

Six In St. Louis? CITY Looks To Continue Strong MLS Start

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis CITY and head coach Bradley Carnell continue to preach the ability to “reset” before each match, looking at each game as if it were their first, and be prepared for any setup any team may throw at them. On Saturday, CITY hosts a Minnesota United team that will look to stifle what’s been one of MLS’s most potent offenses.

In doing so, Minnesota United often sacrifices possession for defensive numbers behind the ball, making them incredibly hard to break down. They've only conceded three goals in four games, the third-best defensive showing in Major League Soccer so far this season.

Minnesota comes into Saturday's contest having won both of their previous away matches, 2-1 at Colorado Rapids two weeks ago and 1-0 at FC Dallas to open their season. In each of those matches Minnesota had less than 40% possession but had the better chances, thanks to their counter-attacking abilities.

"They're a competitive team," St. Louis CITY head coach Bradley Carnell said in his pre-match presser on Thursday. "Just like we strive to be competitive, they're competitive. They work as a group, as a unit, they work collectively, they're difficult to break down, and they have some difference-makers in their team.

"Credit to (Minnesota United head coach) Adrian Heath," Carnell continued. "His teams are always tough to play against. I think he has a good few pieces in his team this year. We know they've had a couple of guys traveling from all over the world, (on international team duty with their respective nations) but we don't plan for that, we plan for the best version of Minnesota."

On the subject of international play, CITY has its internationals returning as well this weekend. Defender Kyle Hiebert was representing Canada, and played about a half hour as a substitute in Canada's 4-1 win over Honduras on Tuesday.

Midfielder Miguel Perez was representing the US U19 Mens' Youth National Team in friendlies against Argentina's U19 squad and the U19 side from Argentinian team Racing Club de Avellanda (or Racing for short). Perez started the match against Racing and scored a goal in the 19th minute, helping the US U19s to a 2-0 win.

Perez, the 17-year-old homegrown talent who's still going to Pattonville High School, has featured in every game he's been available for St. Louis CITY this season, and even started the away match in Portland. He's eligible to be selected to the US U20 team for the FIFA U20 World Cup, which is happening later this year.

Perez spent some of 2022 with the team's MLS NEXT Pro club, CITY2. CITY2 kicked off their second season in MLS NEXT Pro by earning a point at CITYPARK against Tacoma Defiance in a game that ended 1-1 after CITY2's Mykhi Joyner pushed a header home in the dying moments of second half stoppage time.

But due to MLS NEXT Pro's shootout point rule, the tie game went to a penalty shootout to determine who would be given an extra point for winning the shootout, similar to the National Hockey League's overtime point rule. CITY2 lost the shootout 5-4, and Tacoma Defiance claimed the extra shootout point.

"Seeing such a young team playing (on Sunday) is truly special." CITY Sporting Director Lutz Pfannenstiel said on Twitter this week. "An assist by the 16 year-old Braydon Sellers, goal by 16 year-old Mykhi Joyner! Giving our CITY Academy boys the chance to compete at the MLS NEXT Pro level will give us local talent at the MLS level in the future."

CITY2 plays again at CITYPARK on Sunday afternoon against Minnesota United 2, looking for their first win of the MLS NEXT Pro Season. That, of course, follows up Saturday's MLS action in Downtown West as the big CITY looks to make more MLS history with a sixth-straight win to start their MLS existence.

To do so, they will have to go through a stingy Minnesota United team that is also looking for their best-ever MLS start since joining the league in 2017. In their short history, Minnesota United has won four of six matches against MLS expansion teams. Since the start of the 2020 season, Minnesota has allowed just one goal in four matches against MLS debutants.

"They're going to give a different look obviously," CITY head coach Bradley Carnell noted in his pre-match presser. "Right now, they're functioning very well as a team."

On the injury front, CITY midfielder Rasmus Alm took a knock to the knee against Real Salt Lake last Saturday and didn't practice throughout the week. Carnell isn't ruling him out of selection for the Minnesota United match.

Defender Jake Nerwinski mentioned to the CITY staff that he's had tightness in his back "for a few years", and took Wednesday off as a "de-loading day". He was back training with the team on Thursday and looks to be fine for selection on Saturday.

"After eleven weeks of really crushing it physically," Carnell mentioned, "I think it's just good for Jake (Nerwinski) to get a day off. For him to take a day off doesn't hurt him or us, I think it makes us better, getting him a bit of a break. (Thursday) he'll be back, we'll just observe it day-by-day."

CITY's electrifying five-game winning streak to start their MLS run has set a new benchmark for expansion clubs. They're averaging three goals per game, and they're the only team in MLS with a double-digit goal differential (+11). Minnesota's deep-lying defensive strategy will put that attack to the test Saturday night.

Kickoff at CITYPARK is set for 7:30 pm on Saturday night. The match is televised on the Apple TV app and on local radio stations KYKY Y98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.