

# Chicago Fire Media Conference

Saturday, March 25, 2023

Chicago, Illinois, USA

## Ezra Hendrickson

Press Conference



Chicago Fire 3, Inter Miami 2

**Q. You guys get a late win with a late goal. Your overall thoughts and analysis on the victory and performance and if you deserved the win tonight?**

EZRA HENDRICKSON: First of all I want to say that I'm glad the shoe is on the other foot tonight. Last week we gave up a late goal to tie. We didn't lose, but it felt like a loss.

Tonight we wanted to make sure it didn't happen. I thought the guys fought really hard. I told them at halftime, listen, they are at home they are a very good team they are to be going down easy to expect a fight. And I thought we matched them and we were able to get away on the break after going to the 5-4-1, and you know, Kei did what he's been doing all these years in the League, putting that ball away. That was a big goal for us.

This is a win that could really transform a team and really give you some momentum. We have three home games coming up now, so hopefully this will propel us into getting some full points at home.

**Q. You seemed comfortable not being in possession, especially you mentioned the 5-4-1 to allow possession to allow that pressure but be able to counter, it seemed to open up things for Kei, especially at the end. What went through that decision midway at the second half?**

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Especially once it gets to be 2-2, this is something that we practiced during this week. We went into the 5-4-1. We just basically, we're on the road and wanted to make sure we didn't lose the game because if there's an opportunity to win it, then we are doing to do that.

So during the week, we practiced defending, defending and once we win it, can we find that outlet. And Guti, I have to tip my hat off to him because last week in the tie

against Cincy, he missed two maybe three passes where he could give the ball at the top of the box. We sat down and we watched that on film as a team and in our reflection and we talked about that.

Tonight he was in the same position two times and he made the right decisions. On the first goal for Chris, he slid it across and didn't try to be too fancy; and again with Kei, he played him in and Kei played away. It's good to see when a young kid like that is developing as much as Guti is developing. I thought it's been two good games by him, and we just want to continue to grow on that.

But overall as a team we just wanted to make sure we did not lose the game; we played for that opportunity, and when it came I thought we did well with it.

**Q. The first two games you guys had a tough time scoring and the last three; the last couple games, you've put three up both games. Is that what you envisioned, you and the front office envisioned coming into the season, a high-scoring team, or is this something out of nowhere where your team scored three goals, two games back-to-back?**

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Yeah, well, something that we worked on a lot during preseason was our ability to score goals, to be better in the final third. Because last year, we had 12 shutouts, and in a 34-game season, you have 12 shutouts you should make the playoffs.

We knew why we didn't make the playoffs. Beyond the injuries, it was us just not putting our chances away and we worked on that a lot during the preseason. First game, we get both our pivots injured in the first half, so that limits your opportunity to really play an attacking style of football.

Then we go into Philly, you go a man down five minutes in the second half, so again that limits your chance to really get on the offensive end of things.

But the last two weeks I thought we did really well, as you said we got six goals. And you know, if we can win 1-0 I'll take that. I just want us to put ourselves in position every game to come you away with points, whether it's at home or on the road. At home, we want full points. On the road we'll take ties but we don't play for ties. We play to win games.



And hopefully we can continue with that because this is really uplifting for the boys tonight, because after what happened last week, they were a bit down. We kept it positive during the week, and I'm just really happy for them that they came out and stuck with it tonight and came up with a win in a difficult place to play.

**Q. Big result for the team. Last season, this season, there have been a couple times where the Fire have blown leads, and you spoke last week about how that's something you want to see a better response to getting ahead and dealing with a score like that; and it happened again, you let a lead slip. But the reaction to get that win, is that exactly what you wanted to see from the team?**

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Well, yeah, definitely, and like I said, we trained on this exact scenario this week, all right, where the game is tied or we're up, and we just make sure we protected lead or we don't lose the game. But also, you know, not just sitting on the back, on the 18 but looking to get forward. You know, keeping that one guy up and trying to play forward, and we did that really well tonight.

