



Full interview with Matt Calkins and ECS co-president Tom Biro on Sept. 18

Matt Calkins: Where would you say you are with MLS' policy on the Iron Front flag?

Tom Biro: MLS policy is MLS policy. They said that they're not planning to change it. We're at the point where we're going to go into the stadium and support the Sounders like we always do. And that's the focus. We can do more than one thing. That's kind of our take. If you haven't already heard there's a meeting tomorrow in Vegas so I'm going to that. So a few of us from ECS are going, some from the Timbers Army and some independent supporters are going. We expect to have a good dialogue. We know what we want. We theoretically know what they want. I am hopeful that we will get somewhere tomorrow.

MC: When you say you can "do more than one thing," what do you mean exactly?

TB: We can support a cause like what we've been doing with either waving a particular flag or believing something is not a political problem. We believe we can support a cause and stand for something and not have it detract from us doing what we're doing. Ultimately as we said in our public statement, abandoning the section is not our first move ever, and it wasn't something we went into with an easy thought or lighthearted thought about it. There was a lot of energy that went into making our decision, and ultimately the fact that they were going to take out the person leading the section, much of the group section chose to walk with that person.

MC: So the plan was that if we do something like that, you're going to show solidarity?

TB: I think we knew it was a possibility, frankly we prepare for every eventuality all the time.

MC: "You weren't like "we're going to this game and we're going to walk out!"

TB: That was not the intent. The intent with both that capo and the second capo that stepped up and suggested we were going to walk with the group was not just in the moment, we were prepared to make that decision, but it was read the moment, see what the tone is in the stadium and we elected to make that decision, and it's not something we take lightly.

MC: Do you think there are times when a Sounders game is not inclusive? Or is it an unsafe atmosphere?

TB: I do not believe that is the case inside the stadium. That said, given the events of whatever date that was in July, I do believe there are racist fascist people in the mix. And I'm not trying to blow that out of proportion. But as someone who had a verbal altercation with people where

we were sitting and across the street and around the block, and that they still physically assaulted someone, that is still part of Sounders match day. And the Sounders consider things surrounding Occidental Square and other elements part of the game day experience. So in that vein, I guess my answer would be yes, I do think that's happening. I do believe that Emerald City supporters and Sounders fan as a whole, do their best to convey that they are an inclusive atmosphere, and that words can mean what you want it to ultimately, nobody is dictating it. But in the same vein that ECS proudly flies the pride flag, a couple of them, we made pride shirts, it's a thing because a solid portion of our membership are very much about inclusivity, whatever that means, we feel strongly that the same people who fly that flag, we look at the Iron Front flag, the imagery around it -- the first step is that everybody has a right to be here. And I don't mean just in the section but here, on the planet. This is where the "anti-fascist, anti-racist always Seattle" conversation is. We believe it's a human rights discussion. The team agreed in writing, and we look at this iconography in the same light that we look at that. And again, anyone can interpret anything the any way they want whatever. We have made a conscious decision to state what we believe it stands for what it stands for. And in the same way that it is inclusive of those who are like "wow, you believe in me as a person. Those who don't believe everyone has the right to be somewhere should be wary of those that are. That's not a physical thing. That's just a— people want to be around others that are like them, that want the same things. That goes for people that love Stefan Frei and that goes for people who love anybody of any sex, race, creed, color etc.

MC: I'd like to think you wouldn't find too many people who disagree with that.

TB: And that's what I think the crux of the issue is. This wasn't an issue until MLS made it an issue.

MC: I think the concern that there are people who are associated with antifa have co-opted the symbol.

TB: People who identify as a group that as an informal, loosely based organization and I meant that in quotes, there is no capital A antifa in my personal Tom Biro opinion, and anyone who says otherwise is misinformed. Antifa is short-hand for anti-fascist, it has been blown up into something that is made to sound like this international organization. That is misinformation, it's actual disinformation.

MC: There are a couple things that I would bring up. I first heard of them a couple years ago, when I think it was Milo Yiannopoulos talking?

TB: I can't recall.

MC: And they broke a bunch of stuff, there was all kinds of damage.

