

Can CITY SC Stay Perfect In Portland?

by Nathan Tucker

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ST. LOUIS - Very few around MLS expected league newcomers St. Louis CITY SC to be competitive this season. Even fewer predicted they'd start their season in this fashion: two games, two wins, two Klauss goals. On Saturday night in Portland, the newcomers head to one of MLS's storied stadia, Providence Park, on a quest to remain perfect.

"Nothing changes now that we're 2-0," said St. Louis goalkeeper Roman Bürki following last Saturday's match, a 3-1 home win over Charlotte FC. "We let people talk, but we just keep working on ourselves to improve."

CITY's current weakness, one that's been exploited by both Austin and Charlotte in the season's first two games, is the space allowed on defense. Austin FC's World Cup-winning striker Sebastian Driussi found acres of space in the St. Louis defense for his goal in a game CITY would eventually come from behind to win. A similar counter-attack opportunity for Charlotte and forward Enzo Copetti saw them take the lead early in last week's CITY home opener.

"We knew it was on our to-do list," St. Louis CITY head coach Bradley Carnell said after the Charlotte game. "We need to block crosses and close down space. Unfortunately, we don't get out to block that cross, and Copetti is a very good player, a feisty character, he's very good in the air. He makes sure his presence is felt, you can see why (Charlotte) has him up front there."

CITY's occasional defensive lapses are part and parcel of the "energy drink soccer" that Sporting Director Lutz Pfannenstiel and head coach Bradley Carnell are instilling in the club. From day one, team construction has been based on the philosophy of defending from the front, winning possession upfield, and breaking with pace on offense.

When it works, it's a highly-entertaining style of soccer. Long spells of possession are traded off for blistering counter-attacks with a heavy emphasis on simply putting the ball on net. This creates more chances and more shots on target, with the aim to score more goals. To this end, more players commit offensively, which can overwhelm an opposing defense, but at times leaves CITY's defense stretched.

"The boys set the standard themselves," Carnell mentioned after Saturday's match. "If we score more than the opponent, when we're able to go down and come back, I think everything else is secondary. We only gave away two shots on target (against Charlotte). We want to defend from the front, which helps us with defending at the back. If gaps are starting to appear, if we have moments of fatigue, we have to find a new orientation and go from there."

"I think you see the willingness of the group to work," Carnell continued. "I think you see the willingness of the group to commit to each other, and we can see the outcome. Yes, over ten games if we don't have a clean sheet (a game without a goal allowed) we'll look at it, but if we have thirty points on the board and ten wins, we're not going to say anything either."

Portland comes into Saturday night's matchup with a win and a loss to their name on the young season. The Timbers took their home opener 1-0 over Sporting Kansas City to kick off the season behind a goal from Juan David Mosquera. They fell just short of a sensational comeback in LA last Saturday afternoon; the Timbers fell behind 3-0 to LAFC just after halftime, but two second-half goals from Evander and Christian Parades

brought Portland within reaching distance. A mad scramble of a finish saw LA hang on to a 3-2 victory.

A St. Louis CITY team that christened MLS's newest stadium now visits its oldest most storied venue, Portland's Providence Park. Providence Park has had a number of different forms, most notably that of a minor league baseball field for much of its existence. Renovated into a soccer-specific stadium in 2010, Providence Park still has plenty of touches that show its age.

The curved grandstand originally better fitting a baseball field has become an ideal end for the Timbers Army, the largest Portland Timbers supporters group. With their support, Providence Park has long been one of the best atmospheres in MLS, and St. Louis CITY should expect no less on Saturday night.

CITY takes on Portland Saturday night on Apple TV, with kickoff set for 9:30 central time.