

# US Soccer Federation Media Conference

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**Gregg Berhalter**

**Tim Ream**

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen for joining us this afternoon as we review the draw for the 2022 FIFA world cup qualifying for CONCACAF. We are joined by head of the U.S. National Team, Gregg Berhalter.

GREGG BERHALTER: Thank you. Certainly an exciting day for CONCACAF and all the teams involved in the qualifying process. We have some clarity now. It's nice to see as the draw is going where things fall into place, and for us, we're looking forward to this challenge. We know that some of the difficulties with qualifying CONCACAF, we know there's some very difficult conditions to go through, but we are relishing that and we are looking forward to playing. Now we have seven home games in qualifying and we know that we are a very difficult team to beat at home.

So all in all, excited about it. We think it's a good draw and we're looking forward to getting started.

**Q. Having the opener possibly at Trinidad, does that make it any more emotional and with two of the last three games against Costa Rica and México, does that put more pressure on you guys to take care of business early in the process?**

GREGG BERHALTER: Well, you know, I think certainly the potential to play Trinidad in the first game away from home is a nice storyline. But we're focused on things much bigger than just that game. For us it's the total package of trying to qualify for the 2022 World Cup.

Regarding having México and Costa Rica away from home toward the end, for us, every game is pressure. You have a lot of pressure to win your home games because that's historically where you pick up the most points. We'll take every game and we'll put all we've got into each and every game and hopefully towards the end we'll be in a good position to qualify.

**Q. What process would you like to see in selecting venues? Would you like to see a different approach? Obviously you have a lot of experience in Columbus, but what's your take at the moment for picking the right places for home games?**

GREGG BERHALTER: I think it's just that, picking the right places. What we know is that we want to create an atmosphere in the stadium that is very intimidating, very difficult for the opponent to play in. We want a pro-U.S. crowd, which is normal. When you go to these -- when you're in México, it's a huge pro-Mexican crowd. All of the times you go away, you have that environment. So that's what we want to create in our home games, and we have plenty of opportunities in the United States to do that.

The infrastructure with MLS and stadiums is fantastic, and we're confident that we'll pick the right venue, the right stadium, to really make a great crowd.

**Q. Looking at you start off with the double-window, which is a little bit different in the international game with four games in a month, how do you plan on preparing for that month? What's the plan for the group in that month? How long are you going to have them together, and how much do you have to adjust kind of the normal rhythms of the national team?**

GREGG BERHALTER: Well, you know, so the European -- looking at the Bundesliga, I think they are done on the 22nd. English league should finish up at a similar time. So our priority will be getting players into camp as soon as possible, working with the MLS league office and MLS clubs to get the players in camp as soon as possible and then from there to get off to a good start in qualifying.

You know, you go away, home, away, home, it will be interesting. A lot of travel involved. I think with the advances that we have in sports science with our high-performance department the way that they operate, we're confident that we'll be ready to go in those games.

**Q. You two have a lot of young players coming through, some of whom are going to be experiencing World Cup qualifying for the first time. Does the fact that you've got your first two games from some of the lower teams in CONCACAF, do you see that as an opportunity to break these guys in and kind of just**



**give them an idea of what qualifying is like, as opposed to saying México and Costa Rica?**

GREGG BERHALTER: Well, you know, all the games are challenging. There's no question about it. You know, if you're going away to El Salvador or Trinidad, Haiti, it's going to be challenging. They are not going to be easy games. What we are looking for is for our guys to be developing at their clubs from now until June and when we get into camp, we select players that can deal with these conditions.

It's a mindset thing. I think it's a focus thing. It's just understanding that there's only a certain amount we can control and focusing on those items that we can control to be successful.

**Q. If the opener in Trinidad happens, obviously it's a great story line, or a big store line for us. I'm curious how much you would relish it, and how much can you, if at all, use it as motivation, the sort of symbolism of going there and getting a result this time around?**

GREGG BERHALTER: Again, every game we play is important to us, and you know, I think just starting the campaign away from home is enough. You just have the opportunity right away to set the mark in saying, you know, we're going to be good on the road, and that's certainly something we talked about. We talked about the fact that in the last qualifying, 15 points, we only got three points on the road, and that's something we want to improve in.

We know to qualify in the World Cup, we are going to need to get points on the road. You know, if it's Trinidad or El Salvador, we'll be ready and our focus will be to travel down there and try to win a soccer game.

**Q. Curious if you could update us on potential matchups for the fall what opponents might be available in October and November, and you had mentioned possibility of using a European-based team for potential games there. How would that affect you and your staff; would you be able to travel over there in October and November, hearing how the fall is setting up?**

GREGG BERHALTER: So right now, we've been focused on trying to compete in the United States, trying to find a safe environment where we can play games. You know, not knowing what travel restrictions are going to be either way, our focus hasn't been on Europe right now. We'll switch focus in November and we'll try to get over to Europe and play two high-level games, and what I would expect to see -- and just because of the times, I probably expect to see a domestic-based side for October and a

European-based side in November. We'll take that as we come and as we know more information as we travel, we'll certainly adapt.

