

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Ezra Hendrickson Press Conference

Q. Just wondering if everybody is in camp and ready to go, and if there's been any new injury concern since we last spoke a week ago.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Yeah, everyone is in camp at this point. Souquet has gone back to his country to shore up some things, but other than that, everyone is here. There are a couple knocks, but nothing major as far as injury-wise. All of the guys who were injured at the end of the season last year are back and in training, so we're happy about that.

Q. Give guess just interacting with the team so far, what's the attitude of the club now as you start up a new season and as you look forward to a new beginning for the club?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: We're elated. It's been really, really good. The players came back very, very fit. All the injured guys are back, and the atmosphere, the attitude of all the players is just -- we're very happy as a staff to see, and you know, it speaks well for the players that we have here, the players that we have brought in here these past couple years because after last season, it could be time for downtime.

But these guys have come back very positive. They know what's at task and what we need to do. As a staff, as a head coach, it's very, very promising for me, I'm very optimistic about what we can do this year with this team.

Q. As you know, preseason there's a lot of rumors going on, players getting on to the team. Is this anything you can tell us, like if you guys have something close, hiring any player or any position that you're specifically looking for, something you can tell us?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, you know, we're constantly looking to get better. We do have some spots that we need to fill still. We're close on some things, but these negotiations are ongoing and nothing is concrete right now.

So there's really not much I could elaborate on that just beyond the fact that we are still looking to make the team better, and we know that there's some spots that we need to fill, and we're trying to do that as an organization so that we can put the best product possible on the pitch this year.

Q. Any positions in particular you're looking to fill in?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, we came into the off-season knowing several different positions that we needed to fill. Now with Durán being gone, that's another hole that we need to fill. We have just Kacper and Bezerra right now, and we know we need to fill that spot.

Also there are positions that I'm not at liberty to say right now because I don't want to let anything out of the bag, but I think it's pretty obvious some of the positions we need to fill. Right now as is, we have people in every position, and we just know that we need to make the team stronger and make the team deeper, so to speak, and it's not just depth as in numbers, but depth as in experience.

We need to get some experience, some more experience on the team, and that's what we are thriving for right now. Our window, we still have a little bit of time to go. So we do have some time but we want to get guys in as quickly as possible, so we're working hard towards that.

Q. How are the new signings settling into the team in training camp?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Very well. We have been very impressed with what we've seen. These are players that we are very diligent as far as scouting them and before we brought them into the team. So we knew what they were able to do.

But it always takes some time for new players to fit in, but these guys are fitting in really well. We're looking forward to great things from them.

Q. Jonathan Dean, one of those new players, signed from the USL Championship, what expectations do you have for him, and is signing players from the USL Championship an untapped resource for MLS teams because it doesn't seem like guys jump from the championship to signing with an MLS team all that



often.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, we brought Johnny in to give him the opportunity to compete for a starting spot. We want competition at every position.

So in that position, like all the other positions, there will be competition. Johnny has been doing really well but he's here to make the team as a starter. That now depends on how he performs in training but there will be competition there because there are other people that were brought in at that position also, and that's what we wanted to create on this team, competition.

As far as the USL, we want to comb every aspect, throughout the world, throughout the lower leagues in this country to find the best fit for this organization and for this club and for this team, and that's what we are trying to do.

Maybe the USL championship has not been tapped into as much but I think more and more you're going to see teams looking to that league for players. It's the big jump. It's not an easy jump from the USL championship to the MLS because the MLS have grown so much.

But there are players in that league that, you know, can come into the MLS and make a good career. I don't think that's -- if it's not tapped in right now, I don't think that will go on for too much longer. I think teams are going to start looking into that league for players.

But that's a competition that a lot of teams have MLS pro teams and most of the players will come from that and from the academy and stuff but USL Championship is not -- and it's shown over the years that players have come from that league and been able to perform well in MLS. So that's something that I think will be ongoing.

Q. Why do you think that is, that teams haven't tapped that market? There's a lot of experienced players who are familiar with the American soccer landscape so why do you think teams haven't really used that as much in the past as maybe they could have and should have?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Different reasons. Maybe you know, let's take a team, maybe they don't see someone that fit what they are looking for or maybe sometimes the players in the USL championship, maybe they are a little older than what teams are looking for, so it's a bunch of different aspects.

Also with the academies being so strong in MLS now, and with the new like Under 22 initiative and programs like that that the league has instilled, maybe it's easier to go and get

a foreign 19-year-old that's play 50 professional matches that probably fits better what you're trying to do than someone who is 25, 26 or maybe not as much experience.

I think there are a bunch of different reasons why, but nothing too shy about USL Championship because it's a good league. It's a very strong league, and it's getting better, also.

Q. Didn't have a full season but you had a lot of the season with Chris Mueller. What stood out to you about him, and also, what are you expecting out of him now here in 2023 as he has a full season under his belt and able to start right from the beginning?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, Chris is a very good player, and like I alluded to earlier, before we bring a player in, we really do due diligence to make sure that the player fits.

And Chris was sort of easy for us. He's an Illinois boy and he played in MLS before and he showed that he's capable of doing well in the League. He came in and played really well for us. Scored some big goals for us and was very, very important for us going down the stretch.

But like you said, he didn't have a full season with us, and we've seen what he can do. I think he's come back really, really fit. He's got a little break because went straight from Scotland to playing with us. I think he's shown well in training.

What he brings is that ability to break defenses down with 1v1, someone to get behind defenses off the ball making runs. We've seen like the goal he scored in Vancouver last year, his ability to take defenders on and put the ball in the back of the net. That's something that we need more from wing players and that's something that Chris brings to us.

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