

CITY's Dream Start Continues With Win In Portland - Become Just Second MLS Expansion Team To Win First Three Games

by Nathan Tucker
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PORTLAND - Only the most optimistic St. Louis CITY SC fans and followers would have expected the team to get out to a perfect start. On Saturday night, CITY continued to break the MLS mold, winning 2-1 in Portland over the Timbers. In doing so, St.

Louis becomes just the second MLS team in the league's history to win their first three games.

For the second time in as many weeks, St. Louis CITY fell behind in the contest early. Some poor CITY defending to start the match saw Portland march upfield and test Roman Bürki early. Zac McGraw would head a corner home for the Timbers to give them a 1-0 lead in just the third minute of play, with CITY goalkeeper Bürki left stranded.

The first half played out a bit differently for Bradley Carnell's CITY side than they've become accustomed to in this young MLS season. Instead of letting their opponent dictate play and striking on the counter, it was St. Louis who dominated possession of the ball for long stretches in the first half.

CITY held the ball for 59% of the first half, but their equalizing strike came at the end of a quick counterattack in first-half stoppage time. A cross from Rasmus Alm on the right wing was miskicked by CITY striker Klauss, luckily Jared Stroud was on the scene behind him to pick up the loose ball and tuck a shot into the low right corner of the goal.

For the second week in a row, CITY scored a goal in stoppage time of the first half. For the second week in a row, CITY erased a first-half deficit after giving up the first goal. For the second week in a row, CITY had all the momentum heading into the halftime break.

Stop me if you've heard this story before.

Two minutes into the second half, Jared Stroud turned on a corner kick and almost squeezed it past Portland goalkeeper Jared Bingham at his near post. Roughly 15 minutes later, St. Louis got another big chance, as a lovely flicked pass from Klauss found Rasmus Alm with only Jared Bingham to beat. Bingham parried Alm's shot away to keep the score deadlocked for the time being.

Strong goalkeeping from CITY's Roman Bürki on a Portland chance just minutes later kept the score deadlocked. Bürki dropped like an ice hockey goalie protecting his five-hole to reject Timbers midfielder Santiago Moreno who shot from the edge of the six-yard box. Some frantic defending from CITY in the box was both the cause and solution to this Portland attack.

St. Louis CITY has found that the game comes to them when both teams are stretched, and teams are trading chances, creating plenty of space for the pace of the CITY team to shine. Late in the second half, the game became more stretched, and with less than twenty minutes to go, CITY would find their winner.

CITY defender Kyle Hiebert got his head on the end of a free kick in the 74th minute. A cross that just missed the heads of previous goalscorers Tim Parker and Klauss, but bounced to Hiebert who had just enough power on his header to propel a shot into the Timbers goal. Hiebert was initially a signing for St. Louis CITY 2 in MLS NEXT Pro last season who earned an MLS contract last year.

Hiebert, a Canadian who was playing his college soccer at Missouri State in 2021, became a central figure for the CITY 2 team in MLS NEXT Pro. He's played in every MLS match so far, something that won't change anytime soon, especially with Designated Player signing and Sweden International center back Joakim Nilsson currently out for an extended period of time following a recent knee surgery.

A late chance for CITY's Tomas Ostrak in the 88th minute threatened to extend the lead but the former Bundesliga midfielder for 1. FC Köln sliced his shot wide. A few scrambled chances for Portland late ultimately failed to threaten Roman Bürki's goal, and St. Louis officially passed their second MLS road test.

Where CITY dominated the ball in the first half, the second half played more into the "energy drink soccer" style the team wants to play, where the speed and defensive pressing of St. Louis CITY can separate them from the opposition. They outshot Portland 3-1 in shots on target in the second half.

After three CITY games, the team sits atop the MLS. Goals are abundant. The eight goals scored by St. Louis is the most of any MLS team so far, and their +4 goal differential is tied with Atlanta United and Nashville SC at the top of the league. It's early, but it's reason for optimism.

That's the story of CITY so far. Being perfect early isn't going to win you any MLS trophies, but it's certainly putting you in a better position to seriously compete when it matters later in the season.

With Saturday's win, St. Louis has become the 20th team in MLS history to start a season perfect through three games. Of the 19 before them, 18 teams made the MLS Playoffs. Maybe CITY's "optimism" should become "expectation".

CITY hosts the San Jose Earthquakes next Saturday at 7:30 pm at CITYPARK, and each game feels more winnable than the last.