

Houston Dynamo Media Conference

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Houston , Texas, USA

Pat Onstad

Press Conference



Q. Pat, two-part question for you. First of all, Hector probably a player of his caliber, he had chances to go elsewhere. Other clubs were pursuing him. What was the pitch that you guys really gave to him to come join the Dynamo?

PAT ONSTAD: I just smile. That's all I need to do (laughter). No. I think the pitch, we just talked through the project. This infamous PowerPoint that I had, we talked through that a little bit, where I see the team going, what we're trying to build here. Trying to build a culture of collective culture here where we're fighting for one another and everybody kind of has a piece in the game.

So we talked through that. We talked through the style of play that Paulo wants to implement. Paulo spoke to him and talked to him through that. Ted Segal was part of the process as well. He spoke to him. Asher Mendelsohn, our technical director, spoke to him.

I think he felt, the biggest thing when I spoke to him in Madrid last week, he said, listen, every person I've spoken to has said the same thing. You guys seem very aligned. That's a project that he wanted to be a part of.

Part of it's selling to him, but also part of it, I think for him, it's personal relationships. That's his business. I got a really good opportunity to get to know him last week. I think he was really excited about joining us and seeing where we can take this.

Q. And then a lot of MLS as of late have been really emphasizing signing young talent. Obviously, Hector is on the other end of the spectrum. He has all this experience. He's 31. What can a player who has the experience that he has add to your club?

PAT ONSTAD: That's exactly it, the experience and the level he's played at. Arguably, he's the greatest Mexican in Europe in terms of the amount of games. He's certainly played the most amount of Champions League games, trophies he's won at Madrid and also at Porto. So pretty

confident -- maybe Hugo Sanchez is up there. Maybe some people there might argue he's the one ahead of him.

But in terms of his pedigree, it's second to none. We're excited to get that type of player in this club. We haven't had that level of player in the history of this club since 2006. So we're excited to bring that sort of player here. I think our locker room, the players are excited about the opportunity to get a chance to play and train with a player of this caliber.

So in terms of what he brings, he's going to bring a lot of quality. And then the one part that we haven't talked a lot about, there's a reason he was captain of Porto. The reason Atletico went after him. It's because he's a leader. He's a born leader. When you watch him play, it's the little things you see off the ball that he does so well. A guy makes a tackle off the ball, and he's one of the first guys there to give him a high five.

You see it with Mexico all the time. Whenever there's a chance to back up a teammate in a scrum, he's the first guy there. Whether you love it or hate it, especially when he's playing against the U.S., I think you notice that a lot. But he's always there defending his teammates, and he's a fantastic teammate and he'll be a fantastic leader for our group.

Q. Thanks, Pat. Nice to speak to you. Congratulations on getting the signing over the line. Just in a broad sense, when did Hector kind of be identified as a realistic target? And then furthermore, when did it kind of come back to you guys that this was a realistic fit, that there might be a chance for you guys to get this deal done?

PAT ONSTAD: There were some feelers out -- what is it now? We're into March. So a couple of months there were some feelers out. They actually approached us saying would you be interested? Then we obviously went through MLS to make sure people, whether it was discovered or not. We had to make sure we were doing that before we went forward. So it's been going for a while now, I think in the discussions. Certainly once you dig in deep, that's probably only been pretty recent.



So we're excited about how the process took place, and I think for us was more about just feeling each other out and seeing how he could help us and why he actually felt excited about Houston and vice versa. I think for him, is he the right fit for us was just as important as him thinking that this is the right city for him.

Q. So Hector will be just the third Mexican player that will sign for Houston Dynamo, which if you consider the community in Houston and the relationship with that nation, it's pretty unbelievable. Do you plan to change that and make the Mexican players a focal point of this project moving forward?

