

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Ezra Hendrickson

Press Conference



Q. I know other people have other questions, but I'll start with a health update. How is Shaq coming along, Czichos, Herbers, and Navarro, Miguel, among others?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, Miguel and Rafael are back in training, Shaq and Fabi, they are day-to-day right now. That's going to be a gametime decision for us. It's something that we don't want to rush, so we're going to be very patient with that as far as that decision goes. But the rest of the guys are in training and ready to go.

Q. Ezra, I know you want to win this game from a footballing standpoint, but what do you think it would mean for the club in generating excitement in the city to go out and win this game from a fan standpoint?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I think it would be great for the fans. For us, it pushes us up into the standings, get into the top tier of the group, so to speak. But it's going to be a lot of fans out there. They are going to have some fans. It's stars out day, Shaq against Chicharito. The fans are coming out to see a very good game, and what better way to convince fans to come back than to come out here with a very good -- with a victory against a very good team.

L.A. is a team that's pushed up the rankings as the season's gone on, the first six weeks or so, and they're a team that we know they are very good, they have very good players. But we're at home, and it would be definitely a good win for us as far as getting us up in the standings and also convincing our fans that we're for real.

Q. Hey, Ezra, thanks for taking the time to do this. Obviously without getting into tactics or anything specific like that, but what's it like to game plan against a player like Chicharito, somebody who's so dangerous up top? And what kind of goes into the game week planning for that?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, he's a top class player, and we know he's very good, especially in the box, the 18-yard box. He's someone that we have to be aware of in the run

of play, knowing exactly where he's at at all times.

But we've been doing a lot of things this week preparing the players for that, especially our back four, just at all times getting pressure on the crosser and also finding him in the box.

So we'll be ready, we'll be prepared. We have game footage of him, and we know, it's no secret, how well he moves in the final third. We just have to make sure that at all times we're aware of his movement and find him.

Q. I just wanted to know your thoughts on Federico Navarro because at the beginning of the season he was working hard in order to get more time on the pitch, and now he has played well in the last game. So just wanted to know your thoughts about how he's leading this season with you.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, I think coming into the season, had it not been for injuries, Fede would have been a starter. He's definitely one of our top players. He does a lot for us on the pitch. But at the beginning of the season, he just had a bit of a knock on his knee. He took it the last week of preseason.

So we're very patient with him as far as making sure he was fully healed before putting him back on the pitch. When he was fully ready after the first couple of games or so, the team was doing well and the guys in the middle of the field were doing well, so we didn't want to disrupt that chemistry we had going on. But he's been back and playing well since he's been on the pitch.

He covers a lot of ground. He wins the ball a lot for us. He's a big part of what we do as far as, when we lose the ball, regaining possession so we can play our style, our game. So he's definitely one of the big part of our team going forward.

Q. I just wanted to get your thoughts. Obviously, you're going to be coaching against some former teammates of yours, Kevin Hartman, Dave Calichman, Greg Vanney. What does it mean to have so many former L.A. Galaxy players in one spot on both sides of the sidelines? Is it something special for you?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I'm sure Sigi Schmid is smiling

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down from heaven right now seeing this because all of us at one point played for him. Kevin and Vanney even played college for him.

That being said, we're friends. We keep in touch. We don't call each other every day, but when we see each other, it's very cordial, and we remember the times together, the good times together. When you play with teammates like that, it's a lasting friendship for a long time, and we have that friendship between us.

But when that whistle blows, that goes out the door. We're both trying to win. They're trying to win, and we're trying to win out here. It's all about doing what it takes to win this game. We're at home, and yes, I have some friends on the sideline, on the other sideline, but that doesn't matter once that whistle blows. But off the field, we're very close, and that's something that will go on.

Q. Obviously, Chicharito is a huge name, and he has a ton of fans here in Chicago. I'm just curious, have you talked with the team about how a lot of folks could be out there possibly rooting against you guys on Saturday and what that might be like on your home field?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: No, we didn't touch upon that. Mainly what we talked about when it comes to Chicharito is just his movement off the ball, his movement in the final third, in the 18-yard box.

As far as the fans, I've been in games as a player and as a coach where maybe the fans come out to see an opposing player, but the home team is playing so well that they forget all about that player and start rooting for the home team. So hopefully that's what happens on Saturday.

But we can't really concern ourselves about who the fans are cheering for. Our job is to go out there and do our jobs and win the game, and maybe fans who show up on Saturday, not so much at the beginning rooting for us, end up by the end of the game cheering for us because I've seen that happen a lot in my time with the Galaxy actually.

Q. Hi, Coach. My question is regarding it's been a great start for this season for the Chicago Fire. What do you consider your team still needs to improve in order to keep in those top seeds of the conference and of course to keep winning at home? That is really important.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I think we've got it pretty down pat defensively, as far as the team, how we're going to defend. But I think going forward on the attack, we need to become a little more dynamic. And just our movement of

the ball, it hurts -- the past couple games it hurt us not having Shaq on the field, so you have to take that into consideration. But as a team, whether Shaq is on the pitch or not, we have to try to play the same style of play. We have enough players, we have capable players on the pitch to do such.

Last game I thought we were really doing that in the first half, but you take that red card in the first half like that, and then things become changed, and you're going to have to throw tactics out the door and try to survive the next 50 minutes or so of the game.

In general, just going forward, our ability to get from the back half to the front half needs to improve. We need to do that a little bit quicker. And then once we get into the front half, central combinations, getting balls to the wings, and getting crosses in has to be -- we have to be more efficient in the final third. We do create chances, but we're just not scoring at the rate that we should be.

Q. Just want to get your thoughts on those early Galaxy days. What do you remember about those days, and how has that sort of motivated through throughout your career to where you are now?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, once I got to the Galaxy, that's where my career really took off. So I remember those days, and I remember playing with Calichman and Hartman and Vanney and those guys, even the high performance trainer was our fitness trainer at the time, Jim Liston. So I have a lot of history with those guys.

I just remember as a young player, my rookie year, just being with those guys, learning from those guys. Learning a lot from Calichman, who was a formidable defender for the Galaxy. Those guys taught me a lot, him along with guys like Robin Fraser and stuff like that.

So I learned a lot then. As I said, the main part of my career was with the Galaxy for seven, eight seasons. Those days I'll always remember. We won a lot of championships. We won a lot of games. We played very good football, and those days I will never forget. Those kind of set the foundation for me going forward.

But those days, as a player, you remember them, and you hope to duplicate them now as a coach and win some trophies. One of the things we always talked about with those teams is filling that trophy case. That's something that, as a coach now, I'm trying to do with this start. So hopefully I continue in that vein.

Q. With Shaqiri, obviously you've been around a lot of designated players and you know what goes into that

just beyond on-the-field stuff. How do you feel Xherdan is handling that part of it considering he's obviously -- there's a lot of hype around him. He's on a city bus now in Chicago. How do you think he's handling that part of being a designated player, some of the stuff that's not just on the field.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I'm sure it's not as much pressure as he's used to, as it is in Europe, so I think he's used to all that attention, and I think he's handling it well.

What I really like about him is he's a leader off the field. We have a lot of young players, and you always see him, even now being injured, he shows up to video sessions, and he has his input, and the players listen to a guy like that because he's been there, done that, so to speak.

His leadership off the field has been very, very good for us. And because we have so many young players, it's good to have someone who takes the time to -- you know, not always yelling at players, but correcting guys, showing guys when they make mistakes, holding guys accountable and holding himself accountable. That's something that I'm very proud that he's come in and really made himself a part of the team off the field.

But we do want to get him back on the field as soon as possible.

Q. With Brian Gutierrez, what happened Saturday, what have you said to him about, I guess, specifically the first yellow card, and what were those discussions like with him?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Maybe the second yellow was soft, probably shouldn't have been called, but at the end of the day, if you don't make that silly mistake on the first yellow, then we're not talking about that, and maybe we come out of that game with some points because I thought, at the time of the red card, it was a pretty evenly matched game. They had some chances, we had some chances, and the kid was playing well. He was filling in really well for Shaqiri. He was finding gaps in between the midfield and the back four, and that's what we asked of him. I thought he was playing very well.

So it's very unfortunate that that happened, but it's best that he learns that now in April than in a game in October in the playoffs or something. So it's a learning experience, and hopefully he learns from that, and hopefully the other players learn from that because that first yellow is very silly and it kind of put us behind the eight ball once he picked up that second yellow. I'm sure he learned from it, and he'll be back stronger next game.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Gabriel Slonina. Obviously you don't see many 17-year-olds starting goalkeepers in any professional league, but it seems like he plays well beyond his years, and I think he's also tied for the league lead in clean sheets so far. Just curious for your thoughts on his development and the impression he's made on you since you've arrived.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Yeah, he's not a typical 17-year-old. His maturity is beyond his age. He has great command of the defense. He's talking. He's getting guys in good positions. So you see that, not just his physical abilities, but his communication skills and stuff like that, you see that in training and in the games.

We don't call upon him much, but when we do call upon him to make saves, he's come up big. He's just given up two goals so far in the six games. So we expect him to continue to grow. I think Adin Brown does a really, really good job with him on a daily basis, so I expect his development to continue to grow and him continue to get better.

We're very confident, even at his young age, with him back there. I think as a goalkeeper you always want your back four to have confidence in you, and I think those guys back there have confidence in him so that, when called upon, he can make the save.

We're happy for him. We just want to make sure he continues to grow and stays level headed.

Q. I know you are focusing on the game on Saturday, but I'd like to find out how you approach the game of the U.S. Open Lamar Hunt that's like three days after. I know you probably have a plan, but what do you think of opening in the Lamar Hunt on Tuesday, three days after.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: One of the things that we stress on this team is that, guys, whenever we step on the pitch, whether it's friendly, preseason, regular season match, open cup, whatever have you, we're trying to win. There's no ifs, ands, maybes, it's about winning. We're in this business to win. We're going to go into that game to win that game, and we're going to put a team out there that we think is capable of winning the game.

Now, we have to juggle between the league and the Open Cup and make sure we don't stretch ourselves, but come Tuesday, you'll see a team out there we think is very capable of giving us a victory because we want to go as far as possible in that tournament also while also continuing to stay in the playoff race above the playoff line in regular season play.