**Q. All the road games plus CONCACAF -- Costa Rica and México, traditionally the toughest opponents in the whole field, and that probably won't change again this time around. Given the young troops you have coming up, the young generation that's still developing, a lot of players still establishing themselves, how much of a benefit is it to you to have those road games toward the end of that cycle? Giving those guys continue to develop, how much is that going to help you?**

GREGG BERHALTER: It's a great point that you brought up is that you have 11 games before that to get the group used to playing in these qualifying games, and then you have two of the harder opponents away from home towards the end.

I think that's certainly a way to look at it. The other way to look at it is if you can take care of all your business beforehand, you could be in a very good position going into those games.

**Q. Along those lines, if the team does well right off the bat, could almost be World Cup preparation -- is that also considering the window and the way it's set up?**

GREGG BERHALTER: Certainly something to consider as we get to 2022, there's going to be limited opportunities to play difficult games. But when you think about México, Costa Rica away, those are certainly difficult games. Another opportunity for this group to test itself and push itself as you move into the World Cup.

**Q. Columbus has been the traditional home of U.S., México. I know you have ties there. How much do you value that or do you buy into -- a new location is in order for that big match?**

GREGG BERHALTER: I think we want to find an environment that is intimidating and when I think of Columbus, I played in a couple games there against México and I know that it's a great environment.

We've had a lot of success there, but that doesn't mean we wouldn't be open to looking at other locations. You know, again, our focus is on providing the best possible atmosphere to win a soccer game, and to be intimidating. You know, we'll look at everything.

**Q. And also, with three and a half and eight -- has room for error shrunk in this format, and what's your outlook on that in general terms?**



GREGG BERHALTER: I don't know if it shrunk. I think with more teams competing, I think that there may be a little bit larger in terms of the bigness of the games.

Our focus is on winning games and I think 26, 27 points pretty much gets you in there, and basically, to get as many points as we can and get that number and qualify.

**Q. Just more general questions here. Over the last year, obviously the road to 2022 doesn't stop. I'm curious what was or has been the most difficult obstacle that's been presented to the national team side, and now with the clarity in the draw and schedule, what does that allow to you start focusing on?**

GREGG BERHALTER: So the difficulty, obviously this year, is just not being able to play, not being able to get the team together. It's been frustrating, but it's been frustrating for everyone in all walks of life.

For us it's about trying to get back to playing in this fall in a safe way. Our first concern is the athletes and making sure they are safe and in good condition to perform well. With this clarity now of the schedule, of World Cup qualifying, it does give us basically a beacon and a guiding light to say, this is our focus, guys. We've got a year and a half or two years to 2022, and everything we're doing is to get to that tournament in November 2022.

**Q. Anthony Robinson looks to be making a move to the Premier League. If he can break in and play consistently there in the Premier League at that spot -- and McKennie has been linked to several Premier League teams, as well, essentially turned down a chance in the Bundesliga. Can you talk about his development and do you think that's the right step to go from Germany to England?**

GREGG BERHALTER: Well, regarding Anthony, I think it's exciting news, a potential transfer to a Premiere League team. You can see especially after the game he came back and was in really good form and proved to be a dangerous weapon on the left side. For the national team, it's great news. When you think of that back left spot being open and being contested, it's a good opportunity for Anthony playing at a high level to prove that he wants to be and is capable of being the left back for the national team.

Regarding Weston, Weston, he's very focused. He's very focused on challenging himself and raising his level and playing the highest level possible. When you think about the Premiere League, it's the best league in the world. The opportunity to see Weston in the Premiere League for the

national team is exciting, and we wish him the best and hope that's concluded sooner rather than later..

**Q. I know you like to defer to clubs when it comes to discussing injuries, but curious how optimistic that you'll have Christian Pulisic healthy and available when you resume games this fall?**

GREGG BERHALTER: We're comfortable. I talked to Christian today. He's doing well. The leg is doing really well. It's recovering. It's healing, and he's in good spirits and the club is focused on getting him back as soon as possible.

So you know, we have a lot of confidence in Chelsea. We have a lot of confidence in their medical staff, and a lot of confidence in Christian. He's a guy that has exploded on this team in this last year in the Premiere League, and it's been great to watch.

But it's also all down to his work ethic, and him to be focused on playing well. You know, it's great to see, and we're excited to see how he comes back and starts his second season in England.

