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MAGAZINE

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Chicago Fire FC Acquires Slovenia National Team Forward Robert Berić as Designated Player

Chicago Fire FC announced today that the Club has acquired Slovenia National Team striker Robert Berić via transfer from Ligue 1 club AS Saint-Étienne. Berić will be added to the Fire's roster as a Designated Player pending receipt of his International Transfer Certificate (ITC) and P1 Visa. He is under contract with the Fire through the 2021 season with a Club option for the 2022 season.

"We are very excited to add Robert to our roster ahead of the upcoming season," said Chicago Fire FC Head Coach Raphael Wicky. "Robert is hard-working, intelligent number nine who has the ability to score goals at a high rate. We are looking forward to welcoming him and his family to Chicago."

More on Berić: [Fast Facts | Career Highlights](#)

Berić, 28, comes to the Fire with more than 330 appearances in the top divisions in Slovenia, Austria and France. The striker has scored 122 goals in his career, including 12 goals in the UEFA Europa League and four in the UEFA Champions League. Internationally, Berić has earned 25 caps for the Slovenia National Team, producing goals in UEFA Euro qualification (2016) and in the UEFA Nations League (2018-19).

"I'm very happy to be in Chicago, and I think this is going to be a great new era for the Fire," said Berić. "I am looking forward to getting to work with my new teammates and starting the new season."

2020 Ticket Information

Berić originally began his career in Slovenia, featuring for NK Krško, NK Interblock and NK Maribor from 2007-2013. Ahead of the 2013-14 campaign, Berić transferred to the Austrian Football Bundesliga, signing with Sturm Graz. He scored 12 goals in one season with Sturm Graz, before joining Rapid Wien.

In his first season with Rapid Wien, Berić scored 27 goals in 33 league appearances, which ranked as the second-most in the Austrian Football Bundesliga during that year. Additionally, Berić's 27 goals placed him in 11th place in the 2014-15 European Golden Shoe award rankings. The European Golden Shoe is an award presented to the leading goal scorer in league matches from the top division of every European league.

The next season, Berić scored six goals in 10 appearances for Rapid Wien, before transferring to Saint-Étienne in France's top division. During his time with Saint-Étienne, Berić scored 34 goals in 81 appearances across all competitions, including five goals in the UEFA Europa League. The striker also spent time on loan with Anderlecht in the Belgian first division, making six appearances across all competitions during the 2017-18 campaign.

Berić will occupy an international roster slot on the Fire's 2020 roster.

Chicago will kick off its 2020 MLS season on the road on Sunday, March 1 against defending MLS Cup Champions Seattle Sounders FC at CenturyLink Field at 2:00 p.m. CT (ESPN). The Fire will officially make its return to Soldier Field on Saturday, March 21 when the team hosts Atlanta United FC in its 2020 home opener at 2:30 p.m. CT (Univision).

Fans can secure a seat for the Fire's 2020 MLS home opener, or any home game of the regular season, through a variety of ticket packages. Beginning as low as \$25 per game, season ticket packages for the 2020 campaign are available for purchase online or by calling 888-MLS-FIRE to speak with a season ticket sales representative. Additionally, season tickets for children ages 12-and-under are also currently available for as low as \$12.50 per game.

Transaction: Chicago Fire FC acquires Robert Berić as a Designated Player via transfer from AS Saint-Étienne.

Name: Robert Berić (Beh-rich)	Position: Forward
Height: 6'2"	Weight: 183 lbs.
Date of Birth: June 17, 1991	Hometown: Krško, Slovenia
Citizenship: Slovenia	Last Club: AS Saint-Étienne

CREDIT: Chicago Fire Communications

Sporting KC's Alan Pulido, Hunt family, joyous for KC Chiefs Super Bowl bid

What do Alan Pulido and the Hunt family have in common? Excitement for the Kansas City Chiefs reaching Super Bowl LIV.

On Sunday, the Chiefs scored 28 consecutive points to erase an early 10-point deficit to defeat the Tennessee Titans, 35-24, in the AFC Championship Game at Arrowhead Stadium. It is the team's fourth AFC championship and first trip to the NFL's big game since winning it in 50 years ago.

