



Cuauhtemoc Blanco
ABEL URIBE/
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READY, AIM, FIRE

Team has sights set on MLS Cup

By **Kent Green**
FOR REDEYE

MLS might as well make a "reserved" sign for the Fire in the Eastern Conference finals.

Saturday's game against Real Salt Lake at Toyota Park will be the team's third straight appearance in the conference finals and fourth in the past five years. The Fire lost to the Columbus Crew last year and to the New England Revolution in 2007 and 2005.

This year may be a critical one for the Fire's MLS Cup hopes as several potentially big off-season roster changes loom.

Midfielder Cuauhtemoc Blanco already has said he'll leave to play for Veracruz, and speedy forward Chris Rolfe is heading to play in Denmark's top league in 2010. Also, the contracts of Brian McBride, Wilman Conde and Gonzalo



WATCH DOG Fire vs. Real Salt Lake

7 p.m. Saturday,
Fox Soccer Channel

A Chicago sports team with a chance to reach a title game? Sounds like an early Christmas present.

Segares are up, and Marco Pappa's transfer deal from Guatemalan club Municipal runs out after the season. Veteran defenseman Brandon Prideaux has announced he'll retire at the end of the year.

If this were a TV show, we'd be bracing ourselves for the inferior spin-off. But Fire coach Denis Hamlett said the possible turnover doesn't weigh on the team.

"You guys [the media] are the ones that keep talking about it," he said. "We just go about our business."

Fire goalkeeper Jon Busch isn't worried either. "It's all about the here and now," he said. "The winner goes on to the finals. That's motivation enough for both teams."

Whether it's because of the likely end of his time with the Fire—and possibly MLS—or not, Blanco's play has been motivated as of late. He came off the bench in the Fire's regular-season finale and served the corner kick that ended up as a Chivas USA's own-goal, sealing the Fire's play-

off berth. Then, in the second game against the Revolution, he set up the first goal and showed patience under pressure to drive the second and series-clinching goal home in the 83rd minute. "He's a special player," said Real Salt Lake coach Jason Kreis. "He's a player that sees passes and can make plays that the majority of players can't, to be completely honest."

Though RSL snuck into the playoffs, it won't be a pushover. The team ousted defending champs Columbus in Ohio. They sport dangerous wingers Robbie Findley and Yura Movsisyan, and they're coming with, as Kreis put it, "an extra chip on our shoulder" because the Fire won the regular-season series between the two 1-0-1.

RSL will need whatever help they can get. They went 2-11-2 on the road this season and face a formidable atmosphere at Toyota Park. There was a standing-room-only 21,528 Nov. 7 against the Revs, and since this the first time the Fire has hosted a conference final, the team is expecting another raucous sellout.

"Hopefully for us, being at home is going to be the advantage that we had last weekend," Busch said. **KENT GREEN IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.**