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Chicago Fire FC hire Raphael Wicky as new head coach

Chicago Fire FC announced their new head coaching hire on Friday, revealing that Raphael Wicky has departed his post as the US Under-17s national team's coach to move across town to the Fire.

Wicky, 42, brings 27 years of experience as a player and coach in Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the United States. The former Swiss international carries MLS experience, albeit limited, to his new job, having finished his playing career with Chivas USA in 2008. He is the ninth full-time head coach in Fire history.

"I am honored and proud to be named the head coach of Chicago Fire FC," said Wicky in a club release. "This is a position that comes with a lot of responsibility and I can promise the fans and everyone at the Club that I will work hard and give my all. During conversations with Joe

Mansueto and Georg Heitz, I felt that we all shared a similar vision for the club and how to move it forward. That was important to me. Chicago is a world-class sports city and this club has a bright future, both on and off the field. I can't wait to get started."

Wicky made a swift transition into coaching after his brief stint at Chivas USA, returning to Switzerland to work at Servette FC, then on to the highly-respected youth system at FC Basel, where he would cross paths with Georg Heitz, who was named Chicago's sporting director a week ago.

At Basel Wicky trained the club's U-18, U-19 and U-21 sides before moving up to take charge of the first team for the 2017-18 season, highlighted by a run to the UEFA Champions League round of 16, beating the likes of Manchester City, Manchester United and Benfica along the way.

"I know Raphael very well from our time together at FC Basel in Switzerland," said Heitz. "He is a man of high character who fits the philosophy and vision of this Club. He has a fresh, modern approach to football. Raphael has a great appreciation and respect for the sport and because of his time on the pitch, including representing his country at a World Cup, he is able to communicate extremely well with players.

"Raphael, who is familiar with Chicago, has always wanted to coach in MLS. Since he arrived in the US and played here, he has become a student, learning about and studying MLS and what it takes to be successful in this league. We're thrilled that he will be our new head coach."

Wicky took over the US U-17s in March and led them on a successful and stylish qualifying campaign for the FIFA U-17 World Cup, finishing second in Concacaf and outscoring opponents 28-5 as several rising MLS academy prospects starred. Wicky holds a UEFA PRO License and is fluent in Spanish, English, French and German.



Chicago Fire FC have their new manager, now what is their plan?

Chicago Fire FC checked off one of the many items on their long winter to-do list on Friday, announcing the hire of heretofore US Under-17 national team boss Raphael Wicky as their new head coach. It's an interesting and possibly very smart hire. For the time being, though, it's also a move that is impossible to separate from the complex context in which it's being made.

Wicky's selection is the result of a search process that was overseen by new sporting director Georg

Heitz, a former coworker of Wicky at FC Basel in the duo's native Switzerland. Heitz's arrival — announced one week prior to Wicky's — means that even if Heitz had taken up his duties well before the official announcement, he only had a couple of weeks at most to canvas the coaching world, evaluate and interview candidates. And Chicago's 2020 season opener is barely two months away.

Here's what new Fire owner Joe Mansueto said a little over a week ago:

"We don't have much time. We got to get going. So I think the sooner the better. So we're in the midst of that now. We are pushing it ahead as fast as we can on this. So the sooner the better, is the timetable."

Now, Wicky and Heitz worked together for several years at FC Basel, the Swiss club that in recent decades helped groom (and sell on) a long list of top players, including Ivan Rakitic, Xherdan Shaqiri, Yann Sommer and some guy named Mo Salah. Heitz has also worked closely with new Chicago technical director Sebastian Pelzer. It's not hard to speculate that the shared history among the three had a big impact on Fire FC's final decisions.

So what, and why not? Chemistry and shared values go a long way, and you could do a lot worse than to put your trust in a triumvirate that includes two individuals with hands-on experience inside one of Europe's most adept evaluators and developers of talent. Even with new management, a new brand and stadium, and myriad other changes this off-season in the wake of years of sustained organizational underachievement, the Windy City club have a lot to offer potential recruits from home and abroad alike.