Dan Hunt is FC Dallas' owner and Clark Hunt is the club's chairman and CEO. Both are involved in the Hunt family's long-standing interest in the Chiefs. Pulido, Sporting Kansas City's freshly-minted Designated Player, is the team's newest fan. He braved the elements to watch the Chiefs beat the Houston Texans, 51-31, in the Divisional Round.

Sporting KC

@SportingKC

Land in KC, go to a @Chiefs playoff game. @alanpulido gets it.

Fittingly, the team was awarded the Lamar Hunt trophy after the game's completion. Lamar Hunt was one of the original founding investors in Major League Soccer. He at one point owned Columbus Crew SC, Sporting Kansas City and FC Dallas.

The Chiefs are in search of a second Super Bowl crown and will meet either the San Francisco 49ers or the Green Bay Packers in Super Bowl LIV Feb. 2 at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami.



CREDIT: Dylan Butler Contributor

Chicago Fire FC's Jonathan Bornstein eager to work with "great soccer mind" Raphael Wicky

As Chicago Fire FC attempt to build a new brand and identity on the shores of Lake Michigan, another departed one from MLS's past provides a link between their new head coach and their most experienced player.

Raphael Wicky and Jonathan Bornstein were teammates at Chivas USA during Wicky's brief stint with that club at the tail end of his playing career in 2008. Their interactions as Goats gives Bornstein optimism about the prospects of success in Chicago.

"He's just a great soccer mind," Bornstein told the Chicago Sun-Times as Fire FC gathered for the start of preseason training this weekend. "Obviously, a lot of great players transition into coaching because they've done it their whole lives. That's what they love."

"When they named him to be coming to us, I was extremely excited," he added. "Meeting him, he's an amazing person. He's very easy to talk to. With his trajectory, you could be as stuck-up and as pompous as you wanted to, but he definitely is not like that. He came off as very humble."



Why does Bornstein believe Wicky will be "a great change" for the Windy City club? Read the full story here.

CREDIT: Charles Boehm

National Writer

US teen Indiana Vassilev makes English Premier League debut for Aston Villa

TRANSFER TRACKER STATUS: Reports

Wed., Jan 15

Strap in, because here we go: According to multiple reports, including Kevin Baxter of the LA Times, the LA Galaxy are closing in on a deal for Mexico superstar Javier "Chicharito" Hernandez.

Galaxy closing in on deal with Mexican star "Chicharito" Hernandez

The Galaxy and Javier "Chicharito" Hernandez continued talks Tuesday, and a deal had not been finalized. However, a person with knowledge of the situation said an agreement "seems likely" and the...

Baxter reports that no deal is finalized yet but that the club are beginning to make arrangements for an announcement. The club would be likely to break their own transfer record, which is currently the \$7 million they spent to acquire Giovanni dos Santos in 2015.



Sun., Jan. 12

The simmering Chicharito-to-Galaxy story on the transfer-window hot stove got dialed up a few more notches over the weekend as Spanish outlet AS reported that the two sides are set to meet to discuss contract terms. His limited prospects for significant minutes at Sevilla continue to be a key driver for the player, it's said:

If the Galaxy offer manages to convince Chicharito, Los Angeles would pay almost 10 million to Seville plus Hernandez's salary, surpassing the signing of Giovanni dos Santos and Jonathan dos Santos, which was between 6 and 5 million euros [\$5.5-6.7 million].

Fri., Jan. 10

The LA Galaxy want Chicharito Hernandez and reports are that the interest is mutual.

Sergio Dipp of ESPN Deportes reports that Chicharito's team has approached Sevilla asking about playing time for the Mexican star ahead of the second half of their La Liga season. But the Spanish club is apparently set on Luuk de Jong as their center forward.

"What Chicharito wants most is to play," Dipp reported on ESPN Deportes. "It's not the first time that an MLS team is chasing him, but it is the first time that Chicharito is interested in an MLS [move]."

Wed., Jan. 8

The LA Galaxy will look to understand more about Javier "Chicharito" Hernandez's situation next week as they explore the possibility of signing him as a replacement for outgoing forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic, according to a report from ESPN Deportes.

Additionally, Madrid-based journalist Manu Martin has said the Galaxy are prepared to offer Sevilla a \$10 million transfer fee for the Mexico national team's all-time leading scorer, who has not made 20 or more league starts since he played for the Bundesliga's Bayer Leverkusen in the 2016-17 campaign.

