

CITY Tests Depth On Road Trip To Utah

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - After what was easily St. Louis CITY's most comfortable win last Saturday, a 3-0 home win over the San Jose Earthquakes, the new kids in town and in MLS remain perfect through four matches. That perfection is on the line again this weekend, and CITY might be without two of their most important defenders as they travel to northern Utah to face Real Salt Lake.

Last week, it was central defender and assistant captain Tim Parker missing the win over San Jose due to an injury suffered during the week in training. Parker has been ruled as questionable for Saturday's match, according to St. Louis CITY head coach Bradley Carnell.

"The question mark remains," said Carnell in his pre-match press conference this week. "Do we risk Tim Parker to play the game and stand to lose him over more weeks? We might add somebody to the roster just to travel with more numbers just to make sure, so I think we're pretty well prepared."

One defender definitely missing Saturday night's matchup is Kyle Hiebert, scorer of the goal that gave CITY a win in Portland two weekends ago. As it's time for the global soccer international break, Hiebert has been called to duty for the Canadians for the first time in his senior professional career.

It's a big achievement for the young Hiebert, who wasn't even considered in plans for Canada's World Cup team. When CITY kicks off on Saturday night, Hiebert will be roughly 3,255 miles southeast on the island of Curacao with the Canadian National Team.

Miguel Perez, St. Louis CITY's homegrown talent that's already started this season, is also abroad during the international break representing the US U-20 Youth National Team in Argentina this weekend.

Perez is joined by CITY2's Fritz Volmar, who misses CITY2's MLS NEXT Pro opener this weekend. For those unfamiliar, CITY2 is St. Louis CITY SC's developmental /reserve team, playing in MLS NEXT Pro. It was CITY2 playing at SIU-Edwardsville and Saint Louis University last season, where the earliest signings for the MLS roster got playing time while they waited for CITY to join MLS.

One CITY midfielder who wishes they were abroad playing for their country is South African starlet Njabulo Blom. As I mentioned in last week's preview, Blom had missed time as he was in health and safety protocols, but South African head coach Hugo Broos had hinted that St. Louis CITY wasn't being forthright in explaining why Blom couldn't travel to play in South Africa's African Cup of Nations Qualifier matches against Liberia.

Blom had COVID, as one who's watched sports in the past few years might have guessed by the use of "health and safety protocols" by the team. As such, Blom has spent the majority of the past few weeks sitting at home, not training, which factors into his comeback.

“He’s been released from the health and safety protocols, which is good news,” Bradley Carnell said this week. “The bad news is that he’s missed ten days of training. There’s depletion of fitness, everything takes a bit of a whack.

“Listen, Njabulo at 60 percent, we’d still like to see him play in some form or fashion.” Carnell continued. “But it’s questionable whether he travels or not.”

Those making the flight to Utah will face a Real Salt Lake team struggling for consistent form. RSL won their season opener on the road in Vancouver after going a goal down, but have lost to Seattle Sounders and Austin FC in the games following. Last weekend, Salt Lake was off, which gave them two weeks to prepare to host St. Louis CITY. Bradley Carnell thinks his team is ready for the more rested opponent.

“We know we’re playing away from home but we’re just trying to focus,” Carnell said of his team’s preparations for Real Salt Lake. “I think we’ve had a very good training week, taking care of these scenarios (injured/international players missing game time), and coming up with different combinations and formations. We’re just trying to see which piece of the puzzle fits best for the game that Salt Lake poses to us. But I feel we’re just focusing on us right now rather than the opponent.”

A factor that might come into play in Utah: snow, and lots of it. According to the Weather Channel, Salt Lake City is expecting over six inches of snow between Friday night and kick-off on Saturday night. Much like last Saturday’s bitterly cold but successful evening at CITYPARK, St. Louis CITY will have to keep up their high-tempo style of play in below freezing weather, which might catch a rested Real Salt Lake team off-guard.

Kick-off in the snowy suburbs of Salt Lake City is set for 8:30 pm Central Time on Saturday night. The game will be televised on Apple TV and broadcast on local radio stations KYKY Y98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.