MLS as a whole is rapidly growing more comfortable and efficient with the process that Basel mastered long ago, and there's no reason that the Fire can't get in on that, and improve both their results on the field and their bottom line. Wicky cut his coaching teeth in FCB's academy. He's spent the past six months immersed in the United States' youth talent pool. And though his (and his players') reputation took a big hit when the US U-17s faceplanted at the World Cup this fall, he'd earned respect for that team's fluid, proactive soccer in qualifying despite being hired just a few weeks beforehand.

TopDrawerSoccer.com's JR Eskilson is one of the most experienced youth soccer journalists on the continent and he doesn't dish out praise like this all that often:

Here's where I hit you with the Stephen A. Smith-style "HOWEVER..."

Earlier today in an instant message conversation with my colleague Matt "The Armchair Analyst" Doyle, I argued that if they really wanted to, the Fire could refashion themselves into a Great Lakes version of FC Dallas in as little as 18 months.

Chicagoland is one of the only U.S. metro areas with a larger population than Dallas/Fort Worth's, and it's packed with



soccer talent and culture. Renew the academy well, mend fences in the local community, crank up the Homegrown apparatus, then augment the products with some smart drafting and trading and a couple of savvy, ambitious transfer windows. Boom, you're in business, right?

The issue is, it's far from clear that such a shift would be in keeping with the overhaul already underway. With the return to Soldier Field and all that's come with it, Mansueto seems eager to make the Fire a big thing at the heart of the city as soon as possible. Beyond an updated name, crest and kits, that may require a dramatic, sexy sort of on-pitch product as soon as possible, whether it's headlined by a head-turning signing (or two) like Chicharito Hernandez, or something even bigger.

Growing your own? Installing thoughtful, methodical, play-out-of-the back tiki-taka? Punching up with a young, under-dog mentality? Those are different propositions. I'd reckon the Chi's soccer community is shrewd enough to buy that ticket and take the ride if they were given sufficient reasons to invest their time, money and belief, but it's a fundamentally more nuanced product for Mansueto & Co. to sell.

So just who are Chicago Fire FC? Wicky's arrival only takes us marginally closer to knowing the answer.

CREDIT: Charles Boehm Contributor

Official: Zlatan Ibrahimovic to return to AC Milan on six-month deal

Zlatan Ibrahimovic is set to take his talents back to Serie A.

Traditional powers AC Milan on Friday announced they had signed the former LA Galaxy forward to a six-month contract with an option for a one-year extension.

Zlatan Ibrahimović

@Ibra_official

Same Zlatan. Different Devil. @acmilan Arrivo

The move, previously reported by Italian journalist Gianluca di Marzio, reunites Ibrahimovic with the club he played for from 2010-2012. The legendary 38-year-old striker had been without a club since it was announced he was leaving the Galaxy back in November.

Gianluca Di Marzio

@DiMarzio

#Milan, #Ibrahimovic ha detto sì [https://gianlucadimarzio.com/it/ibrahimovic-milan-seriea-calciomercato ...](https://gianlucadimarzio.com/it/ibrahimovic-milan-seriea-calciomercato...)

Ibrahimovic ha detto sì al Milan

Ci siamo: Zlatan Ibrahimovic ha detto di sì al Milan. L'attaccante svedese ha ormai deciso negli ultimi minuti per un ritorno in Serie A e ha dato l'ok definiti...

gianlucadimarzio.com

Ibrahimovic is getting up there in years, but during his time in MLS, he showed he's still very much capable of putting the ball in the back of the net. The Galaxy had their struggles on the pitch during Ibrahimovic's time in the league, missing the playoffs in 2018 and getting bounced by rivals LAFC in last year's Western Conference Semifinals, but he still racked up an eye-popping 52 goals in 56 MLS games, many of them of his vintage, highlight-reel variety.

Farewell, Zlatan.

CREDIT: Ari Liljenwall Contributor



Philadelphia Union re-sign defender Aurelien Collin to 1-year deal

TRANSACTION TRACKER: Re-signed

The Philadelphia Union on Friday announced they have re-signed veteran defender Aurelien Collin to a one-year contract for the 2020 season.

The former MLS Cup Champion and three-time All-Star first joined the Union on a free agent contract in 2019. He made six league appearances, played in one U.S. Open Cup match, and was crucial depth for a Philadelphia side that experienced some instability at the center back position in 2019.