**Q. Christian does seem to pick up muscle injuries on a fairly consistent basis it seems, obviously Christmas, as well. How much does that concern you? What does the medical staff notice about Christian that maybe leaves him susceptible to those kinds of injuries?**

GREGG BERHALTER: You know, I think that as Christian was adapting to the Premiere League, we all know it's a very physical league. We know the fixture rate in England is high. We know Champions League teams also have a lot of short, congested schedule. So I think that this is something that we have to look at, but it's certainly not uncommon. There was a lot of players that go through this particularly on in their careers, and as his body strengthens and as he gets used to those fixtures, he's going to be fine.

For us and for us and for him and Chelsea, it's an opportunity to recognize -- and he'll be okay.

**Q. And how much does travel factor into that, taking cross-country flights to come to games and qualifying?**

GREGG BERHALTER: Cross-continent flights. I think if you prepare and you do the right things, you can minimize the effects of travel. That's something we have been looking into. We've also been using techniques when they arrive for jet lag --

**Q. Your take on the status of Mark McKenzie and Brenden Aaronson. They coaches say they are ready to make a big move, and we hear a lot of reports and can see the way this can affect your program and how you use the guys and the level they are at?**

GREGG BERHALTER: I give the same answer all the time. You guys are probably tired of hearing it but I think every player has a different pathway. All we want is our players is to be challenged in each and every game that they are in. The club coach is saying they are needing a bigger challenge, then I take what Jim says at face value. He's got a lot of experience. He's been working with these players for a long time. So if they need a new challenge; hopefully it will work out and they will get one.

Major League Soccer was instrumental in developing these two players, and I'm interested in seeing where this all goes, because I've been excited at Brenden's performance in MLS Is Back Tournament, and it will be interesting to see where those guys end up as they keep going.

**Q. Continuing with the personnel questions, someone who has been one of the No. 1 or consideration for No. 1 goalkeeper for the National Team, Zach hasn't played a competitive game since at least December 22. How much does that go into your consideration of the next round of call-ups, and he obviously has the backing medically -- how confident are you that he can come back and contribute?**

GREGG BERHALTER: I don't know those two things to be true. I don't know if he's going back to Man City for the year and I'm not sure if he went to Man City he wouldn't be playing. I can't comment on that. I think Manchester would be a better source for information there.

But all I can say is that they have been working hard with Zach right now to get him right, and you know, he's looking forward to having a strong year wherever he's playing.

**Q. You haven't had a game since November -- since January, you're not going to have a game till the fall. You had a lot of time on your hands. We know the game, tactics change sometimes. How have you used this time, and will we see some new wrinkles and changes as you kind of have had time to look at things and maybe tweak some things? We all know coaches kind of like to take from other coaches and things like that. What should we expect when you get back at it?**

GREGG BERHALTER: You know, it's been frustrating not being on the field, but we have had plenty of time to watch soccer. Get to see a lot of games in the MLS Is Back Tournament. We're watching all the games in Europe

every week. That's been really fun.

You are starting to see a trend of teams playing five in the back. That always comes back into fashion every now and again. A lot of teams have been playing the 5-3-2. Some teams play in a 3-4-2-1. That seems to be certainly a trend now in soccer again.

For us, I think it's understanding how best we can be successful, and you know, we have a good team. We have good players and for us, it's continued to challenge the players and push the players to not only play in our style but we try to improve. You saw in January, we started defending in a 4-3-3. That's something we'll look to continue. But also, I think having an alternate system being able to change the game with your substitutes is an interesting concept that we are looking into.

**Q. Can you talk about your reaction to today's draw?**

TIM REAM: For me, I'm pretty even. We are going to have to play everybody at some point. I think it's an interesting one if Trinidad does kind of make it through their group and wins that A&F playoff; that there's a little bit of a revenge factor right from the get-go.

But it's nice to know that the road ahead and where we stand and where we have to go through to get to where we want to be.

**Q. You've got a young, young U.S. squad, and you're starting off with a double window in June. How difficult is it for a young player when they are subjected to World Cup qualifying for the first time, how does the level change and how do you help the young guys prepare for their first qualifiers? And on the club side, Anthony Robinson looks to be headed to Fulham. What could he bring to the squad on the left side, for both the U.S. and for Fulham?**

TIM REAM: To answer your first question, all of these young guys, a lot of them are playing in big games already. You look at Tyler Adams playing in the Champions League semifinal the other night. You've got guys playing at the very top of their game in Germany, in England with Christian. So these guys, you don't have to give them too much -- too much information on what it's going to be like.

We know, as older guys, what it's like to go away from the U.S. and play in these games, and we've had a few obviously not qualifiers, but games that we have had to go away and the guys got a little bit of a taste.

Obviously it's extra, extra motivation that there's a World Cup at the end of the road and I think these guys are more

than motivated to go out there and play in these qualifiers to put the team back into the World Cup in 2022.