PAT ONSTAD: I plan to try to make our team better, that's first and foremost. Wherever the player comes from is relatively irrelevant, but what I would say is I don't think -- like you said, this is the third Mexican player. It's literally the neighbor to the south of us. It's a five-hour drive, and you can be in Monterrey. Clearly there's been a miss in terms of the types of players.

But I would also say, in all fairness, we were not really a league 15 years ago when Houston Dynamo actually came into existence. We were not a league that could compete with those type of players and salaries at that level. But now the league, especially in the last five years, has caught up to that league.

We're still trying to prove in Concacaf. We've still got a ways to go there. I think financially the level now, the Mexican player looks at MLS and thinks that's a viable option for them. So it would be naive for us not to venture into that market. I think we probably have the best recruiting tool now possible in our house, and we'll definitely lean on Hector to help us with that. But we're excited about trying to tap into that market.

Q. Just quickly, perhaps this is a question for Paulo as well, but Hector, not only is he just a very good player, he's the captain of his national team. So he's captain material, obviously, as soon as he steps into the Houston facility. Is that part of the evolution of this team and the sort of player that you're bringing in?

PAT ONSTAD: Yeah, leadership, I would go there. I don't know about the captaincy. That's up to Paulo. That's his choice in what he does with that. We have a great leader in Tim Parker right now as our captain.

I think for us it's leadership. As I mentioned earlier, when you watch him with Atletico Madrid, as I did the last couple weeks and obviously have seen him a bunch of times with the national team, but the way he leads on the field. He's

not the captain of Atletico Madrid, but he's the leader, he's the guy they rally behind when he's on the field.

It's the little things he does around there. When it's a younger player, he pats them on the back, and when it's an older guy that needs a kick up the rear, he's not afraid to do it. That's the type of accountability that we need, and kind of pushing and striving for excellence is what we need in this building, and I think we're slowly getting there.

Q. Good to see you again and congratulations. It seems that Hector meets all the criteria for the perfect player in his experience, in his marketability. Are all these factors that you take into consideration as a team when you're searching up players like Hector?

PAT ONSTAD: We take that into account with every player. First and foremost, you want to get a good player. That's number one, and you want a player that's needed and in a position of need. Lastly, I think what you really look for is a cultural fit. Are they going to fit into the culture that we're trying to build here? Are they a team player? Are they a guy that's going to fit into Paulo's style of play? Are they going to push the guys around them and try to make this a better group?

I think those are kind of all the factors that go into it. Yes, clearly, Hector ticks almost all of those boxes, if not all of them. I wouldn't say tick. He just kind of kicks them off the shelf. So we're pretty excited to have him in that sense.

I think with every signing and probably every club -- this isn't rocket science. I think with every club that's what you're shooting for. And clearly, when you sign players -- and I'll take Hector's side. In any signing, you try to hit as many of those as you possibly can. Sometimes you have a perception of what that player's going to be, and when they come in, they don't make it. Unfortunately, that's the reality of our business, and you just try to make sure you get more right than you do wrong. That's what we're trying to do here.

I think, when you have a player of Hector's level, I think it's pretty easy to get that one right.

Q. Pat, congratulations. As Felipe alluded to earlier, it's about time, right? It's been like a no brainer. I know you mentioned that 15 years ago the resources weren't there, but I think the message is loud and clear that this marriage is almost perfect?

PAT ONSTAD: I think so. I think so. Hopefully when Hector has the opportunity to speak to everyone, he'll say the same. I know certainly from getting the opportunity to get to know him, he and his family are extremely excited to

come to Houston. They're extremely excited about the project, and they want to turn this thing around.

He wants to be part of something where he is kind of a pioneer, so to speak, and he wants to be a champion for Houston. He wants to put the badge on, and he wants to stand up for the people in Houston and be kind of an icon and a sporting hero. And he's willing to take that. It's a big responsibility, but he's excited about the challenge.

Q. Finally, talk to us quickly about the process. I'm sure it had its ups and downs, its moments of doubt, but you were able to bring it together. Again, is there a point where you thought maybe it wouldn't happen, or from the beginning, was it meant to be?

PAT ONSTAD: I think from the get go, we had initial conversations -- once we got the go ahead to speak to him, we had initial conversations. Right away, I think we were both interviewing each other really. And each kind of step of the way, I think it went really well. Like I said, when Hector gets here, he'll be able to speak to that.

All of us were involved, and that's one thing, Alex, you've been around us a little bit, that we are about the club. Paulo was involved in this process. Asher Mendelsohn was involved in this process, Nick Kowba, and then Ted Segal, for example, spoke to him as well.

I think we believe in this club, we believe in this city, and we believe that we can get better and become competitive and become a championship team again. So Hector jumped on board, and he believes that as well.

Q. If you could help me here, I'm part of the laymen. I don't always really understand quite what's going on here, but you signed a player of very large caliber. In lay terms, how big a deal is this? For those who don't understand what the Dynamo have gone and done.

PAT ONSTAD: It's the biggest signing in our club history, and I don't think there's anyone that's close. With all due respect, Sebastián Ferreira was probably just up there just recently.

I think for us it's a turning point, I think, in the franchise. I think we put a marker down in the professional sports scene here, and we believe this is going to transform our organization again and put us back up at the top and make us compete for championships. That's what we're trying to do.

He's a guy that's won everywhere he's played, whether it's with the National Team, Porto, Madrid. He's a fantastic player, a great human being, a guy that ticks every single

box, as I've talked about before. For us, this is a massive, massive signing for us.

Q. For the layman, why is this so big? Why is he so important?

PAT ONSTAD: We can kind of use the sports analogies, which I don't like using, to be honest, even though I'm a hockey fan. It's a little bit, I guess if you want to say, like signing a Wayne Gretzky to a certain extent. Maybe not from a scoring standpoint, but certainly from a notoriety standpoint in the soccer community. He's very well-known.

You look in our league, and I think there are marquee signings that we've had, the David Beckham, Blanco is one that was in Chicago is a big one. But there's not a ton that come to the tip of your tongue in terms of signings for a community that have a really good fit. I think this was a perfect fit for him in Houston, in our city. And I think the timing for our club, he's got an opportunity here to really help us build what we want to build and help us get over the line and become a contender again.

Q. What does this say about what Ted is doing as far as his regime, making a move like this on his watch?

PAT ONSTAD: Yeah, a lot. I think the one thing is we sat down with Ted and said here's the spend we're looking for. We put another one of these presentations before and said here's what we're looking for, of which he approved it. This opportunity literally came up about a week later, and I had to go knocking on the door and saying, listen, it might be a little bit more than what we agreed to.

By the same token, he didn't even hesitate. He knew who Hector was first and foremost, which was great. I don't know if every owner would know who these players are, and right away he knew this could be a great opportunity for our club and for the city.

We're very fortunate that Ted is giving us this opportunity to go after a player of this caliber. So if it wasn't for Ted at this point, I don't know if this would have got over the line, but it's a fantastic opportunity for everybody.

Q. Piggy-backing off of what they were asking you right now, how much of a soccer fan would you say Ted is, and how much does that come into play when you try to sell him on getting high caliber players like Hector?

PAT ONSTAD: The fortunate thing is he likes watching soccer. He's been a soccer fan most of his life. He played a little bit when he was younger. His sport, though, I believe, was tennis, not soccer. But he's aware of what's

on in the global scene, and he's also interested in that.

For me, he's the type of owner where he wants to know what we're up to, what we're thinking, and I would say -- I wouldn't say -- he's certainly not a guy who's going to say yes or no in the sense that he trusts myself and Asher and Paulo to make the decisions to move this club forward, but he likes to be informed and he likes to be educated about what we're trying to do and why we're trying to do it.

He asks great questions, as a lot of owners do. So it's really enjoyable. For me, it's been a fantastic experience since I hit the ground here in November. So I feel very fortunate to have this kind of support from an owner.

Q. Were there any hesitations from Hector's team in regard to signing the contract? Maybe perhaps even the length of the contract itself. What were the major hiccups that you guys had?

PAT ONSTAD: You have to ask them, but there were no real hiccups. I'll be honest, it was probably one of the smoothest contracts in my relatively short career in the last 3 1/2 years that I've been doing this. This was probably one of the easier contracts that I've ever dealt with.

A lot of that, I think, goes to Hector and his character. He's a man of his word, and when he said, listen, this is what it's going to take, and his agent was the same. Guys, this is where we're at and what we're talking about, and we made a decision that we were comfortable with that, and we reached an agreement pretty quickly.

Q. Also, I have to address this because we got phone calls about it today and also on social media. Obviously, the fans are going wild with Hector signing. There's also the rumor of talks with Diego Lainez as well. Can you tell us anything about that?

PAT ONSTAD: At this point, I don't want to talk about players under contract with another team. Technically, I guess, so is Hector, but he's also free in the summer. So I don't want to talk about players on other teams.

What I would say is it's a market -- we talked about this a little bit earlier. We have the best recruiting tool, I think, in the league right now for the Mexican players. Will we use Hector to try to help us recruit players? Of course we would. But at this stage, I'm not going to comment on a player that's under contract with someone else.

Q. Last but not least, what would you say is the highest selling point for European players to entice them to jump over to MLS even if they're at their prime?

PAT ONSTAD: I think the league's growing. It's a lot better. You talk to -- and I'm going to forget his name, and I should remember. It's the CEO of the Man City group, just came out in the athletic. Felipe, you could probably jump in on this one. They came out and talked about how they feel MLS in the next five years is going to be one of the top leagues in the world.

I think our investments from our ownership groups throughout the league, kind of the harmony we have between the players and the ownership group and the league and Don Garber's leadership, I think this league is moving forward and flying.

So I think for a lot of European players, a lot of South American players who look at this no longer maybe a stepping stone but also kind of a league of choice. That's what we're trying to get to, and that's what we're building for.

Q. Out of the long list of players that you wanted to bring to Houston, where was Hector on that list?

PAT ONSTAD: We have a pretty extensive list (laughter). He was on there, but it's a pretty extensive list. I mean, we were fortunate -- I think the big one -- and I talked about this earlier -- when I took the job. The first step for us was to try to get the coach hired and make sure Paulo was on board. Then let Paulo dictate how he wants to play, what he wants to play, what type of profile he wants and positions of what we all feel are need, a position of need.

He got very specific in the type of profile he was looking for. At that stage, that narrows the list down quite substantially. And then the big one, I think, is opportunity. The timing for a lot of these deals, especially the big ones like this, is timing. The player is ready to go take on another challenge. The club is ready to take on a player of that caliber, that level, and for us it just aligned at the perfect time and has been, like I said before, very smooth and just a really nice process, enjoyable process all along.

Q. Was there any particular aspect of the famous PowerPoint presentation that stood out to Hector?

PAT ONSTAD: I didn't show him all that. He'd fall asleep through half of it.

No, I think for him, it was -- they were -- part of it was them recruiting us. They looked at Houston and said this is a market that has never had a Mexican, top Mexican player come through. He knows the city's population. He knows the Hispanic population here. And he also knows where the club is at currently and where they want to go.

I think for him the biggest piece, I think from the outside in, he said, okay, that would be a nice place to play. That kind of fits everything that I'm looking for, but I think for him was more about like, okay, who's leading this group? What's the coaching like? Does it fit my style? Is this a place or do I believe in this project?

I think for him it was probably less to do with PowerPoints saying, hey, this is where we want to go and how we're going to get there. I think it was more about fit and feel. Did he feel a connection to Paulo? Did he feel a connection to Ted? Did he feel a connection to Asher Mendelsohn? Did he feel a connection to myself? Once we got there, then at that stage, he said, listen, these guys are doing the right thing here and I believe in them as much as they believe in me, and let's get this done.

Q. How much impact -- and it's hard to gauge since he's not here yet, but how much impact will Hector have on this club outside of the pitch? And during your conversations with Hector, was that subject approachable like, hey, we want you to be out there with the community?

PAT ONSTAD: 100 percent. 100 percent. I think any time any club in this league goes out and spends this sort of money on a player, they're hoping for not only on the field to transform the team and play at the level that they're able to play at and raise the level of the rest of the group, which we know Hector will. You want them to be able to be marketable. You want them to be a part of the community, you want them to be a part of this city. Hector has embraced that from day one and said that's something he's looking forward to.

I think when you've seen him in press conferences with Atletico, you look at him in Porto, he's always been comfortable in front of a camera and selling himself in a good way and being positive about the club. It's something he said he would love to do and love to be a part of. That makes it that much easier in terms of trying to get pen to paper.

Q. Obviously, Hector didn't see MLS or the Houston Dynamo as a detriment to a place where he can play prior to the World Cup. What can you share about that topic in your talks with him last week?

PAT ONSTAD: I think part of this is him and his character. There's a reason he's at Atletico and a reason he's done so well. Last week he played three games in eight days and played 90 minutes in each game, including a Champions League quarterfinal in which I mentioned to someone else -- I don't know if I mentioned to someone on this call -- he

covered 11 1/2 kilometers. Covered the most distance of any player in that game.

So I don't think that -- like for him, he knows he's going to push himself no matter what league he's in. So he's not worried about fitness level, that sort of thing. He also knows this league is growing, and he's been following it very closely. He's chosen us.

I don't think that that's a problem for him, but the one thing kind of -- I'm going to pivot here a little bit if I haven't already. One thing I wanted to say about him, what he is, he doesn't want to comment now. And that's because he wants to focus fully on Atletico Madrid. You have to respect a guy who says, I am all in here, Madrid, and when he comes to Houston, he'll be I'm all in Houston. I wouldn't want it any other way, and that's one of the things that attracted us to him.

He's a fantastic teammate and a guy who will give his heart and soul to any club that he's with. We're excited that he'll be able to put our jersey on in July.

Q. With a player of this caliber, where do you believe this puts Houston? Does this elevate the club to a playoff contender, championship contender? Where do you rank him?

PAT ONSTAD: Our goal from day one, we got together from the very first day of training camp. We had the staff, everybody, all the players together. Our goal is to make the playoffs this year. I know it's a big jump. Everyone will say, oh, it's such a big jump from where you were last year. Yes, it is. And we also know it's going to be difficult. We don't expect to waltz in there and make the playoffs in week two.

So we still have a lot of work to do. We have a long way to go. But our belief, everything we do every single day is to try to make the playoffs each season.

Q. And obviously he doesn't arrive until July. Do you feel the team still has some pressing needs in the short term?

PAT ONSTAD: Yeah, we have some needs. We're going to try to improve our club. We've made some we want to be able to have a chance to see how these guys perform and how they gel and get a really good feel for our group.

Some players I'm sure that may have been on the outs the last few years now get an opportunity to play and will shine under Paulo's leadership. And vice versa, some guys that had really good seasons in the past may not. So we need to understand our group, which guys are going to be



successful in the style that Paulo wants to play. But we have work in front of us, and we're going to try to also help Paulo by making sure we have the strongest squad possible.

Q. We are all talking about the arrival of Hector next summer, but my question is is there any clause, any part of the contract that can bring down the arrival of Hector?

PAT ONSTAD: Is there any part in the contract? No, there's no part in the contract, no.

Q. I mean health issues or something like that?

PAT ONSTAD: Oh, no, not really. Yes, if a player was injured, we'd have to cross that bridge when we come to it, but that would obviously be a bit of a concern.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports