

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Frank Klopas

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, coach.

FRANK KLOPAS: Hi. Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much for joining us, taking the time today. Well will go ahead and get started with questions.

Q. Frank, in the last week we've had new coach appointments, three new guys being brought onto your staff, including a new role with set pieces. What do you think these guys can bring to your backroom staff and why you felt the need to get Ryan Needs on the staff in that role?

FRANK KLOPAS: Well, I think first of all I had a great staff last year, also with C.J. and Nico. Nico was a situation that it was a moment where he had finished coaching the national team of Cyprus and it was a moment where he was able to come and help in five months, knowing that his mind was returning back where his family was. So that was great.

C.J. has been a big part of this club as a player. He was a tremendous help to me. I think it was an opportunity for him through community relations to do something, be involved in the community and do the work he really loves. It's something he wanted to get into long-term, especially starting his foundation. It was an opportunity to get into that position right away with the club, and he decided to do so.

It's great he's still within the club. He has a lot to offer whether he's on the field or doing his role in the community, which he has a tremendous passion for. I think he's going to be a huge asset to the club in that aspect.

I needed to find two positions. My main goal looking into it, I wanted to get, first of all, someone that had MLS experience and someone that can specialize more off the ball as an assistant coach, more on the defensive part,

knowing we're all going to be involved and talking through this final decision, but someone to be more his specialty.

I went through the process to interview different people, a lot of good candidates. In the end I felt that Paulo Nagamura, first of all a great human being, a lot of experience in the league. I felt that we had a really good connection. He has really good ideas, extremely hard-working guy, very bright. For me, that was really a great moment to be able to offer him the job, but also for him to accept this opportunity to be involved in our club.

Then with the appointment of Carlos Garcia, it's someone that's out of the box. Looking to someone that can bring different ideas. He has tremendous experience. Also played the game at the highest level. He's coached in different countries.

Again, a lot of great people that I had to interview and had to go through this process. In the end I felt Carlos was someone that would just kind of complement myself and the rest of the staff. We're still waiting for him because he's in the process of getting his visa.

Then from last year we had talked about bringing someone that can specialize and focus on set pieces. It's a big part of the game worldwide, just not here. It's an element and a face of the game that can decide outcomes. We had talked about it last year. We didn't bring someone on. But I strongly felt we needed to make that move this year and bring in Ryan with his experience. I think it's going to be just a great addition to the club.

This could not happen if we didn't have the support of our owner. I think that's the biggest thing for me. When I talk about MVPs and who the DPs are on any team, you can look at players, but I look at our owner. Without him none of that could be possible.

With all the pieces there, I think we have an excellent staff, with Zach Thornton, Theodoros Antonopoulos,

Jeff DeGroot, Nacho Terreno with the performance staff. We have an excellent staff put together. I'm really excited.

Yeah, hopefully that answers your question.

Q. Frank, we've got one pre-season match in the

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books. With a lot of the group being the same guys from last year, having a set core, what are the biggest focuses of these matches given a lot of these guys you know pretty well already? Is it mixing in new guys, seeing how different guys combine together? What are you paying the most attention to?

FRANK KLOPAS: Really good question.

I think when you step in in a situation like I did last year, I think there's some things that are set already. I think what I really tried to focus on when I came in, it's really on the structure of the organization on both phases of the game.

Coming in now, being here from the beginning, it's really being crystal clear what kind of team we want to be I think with the ball, what kind of principles we want to have. It always starts with the structure. I think without the ball, the defensive side, it's all about organization. It's the same with the ball.

With the ball for me, I'm the kind of coach also that we all need to be on the same page for sure, but it's also going off the quality of the players, giving them the ability to express themselves, giving them freedoms, putting them in positions where they're going to be successful. That's the most important thing.

I can have certain ideas. I think at the end of the day. Structure formation... For me it's just about trying to put players where they can be successful on the field, where they feel comfortable, what their strengths are, then obviously try to compensate in areas where they're not as strong, but as a team we can be strong all around.

More than anything than that, solidifying the principles and the kind of identity and the team that we want to be. You can only do that from the beginning. I think setting the tone, the expectations, how do we want to work together, what are the expectations daily, what is the culture, the values of that club, and how do we coexist. That really describes the identity.

We've had an excellent start with the group. You're right, I do know a lot of the players from last year. I think that is a benefit. Sometimes it isn't. That's been the focus in pre-season.

We're still waiting now for some of the new signings with Arigoni and Tobias, with their visas. They're not here. I feel this is really an important part of the season because the pre-season sets a tone and builds a foundation within a team. I can't wait for them really to finalize their visas.

