

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Ezra Hendrickson

Press Conference



Q. Just wondering if there's any clarity on the goalkeeping situation for Sunday. You kind of teased something post-game Saturday and I was wondering if there was any update on that.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Yeah, we are going to go with Brady this weekend. We think that he's done well enough with the second team and he deserves an opportunity to see what he can do with the first team.

We didn't want to put him in the game in Cincinnati last week, just it being such a hostile environment there with their fans and stuff like that. And just wanted to make sure that when we did give them a game, it was in a somewhat more conducive environment to him succeeding.

So this weekend, we'll get him to start with the first team.

Q. And also just following up, I guess Gabriel Slonina is still out with the head issue. What is that situation, and when did it happen?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, that happened last week in training. Just came out for a cross and got his head hit Ivanov's hip. He's been in protocol ever since and still is currently. So that's the situation with that. It was just one of those, you know, freak accidents.

Q. Apart from winning, is there anything else you want to see from the team weekend and get out of this game?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: For the past three weeks, we have talked about once we realized we were out of the playoffs, the whole vibe was, hey, let's finish on a positive note. You know, let's finish these three games, the Leon game included, on a positive note. Every time we step on the pitch, friendly or not, we want to win the game.

We definitely want to win this game but we also want to make sure that we finish strong and give a good showing. It's a home game and 25th anniversary for our fans, so

there will be that kind of hype around the game. We want to make sure we go on a very, very positive note this weekend.

And I think the guys are in a mode that that's very possible. New England is a very team, even though they didn't make the playoffs, just one year removed from Supporter Shield, so we are not going to take them lightly. But we like the way that we have been playing. We know that we still have some work to do, some consistency still needs to be there. We need to learn how to finish out games a little better but you know, positive showing this weekend is something that we're looking for.

Q. Since the last game on Saturday, there's been some reports out about Jhon Durán being on the radar of European teams and potential offers. Is there anything to that, and do you honestly expect him to be with the Fire next year or will there be a team coming in to sign him?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, I certainly hope that he's with us next year. But you know, when you're a player of that calibre and that talent at such a young age, I would be surprised if teams, especially European teams weren't looking or weren't paying attention. And also, getting a call-up to the Colombian National Team I'm sure helped as far as the exposure for him.

But he's a Fire player and he'll continue to be that until otherwise noted. But I can see why teams are very interested. The kid has shown what he can do at a very high level. He's come into a situation where he's basically had to carry the team on his back as far as the goal-scoring production goes, and I think he's handling that very, very well.

You know, still not quite the finished product but he's -- his ceiling, and I always told you guys from day one, his ceiling along with Guti, they're ceilings are very, very high, and they are both really showing that potential. I'm very happy for them. I'm loving the way they are progressing and the way their careers are improving.

So he's here. He's our player. But I can see why teams are very interested.

Q. And with Durán, obviously when he got here, he

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was pretty raw and needed some polish and it looks like he's improved a great deal in this season. Where are some areas that you think he has improved over the course of this season and what do you attribute that improvement to?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, the biggest improvement is him being able to play within the team structure. As far as not so much on the attacking side of things because we want him to be -- show his individualism, show his skill level, but team defending is something we pride ourselves on a lot here. And early in the season, he was having a little trouble with that, just learning the system, how we defend as a team.

Because we have always been a very organized team; hence, the 13 shutouts, and sometimes when you don't have a team buy-in, total team buy-in, it becomes difficult and you start leaking goals. I think from his standpoint, that part of it has been better.

Also, discipline. A lot of times Durán didn't play early in the season but sometimes coaches decision, and other times, it was him being in discipline, yellow cards, red cards, especially suspension. Getting a yellow card on a hard tackle is one thing but getting it for taking the ball away or throwing the ball or standing in front of the ball, those are things, that maturity level of him, that professionalism has improved a lot. So it's easier for us to now start putting him on the pitch because a lot of those things he had overcame.

But the talent was always there. He was just raw and also just some off-the-field stuff that he need to sort out and that ability to play within the team structure when we didn't have the ball was something that kept him off the pitch a lot of times.

But we always knew that once we got that discipline level and that team buy-in right, he would be a force to be reckoned with and he's showing it.

Q. What did you mean by "off-the-field stuff"?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Sometimes in training, you know, he's a young kid, he's 18 and sometimes he could be a little hard-headed. But you know, he's come around. You know, we always want to -- because it's team first. Our motto here is "team first" and it doesn't matter who the player is, what your level is; if you're not bought in what we are trying to do as a team, it becomes difficult for you to get on the pitch.

I think his willingness to buy into our team defending and stuff like that was an issue at first, but he's come around.

He's becoming a professional. He's learning what he needs to do when we don't have the ball so when we receive the ball he's in a good position to do what he's been doing. He's come a long ways, and we are happy to see that growth in him as a professional.

Q. What has stood out to you about the play of Brian Gutierrez, what's really stood out to you in his development here in MLS?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, he's becoming more of a complete player. I think he's another one that's very talented when we have the ball. He's very talented when he has the ball. But a lot of times, you know, the defensive part of it was not there.

For us as a team, everyone has to play on both sides of the ball. That's something that he has, also improved on a lot. He's been called upon at times when Shaq has been out to really help in, and it's big shoes to fill. We always tell him, look at the guys ahead of you and what they are doing, and try to emulate them. I think the kid is growing into a very, very well-rounded player, and we're happy to see that.

Q. Going into your last game of the season, also your last game in your first season as a head coach in MLS. How would you evaluate yourself? How have you improved over the course of the season, learning on the job a little bit, and how do you feel about your first season as a head coach in the MLS?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I think I came into it saying there would be growing pains. And it wasn't just for the team; it was for myself as a coach. And there are times this year, it wasn't so easy for me.

There were a couple games that you would say were letdown games. And as a coach, whenever your team doesn't perform the way you expect or the way you train or the way you're teaching them, you reflect and you say, okay, well, did I do enough? Not just to show them but also to get them to believe that that's the right thing.

I think when we went through that ten-game -- when we didn't win a game, that was very challenging for me. And I had to really dig deep because it's hard to get players to buy into what you're trying to teach if the results are not there.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how well the first half you play but if you come out in the second half and you let the game slip away, then it's really easy for players to start questioning what it is that you're trying to do; is it the right thing.

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So just learning how to deal with different players, learning how to deal with setbacks throughout game, from game-to-game and not getting too caught up in, you know, the situation at hand was something that I had to learn because there were times this year when things didn't go so well.

I think someone was telling me a stat, I think maybe Philly is the only team that had more first half shutouts than we did. So that says, okay, the first half, you're able to keep teams at zero. Sometimes you even get the lead.

But then in the second half, for whatever reason, you know, the team's not able to sustain a lead or sometimes not able to chase a lead, and why is that, why is this happening. It's several factors.

But as a coach, you take that on and you reflect and you try to figure out, okay, what can I do different; what could I have done differently. Of course sometimes with injuries, sometimes not too much experience sometimes, to bring off the bench, it kind of handcuffs you.

But you still as a coach have to find a way to finish out games. And I think some of these games that we didn't finish out, you know, I hold myself responsible for those because like I said, as a coach, you have to get the players to be able to play 90 minutes and not just 45 or 60 or 65 minutes.

I could think of two games in particular against Columbus at home and against Charlotte at home where, you know, I wish we had those games back. But they are gone now but I've just got to make sure that we learn from those -- those games and continue to grow as a team.

I think the team has grown a lot, and we have improved a lot but there's still a lot more to -- a lot improvement that's needed. Even the last game, being on the road against a team like that that's such a good team, well-coached team, very good fans, very good atmosphere. You go up 3-0 and then it's still nervy moments in the last ten, 15 minutes.

We as a team have to find a way to finish out games and be stronger when we are up against teams like that because had we done that a couple more games this year, we would be still possibly playing for the playoff this weekend. You know, I think we let that slip away a little bit and that's -- you know, I as a coach have to get better with that and as a team we have to become better at seeing games out. Because, you know, when you have 13 shutouts in a season out of 34 games, you have to make the playoffs. You have to find a way to make the playoffs because there's a lot of games where you didn't get scored

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