

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Ezra Hendrickson Press Conference

Q. I just wanted to ask you about with off-season business presumably coming up what conversations have you already had with technical staff regarding what's going to happen in the off-season, and are there any particular areas of the roster that you think need improvement?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: We have been meeting the past couple weeks since the season has been over with. Last week we took a little bit of a break but we've had meetings with Georg and Sebastian and Eddie, along with my staff, just talking about where are the positions that we can improve on, salary cap and all that stuff into consideration and what can we do and how can we best improve the squad. I think that we have a good working understanding of what it is that we need to do and where we need to get better at.

Obviously goalkeeper with Slonina being gone, that's something we have to make sure we get right. We think we have a good player in Brady that's lined up to compete for that spot but we still want to make sure that we get that right because I think that was a big part of us having 13 shutouts this year is just having someone back there that when called upon, do the job.

At right back is a place where we need to improve, also, and obviously up top, Durán has come on and did well for us but we think getting another player that can produce goals and finish chances is something that we also need. There's some other positions that we probably need more competition at to make sure that the depth is there. But I would say, you know, a striker, a right back and a goalkeeper is something that we really see the need for, and so we'll be continuing throughout the off-season trying to improve the team on the whole as far as going into next season.

Q. I know you're watching the MLS playoffs now. What are you seeing in those teams that they have that you don't that you would need to add to get to that level?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: A lot of it is depth. Let's take Montréal, for instance. If Kyoto is out or he's coming back from injury so he cannot start, you can start Kamara and it doesn't really change much. That ability to be 2-deep at each position is something that I think a lot of these teams probably have over us right now.

That's why we are trying to make sure that we are in a position, because each team is going to have injuries throughout the year but we have to make sure that because we are not always going to have every player on roster like we did in that 5- to six-game span when we were doing well. We took some injuries and we kind of fell off when that happened.

We just have to make sure that we have people in position that can step in with their injuries. It also helps with training, being more competitive when two guys minimum are competing for a position, and so we are trying to make sure that we get as deep as possible going into next season. Because we felt like, you know, for 60, 65 minutes most games, we were in games. I think we fell off towards the end of games when we let ourselves down, sometimes injury, sometimes just not having the wherewithal to finish games out or chase games. We are very aware of those positions that we need to fill.

Q. You mentioned the need for a striker. Hoping you're able to expand upon that. When there's a DP slot open, there's where the energy goes. And how do you look back on Shaq's performance with the club? What did you see from him and what do you need more of and obviously a World Cup coming up for him as well?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: The guys in the front office, Georg and Pele and Eddie and those guys did a really good job of freeing up a DP spot for us going into this off-season. That was a very good job by them. So now we have this DP spot and we are looking to fill that spot as a striker and getting a proven goal scorer that has the numbers that has -- obviously we are going to look at the statistical things as far as physical abilities, speed, strength, all that stuff.

Mainly someone that's a proven goal scorer because we think that to get to where we want to get, and that's back



into the playoffs, we need someone that's, you know, 12-plus, maybe even 15-plus goal scorer.

We think we have that in Duran, but we still have to make sure, you know, because Duran still is just an 18-year-old kid; that we have someone there that can help his maturation and also someone that's putting the ball in the back of the net himself. We have a very good competition there for that position.

You know, so that's something that the DP spot will most likely go towards, but we are not leaving any stones unturned. We have a lot of positions that we feel like we need help, also, but that's a position that the focus will be on as far as trying to use that DP spot.

As far as Shaq, we thought Shaq did really, really well for us. You know, barring some injuries and stuff, he was there game-in and game-out. But he's just one person. You have to have, especially a guy like Shaq who is so good at making that final pass, and dissecting defenses, you have to have someone at the end of those passes that's going to put the ball in the back of the net. I think we were lacking that this year in the first part of the year, especially. We just weren't putting our chances away, and a lot of it was him creating those chances that we weren't putting away. That can become frustrating at times but I thought he was very professional and he was very patient with what was going on with the team.

So overall, he's a great leader for the team. He's helping to bring the young players along really well and we are looking forward to an even more productive player from him next year because we have all seen what he can do when hit and when he has the right tools to work with.