We've had Brian, the goalkeeper, that we signed from a

draft pick. It's good to have Chris Mueller back because he missed out the whole of last year. That's a new signing. With Chris, he's got so much energy, it's almost like he wants to do everything and be back to his form in one day. The thing with me, it's just been really hard to communicate to him that it's going to take time. He's looked really good.

But the big picture and the focus, what I talked about, my goal is to focus in this phase of pre-season. When we start a game, you want to see some of the things we work on on the pitch translate into the game, from a standpoint that you know players will have heavy legs, push through it, have a really strong mentality. Then you're always praying for no injuries, no setbacks. That really sets the players back when you do miss pre-season.

Q. With the coaching profession steering towards more specialization, we've seen it in analytics, you're hired a set piece coach, I'm wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on the importance of that position, why you can't maybe take a current assistant and have them focus on that. That leads me to the question about the day-to-day responsibilities of Ryan Needs. Is it just set pieces?

FRANK KLOPAS: It's just set pieces. I think even our game, it's becoming more -- you bring coaches that specialize in certain areas, whether it's a striker coach, set piece coach, stuff like that. We can do it, but it's time consuming.

I think for a guy like Ryan that we brought in, his main focus is set pieces. He gets the data, analyzing the opponents. He has to look at the minor details. Even the little things. This guy is looking off his right shoulder at this moment. Maybe the half of a second I can go off his back shoulder and gain an advantage. That is his main focus. Scouting the opponent, looking at the strengths, then coming up with the game plan, how do we approach this opponent, what is the best way defending the set pieces, but also how can we be more dangerous and create goal-scoring opportunities. His main focus is that.

I talked a little bit about bringing Paulo Nagamura in. He's an assistant coach, but specializing more off the ball, coming up with the ideas, how do we press on a static situation, goalkeeper against an opponent, how do they look to build out mid block to our final third defending, what is that going to look like.

In the end we all talk and come up with the game plan. I wanted to bring in guys that can specialize in certain areas the field.

As far as Ryan, that's a full-time role, man. All day, it's just

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his focus on that. We worked together, had a performance coach, as we planned the week. Where do we find areas now where he needs to put the time in in order to improve the team. One-third of the goals in the last World Cup, I don't know what the average is within the league, one third of the goals came from set pieces. You have to think that one-third of the time in the week you have to put into set pieces. If you want to improve something, we have to put the time into it.

It's great to have Ryan here. This is what he wanted to do. That's what he specializes in. Now we believe in that. The players believe in that. We laid out the plan, what it's going to look like, then you have to also have buy-in from the players. It's something we talked about with him last year. Once there's buy-in with them, now there's a commitment. It's something that can give us an edge on the field.

Q. Will your next request of the owner be a striker coach?

FRANK KLOPAS: No. Look, I think that's something that also within even myself and Carlos and Paulo, it's an area that we can also do. That's easy for us when we do functional stuff. It's the same having a goal keeping coach. It's a lot of hours. It's a lot of work daily. Not that the forwards are not, but that's an area that I think within us three, it's something we know well and we can cover that.

Q. (Indiscernible)?

FRANK KLOPAS: I'm sure that every team in the league would want Lewandowski to come. Unfortunately he has two years left on his contract in Barcelona. Barcelona paid over 50 million to get him. I don't think it's going to be a player that's going to be coming to MLS, especially right now.

Incredible striker. I think with our Polish community, it would be incredible. But I think, to be realistic, it's something that is not feasible at this moment. Thank you for the question, though.

Q. In the fall, kind of felt like you seemed to think big changes would be coming this winter, especially if you didn't make the playoffs. Maybe there's some questions about fan base and the wider MLS community about what it all means and what this Fire team is going to look like, what is going to change. Could you speak in the big picture on what this team is going to look like and how things change.

FRANK KLOPAS: Listen, it's no secret, we've talked always about the addition of a striker. I can tell you that

the club is working very hard. We're very close to getting something done. I can't speak more into that because I don't think it's finalized at the moment.

It's no secret of certain positions that we talked about, technical side, sporting director, technical director, they're working very hard. I'm confident that these things will get done.

My focus right now is with the group we have here. I think the players we brought in already, Andrew Gutman, who has been a great addition, Arigoni, Tobias, having a guy like Chris Mueller that missed last year that's in camp right now, I think that these guys, we've had a really great start.

I cannot talk about anything else because unless it gets finalized I cannot say anything. The only thing I can tell you, our technical and sporting director, they know our needs. We've talked about it. I'm confident that something will get done pretty soon.

We need to improve from last year. There's no doubt about it. Every team is improving. I think the additions we brought in will improve the team. Even with Tom Barlow coming in, guys that have been successful in this league, but some of the key positions that we've talked about that are not filled yet, I'm confident that they will get done pretty soon.

Q. Your tactical game model will be more or less what you had last year? Have anything up your sleeve there?

FRANK KLOPAS: No. I have to wait to see the players we bring in, what their strengths are. Tactical flexibility is the most important thing because you can put one team in a certain formation, but that doesn't mean that that's the way that they stay.

How we want to build up, create spaces, how we want to create advantages on the field, that changes. That's a lot of the stuff that we've been working on. I talked about earlier, without the ball it's a lot about organization. Be very clear. With the ball it's the same thing.

Also, players with abilities and certain qualities, especially in the final third, you have to give them their freedom and the ability to express themselves. I think that's the most important thing.

It's all about the structure, how we can put them in the best position to be successful. Flexibility is something we need to have. As a player for me, I think you need that. It's not about being rigid, it's about players understanding always where are the advantages, how can they create them,

where is the pressure coming from, their ability to make decisions.

The more we can do at practice where it gives them the ability to solve different problems, we can all be on the same page. That's why it's important in pre-season to be able to work on this, the better team will be on the field. I think that's going to be a key.

The only thing I can tell you is this: the team is going to be committed. The one thing I talked about is commitment, passion, you got to have passion, be committed, leave everything on the field, leave everything on the field when you put this jersey on. That I guarantee to the fans.

Q. Without giving away too much, the team will be facing the New York Red Bulls on the 27th, who have conceded zero goals. Tom Barlow, do you think he'll have a chip on his shoulder to get a goal or two?

FRANK KLOPAS: I think Tom always has a chip on his shoulder. Doesn't matter. He comes in, whatever you do, he gives 100%. It's pre-season, a practice game. Even though we won the game, we have zero points on the board.

For me, I really don't look. The Red Bulls could score 15 goals. I have to prepare and focus on my team. The important thing is to see the things we've been working on on the field, to be able to do that against a good opponent, push through from a fitness standpoint. We're going to push guys 45 minutes. Last game they played 30.

Tom Barlow, all the guys when they step on the field are competitive, man. That's regardless. Tom, the time he spent with the Red Bulls, was really good. He respects the organization. Now he's going to give everything for the Fire.

I think for me and all of us, that's the main thing in pre-season: continue to work hard, then you want to see on the field the things we talked about and we've been focusing on during the week, be able to do that against a better opponent.

Q. Would you have liked maybe for the pre-season to start possibly a little earlier than it started for the Fire to try to get a little bit more rhythm and fitness in the group?

FRANK KLOPAS: We're all in the same boat, the whole league. That's nothing I can do from my standpoint. There's nothing I can do with that. We all have to obey by certain rules.

I think the players have done a really great job with their off-season programs we give them. We stay in touch with them, focus on that.

It's a very long time, I do agree with you. It's something we can never control. The 64 days that we've been able to do soccer stuff, that's why I think pre-season is important. That's why when you talk about the Red Bulls, we have to put things in perspective. It is the second game we played in maybe 70, 80, 90 days. It's not about being ready now. I think it's a process step by step. But the important thing is to be ready when we play Philadelphia because that's when things (indiscernible) matters.

Q. Speaking about the New York Red Bulls on Saturday, you talked about what you see in practice and what you want to see on the field. Realizing it's pre-season, are there certain things you're looking for on Saturday from the group or individual players to show that the rust is wearing off, game readiness is coming back?

FRANK KLOPAS: I think for the team as a whole, we've been working on things with the ball, our ability to build up play depending on how we're being pressed. Our ability to recognize that, I think it's important.

We still don't know a lot about Red Bulls right now. They have a new coach, brought some new players in. I know their DNA, what they're all about. With the ball, realizing how we're being pressed, can we break that press, can we create opportunities in the final third, can we move up and stay compact as a team, can we create opportunities to score.

I think it's great as players to be able to score as a group. I think getting chances is great, but I think the ability to finish, that's going to be important. Without the ball, our ability not to stay compact, to be very organized, how do we build pressure, what have we been working on in training to see that.

It's a good team. I think those are the things that we're going to look at after the game and focus on.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much. Coach, thanks for taking the time to join us today.

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