

St. Louis CITY SC Returns Home, Hoping To Build “Clean Sheet Mentality”

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - Thousands will flock to CITYPARK in Downtown St. Louis on Saturday, not only hoping for a St. Louis CITY win but hoping to create more American soccer history. CITY hosts the San Jose Earthquakes this weekend, and with a win would be the first MLS expansion team to win their first four matches.

St. Louis CITY has flipped the usual MLS expansion script already, and sits atop the MLS in both wins and goals scored. But head coach Bradley Carnell says CITY hasn't let their fantastic start get to anyone's heads in the dressing room.

"It's been pretty much business as usual," Carnell said in his pre-match press conference this week. "I see a group that's extremely hungry, ambitious, and humble. There's a lot of good energy around the group every day. Obviously, momentum and success helps all of that, but I think even if we weren't 3-0 this group would be eager and hungry for more."

The hunger is evident not only in the dressing room, but in the energy expended on the pitch by CITY so far. Despite trailing in every match so far in the MLS season, St. Louis has fought back and won each of them. In the 2022 MLS season, CF Montreal set the league record for points won after trailing in games with 24. CITY has nine points from losing positions in just three matches.

"This team has been really magnificent in hitting the hard reset button," Bradley Carnell noted during Thursday's press conference. "So now, we want a clean sheet mentality (a clean sheet refers to not allowing any goals). We've gone down in every single game.

"Yes, we've worked back to win games and get three points and we'll take it," Carnell continued. "But over the long term, going a goal down early and not keeping clean sheets doesn't put you in good standing throughout a whole MLS season. So for us, the next objective is to tighten things up at the back. It starts with a clean sheet mentality."

While Carnell and St. Louis CITY would love to tidy up their defensive efforts at the back and keep a clean sheet, CITY's bread and butter has been their enterprising attacking play. Much of that forward momentum is created by midfielder Eduard Löwen's ability to spray highly accurate attacking passes.

Löwen, formerly of Hertha Berlin in the German Bundesliga, is the creative heart of St. Louis CITY through three matches. It's on him to play the right pass as the team breaks with speed forward. Going back to the team's first match in Austin, it was Löwen who played an incredible breakout pass to Niko Gioacchini, who then played in striker João Klauss for the game-winning goal.

Speaking of that first match in Austin, St. Louis CITY's first goalscorer, defender Tim Parker, is an injury worry for Saturday's match. Parker left training early on Wednesday and didn't practice Thursday.

“We just have to monitor something, he might be available for gameday.” said Bradley Carnell of Parker’s status. “We’re giving him 48 hours to rest and recover. The doctors said there’s nothing tragic there, it’s just based on what (Parker) is feeling.

“Njabulo Blom is out on health and safety protocols,” Carnell added. “He will be out this weekend, I can tell you that now. Unfortunately we’re losing him for a second game, but he’s still got something going on.”

Blom was called up by the South African national team this week for their upcoming African Cup of Nations (or AFCON) qualifier matches against Liberia. However, South African head coach Hugo Broos has claimed St. Louis CITY has refused to allow Blom to play for his home country.

"Njabulo played the first two league games, last game he didn't play." South African coach Hugo Broos said to South African soccer outlet iDiski Times. “So, we made immediate contact with St. Louis to ask what was happening. They said he's sick, but failed to tell us exactly what he's suffering from.”

“He’s been in a good run of form,” Bradley Carnell said of Njabulo Blom. “We’ll have to monitor over the next few days how Njabulo recovers and if it even makes sense. 15 and a half hours flight direct to South Africa, and then he goes to Liberia, so it’s just the travel around the world which is never easy when you’re coming back from an illness. Right now it just doesn’t makes sense.”

The Earthquakes of San Jose come to town playing a style of soccer that is almost the inverse of what St. Louis CITY has tried to instill in this first month of MLS action. Where CITY prioritizes pace and quick counter-attacks, the Quakes prioritize possession and passing movement above all.

In each of their two victories over the past two weeks, (a 1-0 win at home against Colorado Rapids last week, a 2-1 home win over Vancouver Whitecaps on March 4) San Jose has had 60% possession and played over 600 passes. Conversely, St. Louis has hovered between 40-50% possession and 300-400 passes per game. Saturday looks to be a true clash of soccer styles.

Kickoff is set for 7:30 pm at CITYPARK on Saturday night, Apple TV will have the broadcast. KYKY Y98.1 FM (English) and KXOK 102.9 FM (Spanish) will have radio coverage of the match.