

Chicago Fire Media Conference

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

Chicago, Illinois, USA

Ezra Hendrickson

Press Conference



Q. Since the last time we spoke there's been a couple new additions, Kemar a, and I don't want to mispronounce his name, Koutsias, so what are your thoughts on those two signings and are either of them a possibility to play Saturday night?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Yeah, well, you know, like I mentioned last week, we always are trying to make the team better, look at our needs, look at our most pressing needs. And we've maintained throughout the preseason that putting the ball in the back of the net, getting at least competition in here, the striker position was something we wanted to focus on.

It took a little longer than we expected, and I'm not sure that we are quite finished there yet, but as a coach, you know, it's a pleasure, it's great to have players in each position competing, and that's what we are trying to get here that will make the team better.

Kei is here already. Georgios, I think I'm saying that right, Georgios is awaiting his visa, so he's not here currently but it's just about trying to do what we can to improve the squad. I think that's a step in the right direction.

Q. And just to follow up on Kacper Przybylko, does he have a future with the team or are both sides looking for an exit strategy?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: No, Kacper is our player. He's here. He's been here with us. He's trained all preseason and he's here with us. He's a Chicago Fire player.

What happened this past week as far as getting those two players has nothing to do with him leaving or anything like that. He's still our player and he'll be here on Saturday playing.

Q. You're in the unique position of being the only team off, so you got to maybe get an extra little look at your opponent on the weekend. I wonder, how did you and your staff exactly handle that? Were you just home

sipping on an espresso watching the game initially and breaking it down after that? Were all together watching game? Can you take us through how that may have helped you plan for this a little more thoroughly?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Yeah. No, we watched individually, separately. But you know, New York is a team that we're very familiar with. We played them twice last year.

So it's not a team that we didn't know anything about. They have made some changes but we're very familiar. We were familiar before last weekend's game but even more so familiar now knowing what the new kind of NYC FC looks like. They are a very good team, very talented team. Their parent organization of that club has the ability to bring really, really quality players in.

So yes, they lost that game last weekend but it's not a team that you can take lightly or take for granted because there's still some very, very talented players on that team. We'll be prepared. It's a home game for us, so we want to win this game for our fans, to get a good start for the season, we definitely, definitely want to win this game.

But it's not going to be an easy task. It's a very, very good opponent that we are going to be playing on Saturday.

Q. So coming into the second season at the helm, last season was a bit frustrating when you guys were playing pretty good but just seemed to fail to put the ball in the back of the net. Obviously during preseason, it's a little different but you guys seemed to have been scoring a little bit more goals. Now with the addition of Kamara, do you expect this to be going forward this upcoming season and hopefully creating more opportunities?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Yeah, definitely. Our thing with the lack of scoring last year, when we look at it and we reflect about last season, we felt like that really kept us from achieving our goal, which is making the playoffs last year. Because with 12 shutouts in a 24-game season, that team should be in the playoffs. But you have to score in the other end, and that's something we weren't doing.

Towards the end, we got a little better. We were scoring a

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little more, but then we took some injuries and the wheels kind of fell off, so to speak. But we are focused in the preseason about scoring more, about creating more chances, and we like the way that has gone so far.

So we are looking to showcase that on Saturday night in front of our fans, not just our ability to score and also our ability to score and our ability to keep a clean sheet on the other end because that's very important for us. Very, very important that we stay organized as we have been as a team, and play collectively as well defensively as we did last year.

But we are very, very, you know, adamant that, you know, on the other end, has to improve. We have been working on it. We are going to continue to work on it. Are we going to score five, six goals on Saturday? Who knows? But we are going to score, and that is something we were lacking last year,, and we are looking forward to putting the ball in the back of the net a little bit more, starting on Saturday.

Q. I have a two-part question here for you regarding the team for this weekend. So first of all, you mentioned before that the goalkeeping position is an open competition. At this point, do you know who is going to be starting? Is that Chris Brady or someone else? And the second part is there any injury update regarding Gastón Giménez or anybody else this weekend?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: The first part, the goalkeeper situation, I am 100 percent sure that NYC FC is watching this right now, so I'm going to defer as far as not answering that question. But we have a pretty good idea of who will be starting on Saturday, but we are just not going to go into that right now, just, you know, for that sake, as I spoke of.

