

St. Louis CITY SC Making History In Opening Play

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - Some might say the MLS home opener for St. Louis CITY SC was three years in the making, since the announcement of St. Louis being awarded an MLS franchise. Some might go back further, dating back to St. Louis's recent history in professional soccer with teams like Saint Louis FC and AC St. Louis, both of which drew thousands of fans to Fenton for pro soccer.

Some of St. Louis's soccer historians might tell you to go back more than a century.

For soccer fans new and old, Saturday marked a tremendous occasion, the first time St. Louis CITY SC takes to the pitch in their home stadium, in front of their adoring fans. Saturday's home opener sold out almost immediately when single-game tickets were made available, and it's proven to be the hottest ticket in town this week, with resale prices well over \$200 in the days leading up to the match.

Last week's MLS debut match on the road at Austin FC sparked CITY fever for those who were still holding out. When Austin FC took a 2-1 lead in the second half, many thought the MLS Western Conference finalists would cruise to victory over a rambunctious but inexperienced St. Louis CITY side. Then, St. Louis got a miracle from an unlikely source.

Enter Austin FC defender Kipp Keller, brought on as an injury substitute early in the game. Keller grew up in St. Louis, played high school soccer at Principia Upper School, played 49 matches for SLU in college, and even made an appearance for St. Louis's last pro soccer team, Saint Louis FC.

With 78 minutes elapsed in last weekend's MLS opener, Keller takes possession and runs upfield. He runs out of space, and hears a call from Jared Stroud to pass the ball back to him. Unfortunately for Kipp Keller, Stroud now plays for St. Louis CITY, after playing for Austin over the past two MLS seasons. Keller likely heard Stroud's familiar voice calling for the ball, and passed it to him, not realizing he was wearing a different colored jersey.

Jared Stroud then turned around and rifled a shot into the back corner of the goal. With just twelve minutes of the 90 remaining, St. Louis had a lifeline to steal a point from one of the best teams in MLS. What happened six minutes later definitely wasn't in the script.

A beautiful pass from Eduard Lowen, something I imagine I'll be saying several times throughout this season, found CITY forward Niko Gioacchini in space around the center circle. Gioacchini looked up to see his Brazilian strike partner, João Klauss, making a run behind the Austin defense. Klauss got on the end of the pass, cut back towards goal leaving Kipp Keller in his wake, and toe-poked the Adidas MLS match ball beyond the outstretched arm of Austin FC goalkeeper Brad Stuver.

A goal that will live long in the memory for St. Louis's soccer faithful, a historic goal for St. Louis CITY SC and for MLS as a whole. CITY became the second MLS team in the league's history to record a come-from-behind victory in their inaugural match. The first to achieve the feat since the Tampa Bay Mutiny in 1996.

While it's too early to tell if St. Louis's inaugural MLS season will go the way of Charlotte's, last week's comeback win over Austin has seemingly sparked optimism around the league. St. Louis CITY jumped ten places in the weekly MLS Power Rankings, from last/29th place in the league to 19th.

The moment St. Louis soccer aficionados have been waiting for is finally here. If you can't make it to CITYPARK for the opener, the game will be broadcast on Apple TV through MLS's exclusive rights deal with the streaming service. Radio broadcasts will be available on Y98 FM in English and 102.9 KXOK in Spanish. Kick-off for the home debut is slated for 7:30 pm.