So it's good to see something that you work on in training show itself in a game. But at the end of the day, these guys were not going to give up tonight. It would have been easy because of what happened last week; that we give up the two goals and the game is tied 2-2 for these guys to just hang their head and not fight.

But I thought every man, even the guys that we brought on to help shore up the minimum point put in the effort. They all did. They worked hard. And that's all you can ask of your players: Work hard, trust the tactics, trust the process and believe in what we're doing, and I think these guys are believing and it's starting to show.

Beyond that Philly game, is the only game that so far in the three before tonight that we didn't come out with points, and it looks bleak to see people, but in that locker room, there's no negativity. It's all positive. It's all been: We know we can play better, we know we should do better, and let's just go out and do it. That's something that it's ingrained in them because that's something that we preach as a staff to them every day.

You guys, shut out the noise. Don't listen to experts out there. You guys are much better than people are giving you credit for and it will show. The only way to go out and get recognition is to go out and prove it on the pitch, and I thought tonight was a good start in that direction and we just hope to continue like that.

**Q. Could you rate two players and their performances, Johnny Dean playing the full 90 at multiple positions, left back and then left fullback, left wing back position and then Alonso coming on as a substitute. Curious how you thought both of them played in these new roles.**

EZRA HENDRICKSON: I thought they did really well. Let's start with Johnny. He's a guy we brought up from USL last year and he's someone that we are very happy with. He's a guy that can play multiple positions, and you know as a coach you have someone with that kind of versatility, it's really good to have. He's someone that we trust and someone that we have no issues of putting on the pitch.

So when Miguel Navarro was out, left back, we knew he was a natural fit there. He's a right-footed player but like I say, he can play many different positions and he showed that tonight. Is he the full product yet? No. He's getting there and he's improving day-by-day, and he puts it in in training, and it's good to see his development, also, in just the short time he's been with us.

Alonso has just been with us a couple weeks now. But again, we didn't mind when we wanted to go into a 5-4-1 or 3-5-1-1, whatever you want to call it, to put him on the wing, on the left wing and I thought he did well. He has his defensive tendencies. He knows when to step, when to drop off. He knows how to close guys down and I thought he did well when he came in.

Everyone tonight I thought played well. Those two guys, I was very happy with their performances tonight.

**Q. Your thoughts on Kei's tonight and what it means to have a proven goal scorer on the club?**

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Kei did tonight what he's been doing for quite some time now. If Guti got that ball to him, he would put it in the back of the net. He's a guy that I trust and I've known for a long time now. He came in and we were on the same team, in my last years, he was a rookie in Columbus.

So he's someone I know really well and someone I trust. So I had no issues putting him on the pitch because of what he brings. He works defensively. He's very good at holding up playing; we thought we were starting to lose that battle, so that's why we made that change.

He took a knock halfway through his 30 minutes or whatever he played tonight and it kind of slowed him down a little bit, but he caught his second wind and was able to do what we asked of him, and that's put the ball in the back

of the net. He's been good for us on and off the field.

Unfortunate situation happened in Philly where he picked up that second yellow so he missed last week. But he's someone that we thought we missed his presence on the pitch last week, we missed finishing out that game.

So he's going to get minutes. He's an older guy but we know what he gives us. He's still fit and he's going to bring a lot to this team and this organization.

**Q. Two of your goals come from low crosses into the back post. Was that a byproduct of what the game offered or something that you guys studied?**

EZRA HENDRICKSON: Something we worked on. We noticed that once the ball get on the wing in their final third when they are in the box, they get a little narrow and they always leave the back post. I saw a couple times when Toronto, and I think it was Philly, played back balls crosses. They didn't get goals but we knew that was something we could exploit.

So we made sure we told our weak side winger, whenever we are crossing, you make sure you get in. Someone has to get to the back post. Two or three occasions tonight, we had that and we got it to the guy a couple times. So that's something that we noticed as far as their back, for how narrow they get once they are in their box defending.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports ...