we saw you play in the European championship last summer, you lacked a bit of fitness, as I said, you couldn't play really longer than 90 minutes or so; if that was what you were looking for with this move to the MLS?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: My role with the national team is not going to change. I'm going to go always to the national team when I have to go when they call me and I will keep going the same like I did to now. Everybody knows my role there, and I have already a hundred caps for country, which is very great and I'm very proud of, and I hope many more of going to come.

We have a very good team and young team and very experienced players inside who also want to go forward. My role is not going to change. I'm going to go to the World Cup and I'm going to finish here this season hopefully very well, and then normally go to the World Cup with my national team. So nothing going to change in that perspective.

Q. We talked in the fall, and I remember you saying one of the things you wish you had done differently in 2020 was be a little more patient in roster building, and it seemed like this off-season, there was a point where fans were starting to get a little restless wondering when you guys were going to make a move. Was patience part of the strategy and do you think it worked out?

GEORG HEITZ: Well, we didn't do it on purpose. I think in the end you have to sign the right players that we felt, or

we feel at the moment that we have signed the right players. On the other hand, no one has ever won a trophy for just signing players. In the end, we have to also bring the results and play well.

It was well thought through what we made, and which doesn't necessarily mean that automatically you will be successful. But we are pretty confident that we made the right choices.

Q. This question is for Xherdan. I'm curious if you've had an opportunity to explore Chicago at all, if you've had a chance to go to a Bulls game and really experience what Chicago sports can feel like?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: Not really yet because we were traveling a lot and I was tired with jet lag a bit. So I was happy to lie on the bed a bit and to recover from this traveling.

But of course, yeah, I'm looking -- I'm very excited to see the city, more of the city, and of course we have a lot of sports here with basketball, baseball, ice hockey, NHL. So, yeah, I'm looking forward to see these games, and to meet some other players, maybe, too. And yeah, I'm really excited.

But I came here not for holidays. I came for work and to work for this club and to be successful. So I really want first to win something and then can enjoy more the city.

Q. Could you just describe the vibe of the club, around the club right now after the off-season, where you bring in Czichos, Kacper and then Xherdan, of course Jairo recently. What's the vibe and how optimistic are people around the club that this could be the start of something on the field?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, I mean, it's exciting times. I think throughout the organization, we've brought in what we feel are like four quality players, and so the excitement is there. There's some anticipation for the beginning of the season. I personally am happy and I'm restless. I can't wait for the first kick on Saturday. So it's good times for the club.

But that being said, as Georg alluded to earlier, you bring in the players but now you have to perform, and now you have to have the right results because we are in a result-based business and we need to win some games. But we are doing what we can, and that started by getting the right players, the players we felt could fit the organization and what we're looking for, and now we just have to make sure that we put the right team on the pitch and we play some good football and win some games,

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because that's what it's all about.

Q. You talk about Shaq and complementing him. How do you plan on complementing him with the team you've got and to get the best out of him in that No. 10 role?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I think one of the reasons why we wanted Shaq here is we want to play with the ball a lot. We want to have possession of the ball a lot, and I think someone like him will help us not only maintain the possession but also he has that quality to make those penetrating passes that we know Przybylko can get on the end of, and there are some wingers that can be beneficial to his style of play.

I think he fits the way we want to play. We need to get the him the ball for us and basically take over the game for us. Players are going to be instructed to find him because he's a very integral part of what we are going to do and how we are going to play, and his qualities fit my style of play really well.

Q. You mentioned some of the goals for the team to get back to the playoffs and compete in MLS. Do you have any goals on an individual level that you didn't already mention in Major League Soccer for yourself?

XHERDAN SHAQIRI: Look, there is always goals for me. But first of all, I want to help this team to grow, to help to win games, but individual goals, I didn't put on myself, but first of all comes the team for me, and then the individual.

So I want to help this team, this young team to grow and to try to win games, and for this, I need my teammates, too. We need a high level to play to win games, and yeah, I'm looking forward and I'm confident that the team is going to perform, and, yeah, to win games and to try to go to the playoffs, what is my biggest goal at the moment with this club.

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