TB: You can apply that to any group though. It isn't necessarily antifa. It is people who are against that person's beliefs. They don't have to be any kind of organized force against anyone. People against that person's belief. They don't have to be an organized force against anybody. Like the May Day parade was one of the cooler things that happened. Generally speaking, the problems are caused by those who infiltrate those doing something constructive about labor and work and are there to cause problems under the guise of a bigger group in order to make themselves look tougher or whatever.

MC: Do you know who Andy Ngo is?

TB: Yes.

MC: How do you feel about them throwing milkshakes at him and beating him up?

TB: That's a very loaded question that I am going to not answer. I'm not advocating violence against anyone. However, I will defend my friends if they are put in a position of violence being attracted to them.

MC: Again, I'm just trying to get as much clarity as I can.

TB: That's my personal statement.

MC: Is that a defense of what happened to him?

TB: No. I honestly don't know if I have enough information to judge what has or has not happened. Because so many things have been botched on a given day, so I'm probably ill-qualified to talk of a specific incident. I know of him, but I don't know any specifics.

MC: And there was another guy at the ICE facility in Tacoma. Do you know what happened with him?

TB: Again, vaguely, I don't know if I have enough specifics to comment. Again, this is out of the realm of a lot of things...

MC: And I don't know if this is representative of anybody in Seattle, but I came here a couple weeks ago and talked to a guy named Troy Stjorfell, he's a professor at Pacific Lutheran. I mentioned how they beat the crap out of a guy, and he was OK with it and pro antifa, and that point, I could see why people see this as a political symbol.

TB: Totally. And I understand that. I guess my counter to that is, as someone who sat here and watched a half a dozen or a dozen people use the American flag as their force to be reckoned

with or their iconography, I choose to not fight them on that because they live in this country, I live in this country, it is what it is. But I choose to not manipulate that flag for political injustice or racial injustice or physical injustice for others and that's what's happening. That's not what this is about. This is "we believe a symbol stands for a certain thing." None of us have control over what random third party x does with a particularly symbol.

MC: What if you see that symbol as one thing but all sorts of other people see that symbol as something else?

TB: I believe that anyone who believes in something to the extent that they will hold up a 8x8 flag should probably be able to explain what it is and why it means a thing. And again, everything is open to interpretation. I work in marketing and could talk about labels and bottles all day long. In that same vein, it doesn't mean that people haven't been misinformed, dis-informed. And if we, as a group, didn't believe we had history on our side. We wouldn't be where we are today?

MC: Where do you see this going forward?

TB: Great question. Honestly right now I think we're about focusing on the Sounders, we've made that commitment to players, we've talked to (Brian) Shmetzer (the Sounders' coach) that's where it's at. I don't know if I will have any more concrete things until we have this meeting tomorrow. The good thing about tomorrow is that it isn't a "y'all are in trouble, this is coming to a head meeting" it's a "we have a take, you all have takes, let's have a discussion and really try and understand where we are," and hopefully, and again, everybody wants a win -- I want people to not feel like they traveled somewhere and spent two or three hours in a room and didn't get anything done. I would say that is the next step, and until we have that dialogue, I don't know if there is anything else we can say. That said, I do expect people to feel emboldened to stand up for themselves. We actually were very strong this week about people who chose not to leave the other day. Again, everybody in that ECS section is not an ECS member. It just happens to all be general admission, we call it that because that's the size of the group from a tickets perspective at least. We felt very strongly about saying that people can make their own decisions. And sometimes it's not "I don't believe in what you're doing," sometimes it's "this is the only game I'm going to and I'm choosing to stay here with my kids." Like, you're welcome to make that decision. And while it would be great to have full unity and have everybody in Sounders land be like "oh my gosh we're going to walk away right now," you can't speak for everyone all the time.

MC: What if there were ECS members who didn't want to walk out?

TB: I'm sure there were ECS members who didn't walk out.

MC: There was one guy I talked to named Tim who didn't want to give his last name, but says this has become too political for him, that he feels pressure, that he's a long-time

ECS member but politics have sort of superseded fandom and he doesn't want to be a part of it anymore. What would you say to that?

TB: That this still isn't a political discussion. Our stance is that this is a human rights, people rights issue, and that we are standing with this in the same vein that we are standing with the "anti-fascist, anti-fascist always Seattle" imagery messaging, which is allowed in the stadium.

MC: Well there were things like him not even knowing that there was going to be a silent protest in Portland until he was on the bus. Is that a situation where could you're like "well, he can stand if he wants, too?"