"We are pleased to welcome Aurelien back to our roster for the 2020 season," Union sporting director Ernst Tanner said in a statement. "Aurelien is a proven winner with a strong work ethic that is matched by his heart and passion. We look forward to his continued contributions to our defense and leadership on and off the field."

Prior to signing with the Union, the 33-year-old Collin spread his career across several MLS clubs, beginning at Sporting Kansas City (2011-14), before moving on to Orlando City (2015-16) and the New York Red Bulls (2016-18). He helped SKC to an MLS Cup in 2013 while winning the MLS Cup MVP award. The year before, he took Best XI honors and helped SKC to the Open Cup title.

He also won the Supporters' Shield with the Red Bulls in 2018.

CREDIT: MLSsoccer staff

NBA superstar Kevin Durant meets with Philadelphia Union

NBA superstar Kevin Durant met with Philadelphia Union officials on Dec. 20.

After pictures briefly emerged showing Durant in the company of Union head coach Jim Curtin, among others, Pablo Maurer of The Athletic reported Durant met with the club, and linked the news to his previous interest in getting involved in MLS ownership.

When asked about the meeting, a Union spokesperson confirmed the meeting, without specifying the specific reason behind it, to MLSsoccer.com: "We entertained Thirty Five Ventures for a meeting with Union Ownership."

Thirty Five Ventures is Durant's investment company.

Durant, 31, currently plays for the Brooklyn Nets, after previously playing in Seattle, Oklahoma City and the Bay Area in his NBA career. Maurer reported earlier this year Durant's interest in buying a stake in D.C. United, his hometown team.

NBA players joining MLS ownership is not a new phenomenon, as former superstar Magic Johnson is a co-owner of LAFC and Durant's former teammate James Harden bought an ownership stake in the Houston Dynamo earlier this year.



CREDIT: Alicia Rodriguez Contributor

Austin FC's Matthew McConaughey: Soccer in America can overtake baseball, hockey

Austin FC won't play their first MLS game until the 2021 season, but there's already some overseas buzz about what the expansion club will bring to Texas.

That's, in part, thanks to part owner Matthew McConaughey, a world-recognized Hollywood star who was in London earlier this month for Chelsea's Champions League game against Lille, a 2-1 win for the home side.

"We just got our [general manager], we broke ground, we've got our stadium coming up, we'll have 22,000, we're going to start looking for players now," McConaughey told gathered reporters. "So, soccer is coming to Austin, Texas."

While watching Chelsea, McConaughey got to see US men's national team star Christian Pulisic start and log 62 minutes before being subbed off for Callum Hudson-Odoi. The Blues were up 2-0 at that point, and eventually sealed passage to the knockout round.

Pulisic was transferred from Borussia Dortmund to Chelsea last January for a record fee of \$73 million for an American player, though he didn't join the EPL side until the summer. Across all competitions, he has six goals and six assists in 20 matches.

McConaughey hopes Pulisic is the start of a trend of Americans playing their way into the very highest rungs of European football, an aspiration in which MLS academies could play a role.

"Hopefully we can see more of that," McConaughey told ESPN. "Youth soccer in America is big, it is huge. There's a real commitment there. My hope is that in eight to 10 years you're going to see that generation actually having something to do with soccer around the world at a high level.

"We'll see. I don't think it's ever going to take over American football or American basketball, but it may take over hockey and baseball, soccer in America."

"My job takes me all over the world."

"Football is one game that you'll find anywhere. I played for 12 years as a kid."

"I'm part owner of @AustinFC." 📧

Hollywood star @McConaughey tells @BroadcastMoose about loving football.

McConaughey briefly took the time to plug his upcoming movie, "The Gentlemen," but also spoke to his rediscovered passion for soccer. The growth of MLS has played a part, though his children deserve the lion's share of credit.

"I've got children at home, 11, 9 and 6 who are big footballers," McConaughey said. "My job takes me all over the world. What's the one game you can find anywhere in the world? Football. The soccer ball is the greatest invitation in the world. They've gotten me back into it. I played for like 12 years as a kid, but it's mainly my kids who have gotten me back into it."

CREDIT: Jonathan Sigal Contributor



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Inter Miami, NYCFC reportedly eyeing January move for Chelsea winger Pedro

TRANSFER TRACKER STATUS: Report

Inter Miami and New York City FC are exploring the possibility of acquiring Chelsea winger Pedro in the January transfer window, according to a new report from Goal.com.

An FC Barcelona product who won three UEFA Champions League titles and five La Liga championships with the Catalan giants, the 32-year-old Spaniard (full name Pedro Rodriguez Ledesma) has scored 28 league goals and helped Chelsea win English Premier League, FA Cup and Europa League trophies since arriving in 2015. He was also a member of Spain's 2010 World Cup-winning squad, as well as their 2012 European Championship-winning one.



However, he's fallen down the Chelsea pecking order since Frank Lampard took over as manager ahead of the 2019-20 campaign. With just six months remaining on his contract, Pedro could be allowed to leave for "a cut-price deal" this winter as the Blues mull new signings to boost their attack.

CREDIT: Charles Boehm Contributor

Inter Miami CF acquire Juan Agudelo from Toronto FC

Inter Miami CF have acquired Juan Agudelo in a trade with Toronto FC in exchange for a third round 2021 MLS Super-Draft selection, it was announced Saturday.

"Juan has several years of experience in and out of this league and still has a lot to give," Inter Miami Sporting Director Paul McDonough said in a statement. "He has shown that he's a very talented player and we feel he will add valuable depth to our squad."

The 27-year-old Agudelo was selected by Toronto FC in Stage 2 of the 2019 MLS Re-Entry Draft on Dec. 3. Primarily a center forward who has also seen time on the wing, Agudelo spent the last six seasons with the New England Revolution. He had three goals and two assists in 28 regular season appearances, including 21 starts, in 2019.



Agudelo was a Homegrown signing by the New York Red Bulls in 2010. He spent three seasons with the Red Bulls and two more with Chivas USA before playing for FC Utrecht in Holland.

Agudelo, who scored 46 goals in 215 MLS appearances, has 28 caps for the US men's national team.

CREDIT: Dylan Butler Contributor

Top 10 trades of the 2019 MLS season

It's always fun to look back at the personnel moves that had the biggest impact, which is exactly what we aim to do by ranking the most important trades of 2019.

A majority of these picks were done early enough in the year to have fine effect on the 2019 season, but there are a few late entries that make the list with an eye solely toward the future.

Before we dive into the countdown, let's tip our cap to the honorable mention pick-ups and the teams that bartered for their services: Derrick Jones (Nashville SC), Brooks Lennon (Atlanta United), Dax McCarty (Nashville SC) and Justin Meram (Atlanta United).

No. 10 Real Salt Lake lands Zac MacMath

With club icon Nick Rimando hanging up his gloves at season's end, Real Salt Lake were in need of a new starting net-minder. For the piddly sum of \$50,000 in Targeted Allocation Money, they grabbed an experienced, quietly steady 'keeper to smooth out the transition. Over his last 101 starts spanning seven seasons, Zac MacMath has a goals against-expected goals against (GA-xGA) almost exactly at zero. That means he typically stops the shots he's supposed to stop, which should be just the tonic for an RSL team that is stingy at conceding chances (only 12.8 shots allowed per game in 2019).



No. 9 Minnesota United acquire 15th overall SuperDraft pick

Ah, the last-minute draft day trade-up. It seems like such a crapshoot maneuver, and yet it actually pays off rather often (see: Mason Toye, Jeremy Ebobisse, Cristian Roldan, Will Bruin, etc.). On this occasion, Minnesota swapped a measly \$50,000 to Chicago in order to grab Chase Gasper midway through the first round of the SuperDraft. All the left back did was put in a rookie season good enough (nearly seven defensive stops and one key pass per game) to help the Loons achieve their first playoff berth and earn himself a USMNT call-up in November.