Q. I wanted to ask one more question. A lot of the younger players who were training with the team didn't get a whole lot of season. Anyone who you think can play a bigger role next season?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Definitely. If you look at Sergio and Monis, we thought these guys were making good strides towards the end of the year. Look at a guy like Kendall Burks, all of the sudden he came on very strong when called upon the last couple games. We thought he showed well for himself, and these are guys who didn't get to play much at all with the first team during the year but you know, we watched their progress in training and we watched their progress in the second team matches, and that's why we weren't shy about putting them on to the pitch when we had to.

So these are three guys when you look at what they have done this year and the progress we have that I had that we

think going forward could help contribute even more next year.

The other guys are also improving, but if you want to talk about the three young guys besides Durán and Gutierrez, those guys have made strides and are first-team players. But as far as younger players who mainly played with the second team, I think those three guys have shown really, really well this year.

Q. You've mentioned Georg and Sebastian a couple times today. Have you been told they will be back and they will be the ones running the team in the off-season?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I have not been told either way but as far as I know they are. I think these guys have been here and have done a good job. Until I'm told otherwise, these are the guys that I lean upon to get players in here so we can get this team back to where it belongs.

That's stuff I don't really concern myself with as far as what the timeline is, so to speak with those guys. But I have worked really well with them and they are willing to do what it takes to bring in the right players to get this thing where we need it to be, and I think if I look forward to next year, it's playoff. Playoff is a must. We have to do what it takes to get this team back into the playoffs.

Even this year, the beginning of the year, trying to rebuild this thing, we have shown at times that we can play with the top teams and we can really, really compete and be in the playoffs. But we just are not quite there yet, and I think with these guys' help we'll get the right players in here to get this team back to where we belong, because even a little shorthanded at times this year, the football that we played at times, you can say it was very, very good and it was very playoff-worthy, and some of the teams we beat, Seattle, didn't make the playoffs, but still is on any given day a very competitive team; beating Philly and stuff like that who many have picked to win it all this year.

We have shown at times that we are on right track, and I think if we continue to build like this and get the right complementary players, a couple starters in some positions in here, we will get back to the playoffs next season.

Q. You mentioned right back and striker as two places that you guys will look to address this off-season. That leaves me to think about Kacper and Boris. With Kacper, what went wrong for him, and is it possible that maybe just the change of scenery would be better for him and what's the thought process with Boris for next season?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, I think Kacper struggled with some injuries this year. I don't think he was ever really fit physically as far as injury-free. I know most players don't play injury-free but for the most part, I think he was bothered by whatever injuries he was carrying maybe the back foot or whatever. He never really got going and we expected him to produce a lot more than he did this year. So that's an area that we feel like we need to get some, like I said, competition in there and get some players that's going to put the ball away for us. As far as Boris, he's in his last day of his contract and that's another area where we feel we can also improve there.

But you know, these guys are our players, Kacper is still under contract. We are just trying to make this team better and not sort of pointing out any particular player as far as whether or not we like that player.

But whatever it's going to take to improve this team is what we're going to do because at the end of the day we owe it to our fans, we owe it to the owner to get the best quality guys in here and form the best team so that when we step out on the pitch, we know that we are at full strength and we are as competitive as possible on that given day.

And that's how you get into the playoffs, being able to compete game-in, game-out, not for five games at a time. The more competition we can have at a position, the more people we have competing to get on the pitch come Saturday night, the better the team will be and the stronger the team will be and the training session will be more competitive.

One of the things we always tell the players is we train the way we play; we play the way we train. So if these training sessions can be more competitive and guys are competing more for positions, I think the team as a whole will be better. That's what we are trying to do when we talk about positions of need.

Q. You mentioned Chris Brady. I don't expect you object October 17 to hand the starter's shirt to Chris but obviously some buzz and excitement around him. How do you view that situation, can you expand if at all on how that goalkeeper battle might look of one U.S. youth international going out and one stepping into his shoes perhaps?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I think Brady showed us in the last game that he's the player that when called upon, can do the job. And you have to have someone back there that keeps the balls out of the back of the net.

I think the way we defend as a team, we are a very

organized team. Hence not making the playoffs and still having 13 shutouts. A lot of that was Gaga but a lot of it was team defending. We were not getting broken down by teams very easily, and we have to continue that. With another young keeper in the goal, we have to continue that as a team as far as our team defending.

As I said previously, every position there will be competition. So it's not a composition that we are not just going to hand it to Brady. If you asked me now, I would say yes, he's front runner to take over the reins but we know the competition needs to be there and he'll get that from Richie and whoever else, other keepers that we have here.

But he's shown that he's ready to step in but it's just not going to be handed to him. He's going to be competing for it because we don't at any time want players to get complacent and thinking the job is going to be theirs. We want competition and that's how we think we can get this team to be better. Every position, two players, minimum, competing at a similar level for the position, not a big drop-off from player one to player two because that can also cost you late in games when you feel like you don't really maybe trust the player, the alternative, or sometimes we have three games in eight days, and instead of running the same guy out for three games, there's a player, a backup that you trust to put in the middle game of the three.

Trying to get this team as competitive as possible is the focus and it's the same on every position, including the goalkeeper position. But Brady has shown that he can step on the pitch.

Q. Jairo Torres, his year one did not go how he or the Chicago Fire hoped. What type of player could we see? There was a lot of expectation.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Yeah, definitely. I am that's another player that we had that was hampered by injury. I think he never really got to show us, you know, what he can, and I think a lot of people are going to be surprised once he's recovered and he's back on the pitch playing. You know, at times, we saw a little glimpse of the player that we brought in. I can remember specifically the Toronto game, one of his first starts, and for 66 minutes that he was on the pitch, we saw the Jairo Torres that we expected. He had good command, and even scored a goal that got caught back by VAR in that game. And then he had to come out because with the injury, he couldn't go longer.

We have seen some other games where this player could be a very, very good player for us. He fits our system very

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

well. We just hope going into next season we have him at full strength because I think he'll surprise a lot of people who maybe still have doubts or maybe who don't really see what we saw before bringing him into the squad.

Q. Wondering if there's any updates on the guys who underwent surgery? Jairo, Gastón, Andre or Wyatt, how is everybody doing, and is there any possibility for any other off-season procedures for other players?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: As of now, everyone is healing well. Some are going to take a little longer than others but so far, everyone is I think on the right track, on the right timeline as far as returning. We will do year end physicals after we train these next couple weeks, and if any player needs surgery or needs further work, that will be determined. But as of right now, until we do those year-end physicals, we can't really say if anyone else will be in surgery. Hopefully not. But you know how these things goes. We do have a couple more weeks of training here and we'll see how we go in those two weeks.

Q. More generally, coming in as a first-time manager for the club, you want to establish ways of doing things, establish culture. How much do you believe you did that this year and how do you feel about the team's culture and your system moving forward now to year two?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I think as a first-year coach, I learned a lot of things. I think if you get the culture in right direction, if you look at the team going through those ten games without winning a game; if you look at that Columbus match, after coming out of that ten-game and then playing so well for 60, 65 minutes against that Columbus team and then failing in the second half like that; a team that doesn't have a good culture, that's not cohesive, could have easily folded.

But I think we showed some resilience. We showed some team chemistry and we showed some fight that we were able to after that game go on a nice run of games where we just bond together as a team and did what we set out to do from the start of the season.

So I think in that aspect, keeping a cohesive group, a group that believes in each other, a group that is believing in what it is that you are doing, we are very good at doing that.

Now part of creating a good, strong culture is winning and so that's the part now that we need to improve on because when you win, that culture of the team also improves, and you can get even more buy-in to all of the guys.

So if I look back at this year, I see some success, I see some progress, which has helped change the culture of the team because it's been a few years since this team has made the playoffs. So I can see how it will be easy to say, here we go again.

But I think the way we finished the season, and even when we were out of it or needed points, going to New England or going to Columbus and getting ties, the guys just never gave up. Going into Montréal so short-handed and playing them in a really, really good game, ended up losing the game 3-2, they had some goals that we could have avoided.

But as a team and in the growth of the culture and the team as a whole, I think it's been really good this year. We have shown some progress. We are showing that we are on the right track to where we are trying to be. I would say that things are looking up rather than looking down wards. Had we finished this season on a ten-game losing streak, then I would say different. But I think the way we finished the game, even though the points weren't enough to get in the playoffs, we have shown progress and I like the direction the way the team is going. You see the young players such as Guti and Durán getting an opportunity to get on the pitch and show what the future holds for this squad.

I'm excited about going into the second year, and I know that this team will continue to grow.

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