Hernandez, 31, has been out of favor at Sevilla, starting in only four of his nine La Liga appearances this season and scoring once.

That could mean an MLS move is closer than ever for the former Chivas and Manchester United star, who has been linked to MLS plenty in the past.

Kevin Baxter of the LA Times asked Galaxy GM Dennis te Kloese about the reports on Wednesday, and while Te Kloese admitted signing Chicharito would be "a challenge," he did not deny outright interest from the club:

Previously, the Galaxy, LAFC and incoming 2021 expansion side Austin FC have been named among potential MLS landing spots. Late last year, he told the LA Times he was "definitely" interested in MLS as a possible future destination.

Hernandez has 52 national team goals and — according to FBref.com — 115 in his club league career.

CREDIT: Ian Quillen

Contributor

Philadelphia Union acquire Slovakia U-21 midfielder Matej Oravec

The Philadelphia Union have acquired Slovakian midfielder Matej Oravec from DAC Dunajska Streda, sources tell MLSsoccer.com.

A versatile player, the 21-year-old Oravec has spent the bulk of his starts at either defensive midfield or central defense, though has also featured as a fullback on occasion. The Union view him as a defensive midfielder. He has been capped regularly with the Slovakian youth national teams, including now a regular starter with the U-21 side.

Oravec has featured in all but one of DAC Dunajska Streda's 18 league games this season as the club sit tied for second in the Slovak Super League at the time of his departure. He has spent all of his young career in Slovakia, first with Spartak Trnava then Podbrezova before joining Dunajska Streda last summer.



Oravec is the club's third winter signing, following the permanent acquisition of Jamiro Monteiro on a Designated Player deal as well as Venezuelan defensive midfielder Jose Andres Martinez. Sporting director Ernst Tanner told reporters on a conference call last week that the club planned to add another center back.

Martinez and Oravec typify the transformation Philadelphia are undergoing in midfield, furthering their high-pressing ethos.

CREDIT: Tom Bogert Contributor

Vancouver Whitecaps FC interested in Korean winger

TRANSFER TRACKER STATUS: Report

The Vancouver Whitecaps are reportedly interested in South Korean winger Hyeon-beom Ahn from K-League 2 side Jeju United.

Citing Jeju United's ambitions to get promoted back to K League 1, Transfermarkt reports the club rejected the Whitecaps' initial bid for the 25-year-old, who can also play right back.

If the 'Caps can acquire Hyeon-beom Ahn, he would be the second Korean on the club, joining Inbeom Hwang, who made the move from Daejeon Citizen FC and signed as a Young Designated Player last January.

Hwang, who enjoyed a stellar first season in MLS, reportedly has interested in playing in Germany, a subject Whitecaps coach Marc Dos Santos discussed with TSN as part of the MLS media tour in Los Angeles.

MLS on TSN

@MLSonTSN

@WhitecapsFC Coach Marc Dos Santos reacts to the report that Inbeom has his sights set on a career in Europe.



CREDIT: Dylan Butler

Contributor

German playmaker Hany Mukhtar ready to star as one of Nashville SC's "key players"

Nashville SC will begin their inaugural preseason in MLS with just one Designated Player. As the expansion club convene their preseason camp in Florida, former German youth international Hany Mukhtar will wear the No. 10 jersey, and the weight of lofty expectations.

The 24-year old, signed from Brøndby IF in Denmark's first division, is ready to face those expectations – and plans to seize the initiative in his first season on this side of the pond, starting from the very beginning.

"Of course in football, it's always pressure," said Mukhtar as NSC unveiled their 2020 primary kits on Saturday. "You never play without pressure, because the club has goals, you have goals. But the most important for me in the beginning is that I get to know everybody in the team. That we find each other.

"I've never been to a team where 11 new players are on the field, so it takes time. I think what I have seen, we have good players, and we have the potential. When we find each other, we can be very successful."

Mukhtar's performances this season should go a long way toward determining just how strong a season Nashville SC have. That should come as no surprise to fans, and it's certainly not a surprise to the attacking midfielder. Indeed, that sense of being the most important cog in the machine was a major selling point for general manager Mike Jacobs when he pitched the young German on taking his game across the Atlantic.