TB: It's ideal if people don't in that situation because a show of force is important. At the end of the day, when people are uncomfortable in situations, our stadium will find a way to accommodate you. At the end of the day, the law of large numbers means you're never going to make everybody happy all the time. And we, in that case, did our best to keep a little bit of that language about what was going to happen until we were on the way to Portland because we didn't want everybody in the world to know that it was coming. So could we have done that differently or better, another way? Sure. Absolutely. And live in learn. In any situation, it's pretty atypical that people will show up to a stadium and not know what's going to happen, even when we have a great choreo or tifo, etc. you walk in and you know what's going on, because someone has said something. So I think in that case because it was in the week prior that we had really nailed down what the plan was going to be, it's very hard to do that and keep it quiet. Obviously it got out there, with some of the stuff with TA (Timbers Army), and again, we want that kind of feedback from people and we always want people to feel like they want to be in the section, but ultimately -- and this isn't just an ECS thing — any supporters section is not for everyone. And that doesn't mean it's not inclusive of everyone, but some people want to sit down and watch the game for 90 minutes, and others are like I want to pogo the whole time. It's about finding the balance but knowing that you're really there to support the team in a way that's unique to everyone else that's there. And can we always go like "oh maybe these songs should change" or "maybe there are too many flags or too little flags"? All of those factors are on the table, but I think people are allowed to have their opinion that they think something is political. In this case our stance is that it is not.

MC: What would you say to ECS members who aren't on board with this? Who don't want to walk out, who don't want to protest, who do think the Iron Front flag is political?

TB: I'm gonna say that we are going to support for 90 minutes like we always do tonight and we are going to appreciate them all.

MC: I mean in general.

TB: The second part of that is that we are all listening and this week we have actually had a number of really good conversations with ECS supporters that are elsewhere, who aren't in Seattle all the time, members of our armed services group. They have rules and regs about what they can and cannot be seen doing, and perception is a thing in some places, and we are definitely very much listening to our membership, season ticket holders, etc. and trying to take in all those facts and data and make better informed decisions, having all of that.

MC: You seem understanding of other people's opinions.

TB: I don't have to personally agree with all of them, but as adults, an adult helping lead a group of really awesome people. You might make a decision that everybody doesn't like, but if you at least listen to them on the back end and go "OK, maybe that wasn't the right thing," or "next time we're going to tell people about that a little more effectively," sure. If you're not adapting you're failing most likely. This is long-game stuff. This isn't "we're doing this for this many games in one season and that's it." This group has been around for more than a decade, and when most groups fail, it's in like five years, or that's the rumor. The fact that we're gaining ground in a lot of areas is really important, and having talked to TA and some other folks and seeing where their membership pushes or what the negatives are, I mean -- read the room, take all the facts and adapt accordingly. Does that mean ECS doesn't still move forward with this particular topic or this particular flag or being anti-fascist? No. But you can adapt or make sure that people feel heard, and listened to more importantly, and you're like "oh, we should have sent an email a day earlier so people can opt not to do a thing." That's hard, especially when some of this stuff is a little more in the moment.

MC: There was one ECS member I talked to who basically said it's OK to initiate violence if they see what they consider a threat, or a "Nazi," which I think is becoming a little too ambiguous, it's OK to punch him. What do you think about that?

TB: ECS and ECS security are there to protect membership from whatever. In the stadium, in the march. We have our protocols with security. I don't know if I know enough to really say anything, but I would say in general terms, we're there to stop aggression against our membership.

MC: I think he was saying more anywhere.

TB: Again, but think about in the moment. If we were standing outside right now and someone pulled out a gun, you may step in front of them or you may not.

MC: That's a little different, that's a gun, that's different than a sign or something ideologically.

TB: Sure, but we're talking about situations where someone feels that they need to defend themselves. I can't say for everyone's opinion on taking the first step or not. I know that it is our policy to be hands off with people, and that's why we try and have kind of a cordon around our march, do certain things inside the stadium with stadium security and the club, we've all agreed to -- there is real protocol around it. And it is about stopping the aggression before it really starts.

MC: Thanks. This helped a lot. I'm gonna be honest, I'm not as convinced as you are that it's not a political symbol.

TB: Well, in a column you are permitted to have that take.