Again, we can give them little bits of information here and there, but the fields aren't great. The accommodation isn't great. Sometimes the food and the travel isn't great. But these are all things that we can't control, and I think that's the biggest thing that we have to kind of pass to these younger players is that we can't control these things, so there's no point in worrying about them. There's no point in making a big deal out of them and there's no point in dwelling on them, and we just have to go out, and they have to go out and just perform once that whistle blows.

To answer your Fulham club question, I've spoken to Anthony, and nothing is done yet. But he's played a lot of games, I think 36, 37 in the League in the championship this year, and he's a flying fullback. He's technical but he's got pace to burn and energy to burn and he gets up and down. Both times we played him this year, our guys have come off the field saying what a player. He can defend. He can attack. He's good with the ball at his feet. I think as long as he continues to develop in that same vein, big thing for him, obviously -- falling through would have been huge, but for him to come to Fulham would be great, another American and someone who can tackle that left fullback role, and that can only translate into his role in the National Team and be that attacking left fullback for the U.S.

**Q. This idea of, again, the core of this team as it exists now, guys in their early 20s with only Christian really having had the experience of playing in some of those rode environments -- that's not what makes CONCACAF challenging, it's not that Trinidad was a Premiere League or Bundesliga level team. What did you take away from the last cycle, lessons, memories, pointers, things like that, that will not only make you feel better or more confident going to the next cycle, be something that you can pull aside a guy who is 21, 22 years old and say, look, I know on paper, El Salvador is good; how we are going to handle it.**

GREGG BERHALTER: The last cycle was my first cycle, as well. My last game was qualifiers. I went in with eyes wide open from getting information from the older guys in that cycle and I was still surprised.

Like I said before, the biggest challenge is to make sure that these guys, these young guys go into these games expecting the unexpected with, again -- and that's not just on the field. That's travel. That's hotels. That's the night before games when there's fireworks blasting just outside your room window. These are all things that happen on these road trips and these away matches that can affect

you, and I think if guys -- if we can pass that on and we can let them know, listen -- fire alarm may be going off tonight at 2:00 in the morning, don't be surprised.

Then you come to the actual on-field stuff, and you can't expect nice pitches. The grass is going to be long. It's going to be choppy. It's going to be clumpy. It's slow. The weather, it is what is it, especially in June. It's going to be humid. It's going to be hot. You're playing at altitude. These are all things that they have to be prepared for and need to have their eyes open in order to move past these hurdles and again reach that ultimate goal of qualifying.

**Q. As you look at the change over the last three years, where is the team different with the addition of players like Weston or Tyler, Sergiño, Mac, Josh and potentially Gio Reyna also?**

TIM REAM: First and most obviously is age -- inaudible -- Orlando and Trinidad -- it's always the youngest guy in the box and I was 30 at the time, and I was the youngest. Youngest player on the bench as a sub.

First and foremost you look at these guys that are 21, 22 years old and they brought a youthfulness and exuberance into the team, and with that youthfulness it brings, legs, energy, excitement, and these guys have all developed in Europe. And not that that can always translate into results in CONCACAF, but their abilities and mental capacity and struggles and the things they have gone through over in Europe can only put them in a good position. I think last time around, we didn't get off on the right foot in the beginning of qualifying and we were always playing catch-up.

With these young guys now, we are looking to be on top from the very first game, and like I said, they bring a youthfulness and energy and technical ability. Not that there wasn't a technical ability before, but technical ability with the running and the attitude and the never say die that these kids have. They don't worry about anything else. They just want to perform and win. I think that's been definitely refreshing to see with this group as it has developed over the last two and three years.

**Q. Have you seen the beard -- Grizzly Adams for the next season, and traditionally heading into the next cycle, obviously you played backup quite a bit the last cycle, but should we expect to see a bit more center back heading into the next cycle?**

TIM REAM: The beard, I didn't shave it completely but I shaved it before the playoffs started, so I'll keep it at a three or a four with the clippers and that way it's not so out of the control.

In terms of my position, playing out wide is, I think it definitely for the younger boys. Again, that depends on the system. I've had multiple conversations with Gregg and I think depending on the opponent, depending on the style, depending on the shape, depending on the system that we want to play, in any given game, it could be that I play out left as a left back and hold back more to almost create a different look. But then again, playing against, Uruguay and then going on to Cuba and playing against Cuba, playing center back.

So for me, I'm happy to play whatever they see fit, as long as I am fit. I'll play wherever they want me. I've always said from the day I set foot in New York my rookie year is that I don't care where I play. I just want to play. If that means playing left back in a certain system or playing center back in a different system, I'm all for it and I'm happy to contribute and keep pushing the team and pushing this group to the World Cup and our ultimate destination.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for joining us this afternoon.

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