No. 8 Jonathan Lewis to Colorado Rapids

The Rapids spent \$650K plus an international roster spot to rescue the young winger away from New York City FC, where his pitch time had a habit of drying up despite solid production. Jonathan Lewis then enjoyed more minutes on the field in 16 Colorado outings (899) than he had in more than two years in the Bronx (776), and responded with five goals and three assists. It seems likely the US international is only getting started in the Rockies. Spoiler alert: This is far from the last time the Rapids will be mentioned in the list.



No. 7 Atlanta United acquire Emerson Hyndman

Though only in existence for three seasons, Atlanta United have quickly become known for shrewd dealing. This past summer, they shipped \$200,000 to FC Dallas in order to secure Emerson Hyndman on loan from Bournemouth. The youngster fit in right away and ended up making 14 starts in 21 appearances on the way to raising a pair of trophies. Hyndman scored to cap their US Open Cup semifinal win at Orlando City and bagged the fast opener in their Campeones Cup defeat of Club America. And for an encore, he completed a permanent move to the Five Stripes, where he looks set for a greatly enhanced role due to the departure we'll discuss next.

No. 6 Columbus Crew SC land Darlington Nagbe

After missing the postseason, the Crew wasted little time reinforcing their squad. Three days after MLS Cup, they reunited head coach Caleb Porter with former Akron and Timbers charge Darlington Nagbe by sending an allocation

money package in excess of \$1 million to Atlanta United. It was a bold move for a team that likes to use possession as a cudgel. By teaming the two-time MLS Cup winner with Wil Trapp, they will now have two of the league's best midfield distributors to keep their flank runners and new playmaker Lucas Zelarayan well-fed.

No. 5 Colorado acquire fifth overall SuperDraft pick

Remember the 15th SuperDraft pick we mentioned above? Before it ever got to Minnesota, Colorado used that very same pick (along with \$100,000 in allocation cash) as bait in a trade up for Chicago's fifth overall selection. The Rapids did that for the express purpose of grabbing Andre Shinyashiki out of the University of Denver. Of course, the Brazilian went on to make 18 starts, score seven goals and add three helpers on his way to the Rookie of the Year prize.

No. 4 Darwin Quintero heads to Houston Dynamo

A few days after MLS Cup, the Dynamo dealt Marlon Hairston and \$600,000 in total allocation money over the next two seasons in exchange for Minnesota United's veteran dazzler. Will Darwin Quintero prove to be a bargain or a bust at that cost? We don't know the answer to that question just yet. What we do know is Houston's flank-driven attack now has the horsepower, skill and ingenuity to wreak havoc up the gut, which in theory will create extra time and space for the already scary likes of Alberth Elis and Mauro Manotas (for however long they stick around, that is).



No. 3 Colorado acquires the right to hire Robin Fraser

For the low, low price of \$75,000 in General Allocation Money to Toronto FC, the Rapids got themselves a new head coach capable of lifting the club out of their recent doldrums. Fraser only had seven late-season games to build on the momentum sparked by interim boss Conor Casey, but he certainly made the most out of them. Colorado went 5-2 under the former US defender, scoring over two goals per game while also posting three clean sheets. Four of those victims were playoff teams, including soon-to-be champs Seattle, who were outshot 25-5 in a 2-0 loss at Dick's Sporting Goods Park.

No. 2 Rapids make Lalas Abubakar loan permanent

There's one last nod for the Rapids, and I'm betting it's the most fruitful of all their fine 2019 swaps. On the heels of a 22-game loan spell from Columbus that saw Lalas Abubakar break out in a big way, the big center back moved straight back to Colorado on a \$400,000 permanent transfer that will probably look like a major steal in the years to come. How good was the 24-year-old in 2019? Without Abubakar (who led the league in clearances per game), the Rapids leaked 2.33 goals per game, a rate worse than FC Cincinnati's. With him on the field (working 90 minutes each time), they conceded 1.59.



No. 1 Minnesota United lands Ike Opara

The Loons shelled out a cool \$1 million for the veteran defender all the way back in January, and he was worth every penny. Ike Opara routinely dominated in and around the Minnesota area, chalking up more than nine total defensive stops per game and his second Defender of the Year honor. While old side Sporting KC saw their goals against total jump by nearly one per game, Minnesota saw theirs drop by .81 goals per game en route to the first playoff invite in franchise history. What a difference an Ike makes, indeed.



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