"It was something special," Mukhtar said. "Not often that a team comes to you and says, 'we will build a team around you; you will be one of the key players.' That was, for me, very important. They gave me the feeling that I am important. Every player wants to feel important, that's something special, I would say.

"Really, they treated me really well, the club. How they treated me was impressive, so I decided for me to come here to make the next step in my career to MLS. I hope it's, for everybody, good: for the club and for me."

Mukhtar's knowledge of the league – and the acclaim he received when he announced he'd be playing in MLS – got a boost in recent years, thanks to broadcasting deals that have raised awareness of Major League Soccer in Europe.

"Actually, they showed a lot of Zlatan [Ibrahimovic]'s games, so I saw LA Galaxy a lot," he admitted with a grin. "Of course, he helped the league, especially to Europe. The European channels, they showed most of his games. I'm really excited and I can't wait to start: you have to write your own story, you know."

Mukhtar is expected to be the orchestrator of Nashville's attack. He began the 2019-20 Danish Superliga season on the bench with injury, but in the 12 league appearances he made after recovering from a minor foot issue, he notched two goals and two assists for fourth-place Brøndby. It's the latter that defines his game.

"I'm more like a playmaker," he explained. "I'm an offensive-minded midfield player more than a scorer. I try to help the team as much as possible, and try to bring the [other] offensive players into the game as much as possible."

While the Hertha Berlin academy product and FC Porto ex brings high-level experience to NSC's first-ever MLS squad, Mukhtar still remains a player very much approaching his prime.

"I'm 24, so I have still 10 years to go," he said. "I learned from the past. When I was 17, 18, I had big goals, crazy goals. Now I've learned to take it step by step. First now, be healthy, make a good preseason, try to get as fast as possible adapting to the league. But first, healthy, perform, be the best Hany Mukhtar I can, and that's my goal."

If all goes according to plan, maybe he can be that next player to draw the European spotlight to MLS.



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Kobe Bryant praises MLS' growth, but (probably) won't be the latest NBA star turned MLS owner

Kobe Bryant has watched Major League Soccer's growth over the past dozen years and likes what he's seen, and now he's lending his celebrity to the league as it continues to expand across America.

Bryant spoke about his involvement in the game Wednesday at LAFC's Banc of California Stadium as MLS announced a marketing deal with BODYARMOR, as the official sports drink of 19 of the league's club and with a youth soccer initiative coinciding with the kickoff of the league's 25th season.

Bryant, a shareholder in the company, retired four years ago after playing 20 seasons and winning five NBA titles with the Los Angeles Lakers, but his background in soccer dates to his childhood in Italy, and he's followed the league since David Beckham's arrival in 2007.

He's been impressed with MLS's growth.

"When David first came out here, I came down and watched him play," Bryant told media on the Banc of California pitch.

"I was able to kind of gauge what the energy was at that time, and it was still relatively unfamiliar to the U.S. market.

"Then to be able to fast-forward now and to see the energy that has kind of been put behind MLS, and the amount of support that's being put behind MLS, it's, I wouldn't say, surprising, because I've always appreciated the game and what a beautiful game it is and knew eventually America would catch on."

Bryant spent a half-dozen years as a child in Italy, where his father, Joe "Jellybean" Bryant played after an eight-year NBA career, and became a fan of AC Milan and later, FC Barcelona. He can talk at length and with great intelligence about the game and its players. Just don't ask him which of the local clubs — LA Galaxy or LAFC — he supports.

"Really?" he responded when queried on that topic Wednesday. "Ask me something better."

OK, how about what his profile might mean for the league.

"Hopefully, what my involvement will do is help with some of the marketing and storytelling of the game," Bryant said. "The most important thing, particularly in some of these markets — the newer markets that are coming now — is the marketing and storytelling of the players. Who they are, the beauty of the game.

"Educate fans on what's a beautiful play and things of that nature, and with our partnership with BODYARMOR, we're absolutely looking forward to doing those stories and getting that word out there more. And with my name, hopefully that will help."

