

Chicago Fire Media Conference

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

Gregg Berhalter

Press Conference



Q. Looking at this weekend, it's Nashville, it's never an easy team to go against. I'm curious, what do you think their addition of Cristian Espinosa has done to elevate this team as they continue to be one of the better sides not only in the east but in MLS in continent competition and league-wise?

GREGG BERHALTER: Yeah, I think Nashville has shown this year to be a top team in our conference. With Espinosa, they have quality. It may not be the same dynamic they had running behind, but it's a player that can make the difference in the penalty box. You see that's where they've improved, and they've gotten much better.

I think it was a great pickup. You add it to the workers they have at midfield, the stability they have in the back line, and it makes them a difficult opponent.

Q. Nashville has been a tough opponent for the Fire, one win in nine games. We've talked about the results last year, which I think were not exactly what anyone in Chicago would have hoped. Does that provide extra motivation for this year and trying to change that story of what has been a lot of futility against what has been one of the better sides in MLS over the past few years?

GREGG BERHALTER: Yeah, I think there's obviously a record that we have against certain opponents that you want to change. When was the last time we won in Philly? 2013, yeah, so a 13-year drought of a win, and we got the win.

When you hear stuff like that, I think it heightens the focus. But all in all, like we talked about in the beginning of the year, we want to compete to win every single game, and that's the most important thing. You can talk about records. We don't need to focus on that because our focus is on trying to win the game on Saturday. The guys have been training hard. It's been a good week of training. We've got guys back from international duty, so now it's time to go.

Q. How did you see Nashville particularly against Inter Miami and their striker who's leaving the MLS?

GREGG BERHALTER: You know, he gets in good positions, and when he gets in those positions, he finishes, and they gave him the ball in great spots. They like to make the pass to find an opponent who's I think more open than other opponents to get clear shots.

They've been doing a good job. He leads the line, and he's playing with confidence. For us, we need to be aware of where he is in the penalty box, and we need to close the spaces.

Q. Gregg, kind of relatedly, on the same Serge question, coming off the excitement and the high he must have from that goal the other day, how do you channel that energy that 'em bows I is bringing back into camp against probably his toughest test yet as a member of this team?

GREGG BERHALTER: Well, he's not back yet, so that's the first issue that we have. There was a flight complication, and he's still en route. So that's the first thing.

Then from there, we have 24 hours basically to turn him around and see if he's available to play. With these conditions, I don't think it's guaranteed that he's going to be playing. We're going to have to see.

The most important thing is that he's fit and he's prepared to play, and we're going to have to check on that when he returns.

Q. Gregg, it's been a year since Dje D'Avila's signing, April 1, 2025; not a joke somehow. Very curious what you've seen from him, not only once he got comfortable towards the end of last year but alongside some of the challenges you've put toward him in 2026 where it's adjusting next to Anton and Mauri and then Andre later in the year?

GREGG BERHALTER: You know, I've liked his progression. I think he's a guy that follows the path that most players do, this non-linear progression. It's a lot of ups and downs and difficult times and for him he had to hang in there and fight and he still has to fight.

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The message to him this year is you have people breathing down your neck and you need to perform and we're going to help put you in position to perform, but at the end of the day it's going to be up to him and how he applies himself in the matches and in training.

I think he's a talented player. He's got a natural skill set that is very well suited for Major League Soccer, and then there's things that we're continuing to work on and continuing to improve.

But overall it's been fun working with him for the last year.

Q. How useful is it having a player that made the adaptation to new continent, new league, new culture, all of that, even at a young age being able to be there and sort of be a leader for some of the new arrivals this year, including Puso Dithejane and Mbekezeli Mbokazi?

GREGG BERHALTER: Yeah, he's got a lot on his plate in that area, and for him, this is a really crucial time because we know he has a high level in him, and now it's about how does he replicate that week in and week out, and that's always been the challenge for Da'Vila because his top level is top and then when he needs to work on is the average level, what does that look like.

There's a lot of challenges that he's facing this year, but we think he's been handling it well. I think he's very professional for a young player, always looking to find the edge and do what's necessary to keep performing at a high level.

Q. Gregg, another international break related question. I'm curious, as a former national team coach, what do you hope somebody like Chris Brady, who comes into camp for those 10 days but doesn't play, gets out of the international window, and then as a club coach, what do you want to see a guy like that coming back into camp with?

GREGG BERHALTER: You know, I think when you're able to be at that level, the first thing is you observe an extreme high level of play. When he's watching the games against Belgium and Portugal, he sees the opponent and sees how they finish, the finishing quality that they have.

So you start to think, okay, this is what the top level is, guys that get one opportunity, two opportunities and they put it on frame, they put it hard, they put it well-placed.

I can imagine from being there, the training is very similar for him. He's facing guys that can hit the ball hard and hit it

accurate. So that's going to help him. We know traditionally that their goalie gets to take a lot of shots after practice.

You would think that he would lose some sharpness, but actually he's probably more sharp because he's training against some high-level players.

Q. Coach, going off of that, I'm curious what you've seen from Sebastian on that national level and stage, what sort of things, progress in his game? Obviously he's been tremendous with Vancouver and stuff, but with the national team, too. What have you seen over the last year and seen with his game? I'm sure you always watch him carefully.

GREGG BERHALTER: You know, he's definitely grown and matured as a player. When you think about his first caps to where he is now, this is more of a routine for him. It's something he puts a tremendous amount of focus into, and you can see he's more settled on the field.

This March window and the window before the roster announcement is always challenging for every player, and you all you can do is hope to put out your best.

There's a lot of pressure that comes along with this window, a lot of implications that are hanging in the air, and I think for him, the good thing is he remains calm, he remains focused on his process.

Q. Now that Jack Elliott has been back in training this week, any updates on his availability and what that process has been like just having him back? This is something we're not used to covering.

GREGG BERHALTER: Yeah, it's definitely a rare incident that Jack was experiencing. What we could see when he reintegrated into training was it took a toll on him. He lost, I think, eight pounds in total and he was fatigued the first couple days of training, and again, he's going to be a game-time decision based on how we think he progresses in the next couple days.

It's just good to have him back on the field.

Q. You mentioned losing sharpness as being a concern. There's obviously concern taking a week off, considering the Fire went into the international break with a win. How do you look at the balance between the time off getting guys like Jack potentially back and game ready versus what you lose from not having had a game for a week?

GREGG BERHALTER: You know, I don't think we lost

anything. In fact, I think we trained harder in this last two weeks than we have in a while. We really pushed the guys. Our Saturday load was close to 95 percent of a match load. We exceeded match metrics in some other physical areas.

We really pushed, and the guys have been doing a great job in training.

I think the pause, and we had seven, eight guys go away, then get them back, so we've been active, and I think we're not going to skip a beat.

Q. Gregg, how much did having a lot of the youngsters around help elevate the energy in what could sometimes be a doldrum time?

GREGG BERHALTER: You know, it was fun. It's always nice to give younger players opportunity and see how they embrace it and see how they deal with it. We have a one-club mentality where we love players from the academy, from the second team come into the first team to train and then have lunch with us and spend the day, do the weight sessions. It's great to keep that connection.

Overall what we want players to believe is there's a pathway to the first team. That's the most important thing about our academy and second team is they believe there's a way. When you see guys like Dylan Borso who comes up and gets opportunities, Christopher Cupps who comes up, even Sandmeyer getting called up to the Philly game. So there is opportunities for guys.

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