And then the second question, everyone is healthy right now and is available for selection on Saturday.

Q. One of the questions I wanted to ask you is: What are some areas do you feel the team has improved compared to last year and the fans will be able to see it on this Saturday's match against New York City FC?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, certainly, with we are putting the ball in the back of the net at a more rapid, more frequent pace. So that has improved.

But I think our ability to get from zone two, which is mid-third to the final third at a more efficient, at a quicker rate, has improved. So our speed of play through the thirds are very -- have improved a lot, and that will help create more chances. And then when you have more chances created, then your ability to score more goals also

improves. I think just so speed of play, moving through the thirds, especially from zone two to zone three has improved greatly.

And that comes from having guys moving off the ball. Having guys looking to get behind. I think last year, a lot of times teams were just able to keep us go in front of their back four because we didn't have threats. So we didn't look to get behind as much as we should have. But I think that has improved a lot this year, and I think that's something that the fans will see on display on Saturday night.

Q. Quick question on Koutsias. Do you have any plans on him potentially featuring for the Fire 2 like Durán did last season?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: It will have to be a wait-and-see. I'm sure by the time he get here, he'll probably need some games, he'll probably need some minutes, and that's what Fire 2 is therefore, to develop young players and also first-team players who need minutes, whether they are coming back from injury or whether they have just joined the team to get some minutes.

If the minutes is needed, for sure. But he's been playing with his club overseas, and I think the quicker we can get him here as far as getting that visa and getting him into camp, that will probably dictate whether or not he even play any minutes with the second team.

But if it takes a while, then we definitely will have to get him some minutes with the second team so he can just get caught up to speed with the rest of the group.

Q. In terms of tactics, what's it like balancing things in terms of staying solid defensively while also sending players forward and trying to score more goals. What's that balance like?

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, they say the best defense is a good offense sometimes. We are a team that when we have the ball, we want it open up, we want to play, we want to get forward and we want to get forward and play in the front half as quickly as possible, because want the game to be played in the opponent's half. We are still going to continue to do that.

We are trying to get our outside backs to get forward more often, more efficiently, more timely. I always tell them, I'd rather them get forward five times a half and give us good -- four good crosses, rather than get forward ten times and get two good crosses in. So it's not just about them getting forward. It's about them getting forward effectively and efficiently.

I played outside back as a professional, and that was one of my strong points, that ability to get forward as a surprise in the attack. So that's something that we've been working on and we are doing it a lot better now, a lot more efficient. So we hope to also showcase that this weekend.

But staying strong defensively is, you know, the first and foremost of the outside backs' jobs, as much as we wanted to get forward, they have to be able to defend when called upon. But the way we defend as a team, we try to make everything predictable for the guys in the back, so it's not too hard of a task with them as far as matching up.

Because like you know in this league, the winger, the guys play on the wings are very fast, very dynamic, so you have to have good positioning and you have to have good timing, and you have to be very solid 1v1 defenders to play at outside back. Once we have this, then what we get going forward is an added bonus. But we definitely encourage our outside backs to get forward.

Q. You had mentioned a few times about the attitude of the team through training camp. Curious how maybe you see the mindset of the group now that you've completed training camp and arrived at the season, and especially knowing the desire of the group to try to crack into the playoffs.

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, one thing I can say about this group is it's a group that's together. The attitude is there, and this stems back from last year. I mentioned, you know, a couple games where we fell short at home after being up at halftime and how they galvanized together and how we were able to go on that five-, six-game really, really strong run. And that has shown throughout the preseason.

It's a really, really good locker room. We have some good leadership, so that's good, as an extension of the coaching staff.

But the guys, you know, I think something that's fueling the players, too, is just the lack of respect that we're getting from the experts, so if you want to call it bulletin board material.

But I think the guys are together, and this is something that we asked of them, to be together as a team on and off the field, and we're seeing that. It's very easy to tell on the field of play if a team is together off the field or not. I think we have been seeing that very, very well in preseason, so that's something we are going to continue to push.

You know, we've brought in some added reinforcements, and I think overall, the team is stronger than we were last

year, and we're going to surprise some people this year, people who don't expect us to be good as a team, I think we'll surprise them.

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