There's long been a connection between soccer and basketball, the two foremost international sports, and several high-profile basketball players have stepped into MLS ownership groups or been linked to potentially doing so. Steve Nash has long been part of the Vancouver Whitecaps' management. Magic Johnson was the early face of LAFC's ownership group, James Harden joined Houston Dynamo's ownership last summer, and Kevin Durant has been connected to the Philadelphia Union and D.C. United.

LeBron James, Bryant's successor with the Lakers, has owned a piece of Liverpool FC since 2001.

Might Bryant follow a similar path?

"I have looked at several opportunities," he said. "I'm not really big on owning franchises — sports teams, per se — but you never know. If the right opportunity comes along, then I'll definitely look at it."

He sees a deeper link between soccer and basketball.

"Really, it's the connectivity of the sport itself," he said. "You have to use each other [in both sports], you have to be able to communicate with each other, verbally and also through the ball itself. You know, being able to read each other and how to open space for each other."



Five must-watch teams as opening day approaches

MLS preseason officially hits full swing this weekend, with the rest of the league's teams reporting for duty one week after the five Concacaf Champions League participants got things started.

All 26 clubs have plenty of storylines worth watching for, of course, and questions to answer in the weeks ahead. But these five stand out for me, whether it be for the promise they've shown entering 2020, the scale of the challenges in front of them or the personalities onboard.

Chicago Fire FC

Where to begin? The Fire have a new coaching staff, new brand, new NFL-sized stadium and, to a large extent, a new team this year. With just 17 players under contract on the eve of preseason – one a fresh draft pick and three teenage Homegrowns – the roster is barely half-full. While they'll undoubtedly add to it in the days ahead, as they did on Saturday with the arrival of striker Robert Beric, the status quo underlines the workload, and time crunch, facing the all-new technical staff.

Beyond that, Raphael Wicky will be a fascinating figure to follow. The Fire's head coach was convinced to leave U.S. Soccer and move across town less than a year into his tenure as the US Under-17 national team boss. And though that team's disappointing performance at the 2019 U-17 World Cup dinged his reputation, he'd largely earned positive reviews for his proactive work with that squad, as well as his previous stop at FC Basel in his native Switzerland.

Columbus Crew SC

If the Fire are the definition of a work in progress, their heartland counterparts in Ohio are the inverse. The Crew finished last season on a high note as Caleb Porter & co. found a rhythm down the stretch, and they built on that further with some promising winter moves, highlighted by the arrival of Darlington Nagbe and club-record acquisition Lucas Zelarayan.

The Yellow Football Team look to be crafting a fluid, technically-gifted starting lineup with a fearsome central-midfield core. Now the challenge is to hit the ground running this spring and prove their bonafides in a crowded Eastern Conference field.

LA Galaxy

Chicharito. Need I say more?

OK, fine, I'll say more. Beyond Javier Hernandez's expected (blockbuster) signing, the Galaxy have reeled in Aleksandar Katai and Sacha Kljestan, extended the loan for Cristian Pavon and re-signed Sebastian Lletget, providing some luxurious attacking options for Guillermo Barros Schelotto as the OGs of El Trafico aim to punch back in the battle of Los Angeles.

Have they fixed that painfully wobbly backline? Ehhh, I'm not so sure about that. LA might just have to win a lot of 3-2 and 4-3 games again this year. But that's just fine for most of us neutral viewers.

Montreal Impact

As a rebuilding side who also happen to be one of MLS's CCL representatives, the Impact face a daunting start to their first season under Thierry Henry, who despite his legend status as a player remains very much an unproven product in coaching terms. And their opening foe, Costa Rican powers Saprissa, will be a very tough out.

That said, Henry's footballing intellect is unquestionable and IMFC have a proud history of punching above their weight in Champions League. Can they get comfortable again at "The Big O," their hulking, historic second home for cold-weather matches?

Seattle Sounders

The defending MLS Cup champs also have to figure things out quickly given the early start brought on by CCL, and they have the quality and desire to make a real run at the thing.

Problem is, they've bid farewell to some key figures this offseason and are paper-thin at the back, particularly in central defense, where the freshly-signed Shane O'Neill and Xavier Arreaga are their sole specialist options at present. And their CCL opener, a potentially dicey visit to Honduras' Olimpia, is barely a month away. It's a real job looming in front of coach Brian Schmetzer and his staff.



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