



Toronto FC Media Conference

Sunday, March 3, 2024

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

John Herdman

Media Conference

Toronto FC 1, New England 0.

Q. Congratulations on the win. Beautiful goals and some great goalkeeping, and a pretty gritty performance all in all. What was your take on the afternoon?

JOHN HERDMAN: Well, summarized it well, Neil. You can write your own article on that one in comments. It was exactly that. We managed the first half really well from technical perspective. We had some really good moments and nullified a lot of their threats.

Took awhile to adapt to the pitch. I don't know if anyone got a chance to see the pitch, how it was playing. It was a little bit wobbly in the first, ten 15 minutes for our lads. But once they adapted we were able to get good control and with that control we were able to score a goal.

And when you have a goal on the road, that's the golden egg for us. We were very clear at halftime, two goals would be nice just to make the game what it needed to be, which was more comfortable but you know, it wasn't to be. Great performance from the back five, the midfield three, and now obviously Sean Johnson pulling off a wonderful save at the end, a real world-class save showing his calibre.

Q. Obviously a great goal from Lorenzo, but aside from that one brilliant moment, just wanted to get your assessment of his overall performance because it seemed like he was putting in a lot of work in the defensive end and off the ball. And second question, was it always the plan to sub him out at halftime or was he feeling something?

JOHN HERDMAN: No. The plan was to bring him out at halftime, again, like Lorenzo and turf, they don't go too well. So we were well aware of that. He had a reaction to the turf in January when we came back after our first phase of preseason.

So this season, we just have to manage that. Completely manage it through to the end of the season to make sure we get him starting as many games as we can for the fans, for the team, because he's magic. He really does bring a different tempo to our game and quality.

So you know, it was planned and it was planned for him to start strong and get the goal at halftime, as well. That was his mission, to put us in a strong situation, and he did that. And his efforts there. It's clear when you're in a leadership group and you're setting standards for the rest of the team, you've got to model the way, and he's doing that. He and Federico are both putting shifts in.

Q. Can you explain the physics of that Sean Johnson save at the end and maybe how important was it to have 180 minutes of back-to-back through these first two matches?



JOHN HERDMAN: I think when you look at it, it's our first win on the road since August 2022. We kept a clean sheet last week against the champs and this week against a really good New England team that's in rhythm. They have played a lot of games together. They are in good tactical rhythm.

I'm just proud. Proud of what these players are collectively putting out there for this club. They have changed gears. There's a different effort, a different ethos, and I think a clarity towards what they want, which is to win football matches for this club and to get back to the top.

So there's a long way to go but saves like that from Sean Johnson are going to keep us there, and they made some good saves last week, and they will continue to make good saves. Is that's what teams that win championships do. They have goalkeepers that can keep them in games in games where it's going to be tight.

For us, our big players are coming big, and that will need to last throughout the whole season if we are going to push.

Q. Congratulations on the win. You mentioned the pitch conditions. It seemed like the group was maybe a little bit leggy there towards the end. It looked like the pitch was playing kind of heavy. You are playing in an NFL stadium on an NFL field. There is an NFL term that we like. It's called the "Victory Monday." It's a day off for the players after a win. Are you going to have to give your players a day off tomorrow?

JOHN HERDMAN: Oh, yeah.

Q. How do you manage players coming off of a game on a field like that to get them ready for the next game?

JOHN HERDMAN: Yeah, it is, it's an amazing league. I think that's the beauty of this league. You get to come in and play in the New England Patriots stadium where Super Bowls have been. In the trophy cabinet, it's amazing. Surreal to be honest.

The pitch management, I said this before, there were two teams playing in snow last night. One team complained about the conditions and the other said we adapted. For us, I thought we adapted well. We were willing to be a bit more direct. We were willing to play on the sides more. We were willing to avoid the combination play through the center. We knew that would be a major problem on this pitch. Sean was given full license to play direct.

I think what's what you have to do. Just adapt to these conditions, and now we have to adapt post-game. That's the hardest thing for players on turf, no matter how fit you are, the take on the johns (ph) is tough.

We have one day less in our prep this week. So the turnaround, yes, they will get some time off. But they never won on the road for a long time, so I think I'm not going to have to give them a day off just to recover from tonight. I'm going to let them celebrate, because it's important we do that. It's a big moment, a big step for this team, but only, as also said in the huddle at the end, it's just one small step on a big climb that we've got to make this season.

Q. Nicksoen Gomis made his debut today for the club. I wanted your thoughts on his performance.

JOHN HERDMAN: Yeah, I mean, he looks like he's a seasoned veteran in MLS. That's how he's approached the whole preseason. We were gutted last week he couldn't start because of a little bit of a concussion out of the LAFC game. But you know, he was cleared pretty quickly.

Yeah, we were desperate to get him out there. I think even when he's on grass at home, you'll see his attacking qualities even more so. Very composed. He's got huge self-belief, and he just brings a different presence to our back line. We've got a couple of veteran lads in there, and he's just this young, sprightly sort of confident young lad who is bringing a bit of a committee element to the team, as well. I've enjoyed some of his off-field antics. He's a funny lad.

Q. A few supporters had their hearts in their mouths seeing Lorenzo holding the back of his leg after a goal until he started smiling. What was your take on that?

JOHN HERDMAN: Oh, it was brilliant. Love it. He's a funny guy, actually. I don't think people get to see the real Lorenzo.



He has a lot of pressure, and the price tag on his head. He carries the pressure of this club, it weighs heavy on him.

But if you get to see him behind the scenes, he's a funny guy. He's got that sort of cheeky personality. So that was nice. It was nice. I didn't know that's how he was going to celebrate but you know, he was put on the pitch for 45 minutes to do exactly what he did, and that was just the -- what he could do on that left-hand side.

Raoul Petretta I think is a really, really good supporting cast for Lorenzo. Obviously speaks Italian and they have got a nice bond there. And then he's able to find Federico on the opposite side I mean that goal that Fede scored is right off the training field. It would have been lovely if we were able to come away with that second goal and just made our lives a bit easier for that second half.

Q. It's two clean sheets in a row. The back line has this kind of bend-but-don't-break mentality to it. I wonder how much of an influence has Kevin Long imparted into the club in those two clean sheets since he's been in Toronto?

JOHN HERDMAN: Well, I said this in the preseason. We were able to make clean sheets in every game we played against Columbus, LAFC and Nashville, Real Salt Lake when we had our starting centre-backs. Longy joined us on the back end of that, so Shane O'Neill, Nicksoen, Raoul Petretta and Sean Johnson have developed some really good habits and with floors in front of them, those guys set a strong partnership. And then longy was just that missing piece. You know, that experienced sent are back that he can bring a level of calm and just reads situations quicker than maybe others can. I thought he was a great addition.

But I'll be happy with some of the lads I started with in preseason as well. I thought those guys were wonderful. I think we've got a strong group back there, and you've got to think people like Sigurd isn't in the starting lineup, and he brings real depth. I may Mbongue who had good performances in preseason, as well.

So I just think we've been able to carry on certain habits and a mindset that clean sheets win games, and that's the starting point, particularly when you're on the road. But looking forward to shift gears when we get in our own stadium with our own fans on a grass field. Hopefully that plays well.

Q. Is there an extra value to a gritty 1-0 win on the road this time of year in terms of offering proof to bolster the belief within the side?

JOHN HERDMAN: Yeah, they enjoyed. It I think you're seeing how Lorenzo on the bench was celebrating at the end. They were cheering. They were all-in. You know, the connection's building, and we've put work into that behind the scenes. These things don't happen by chance. The work's gone in. Robyn Gayle, the staff, all the staff who have congregated to just creating a new level of connection, but also a belief.

We said before that the game, this table is wide open, and we could be sitting in the top four with a 2-0 win. We could have been sitting third with a 2-0 win. So it just about taking care of business on the road, a point on the road, three points on the road, a massive for us. And then bringing the excitement to come home to play at home and play differently, as well.

Q. You mentioned it a couple of times, but the next one is at home. How much are you looking forward to that knowing now that you've got the ball rolling in the right direction and you have some good momentum going?

JOHN HERDMAN: Can't wait. Can't wait to get in front of those fans. Because I feel like -- I said this right at the beginning of the team had to build trust. They had to build trust back with the fan base. And all the fans, when I went to the fan engagement night, they just wanted to see the effort. They wanted to see effort. They wanted to see that resilience, that resolve, and the fight. And I think we've showed that over two matches.

Yes, it's the beginning, but as I said there was a preseason where those habits had been forming, and I think the fans can be proud of the work that's gone in and hopefully they show up and give us a real home opener and leave the past in the past. Give us all the support we need to put another star on our jersey to push to that next level. That's what I'm hoping. Fingers crossed they all show up and we can put on a real attacking performance in front of our fans.

Q. The first two games of the season have been unbeaten and you've been playing a three-back. Do you feel like



this is the formation that you're confident moving forward, or are you still wanting to experiment with the shape of the squad?

JOHN HERDMAN: I said this right at the beginning that when we did our deep dive into MLS as a league, we compared and contrasted with other leagues. We looked at some of the success factors in the Eastern Conference, and we were able to do a bit of research of what we've learned over the last three years that back-five teams out-perform back-four teams, and whether that's the quality of disadvantage that you have with Lorenzo and Insigne and Carlos, etc., etc., playing in the frontline. You know, there's a real quality of disadvantage you carry into games.

We made the decision early that we bridge that gap with numerical superiority; we bridge it with positional superiority. When we look at TFC last year, in back fours, they couldn't defend in back fours. It was a really open ship, and to get the best out of people like Shane O'Neill, Sigurd, Kobe, guys that were already in this team, Raoul Petretta. I think the back-three system certainly helps them.

So for us, we've been building an identity in preseason. This is part of it, being able to adapt in a 5-2-3, and we adapted to a 5-3-2 in the second half to solidify certain things. But we'll keep adapting. That's part of the work in the next four or five weeks to become even more in sync in our attacking moments, and not have to survive so many waves in that last 12, 13 minutes of the game. That's something that I'll certainly be pointing to to the players.

DraftScripts by ASAP Sports