

St. Louis City SC Heads To Seattle For Western Conference Contenders Clash

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - It took six matches, but St. Louis City SC finally lost a game last weekend, falling 1-0 at home to Minnesota United. On Saturday night, April 7, they look to get back to winning ways on the road facing the Seattle Sounders at Lumen Field.

“Looks like an enjoyable game with two very good teams,” said St. Louis City head coach Bradley Carnell on Thursday. “Two teams that are excited about what they’re doing right now, and two teams that are on a good streak at the moment. Even though

we don't get the points (last week against Minnesota) we are defensively sound and our structure is good. These are two teams that can challenge each other really well. We know we can go on the road and pose some problems for the opposition. We're excited and we're up for the game."

It's a clash of the two top teams in the MLS Western Conference through the first six weeks of the season. City has proven their mettle on the road so far in their debutant MLS season: 4-0 over Real Salt Lake two weeks ago, 2-1 over Portland almost a month ago, and of course their come-from-behind 3-2 win in Austin which put the whole league on notice.

"Inherently, our system has never rewarded a tie game," Carnell said in his pre-match presser Thursday. "You either win or you lose, and that's how we go to battle. We want to go all out, we want to be on the front foot, we want to try and win games, whether it be on the road or at home. If we could bag a couple of points in Seattle it would be great, but it's an opponent we have to respect."

Much like City through the early going, Seattle has found the back of the net early and often, particularly by way of Jordan Morris. Morris, who represented the United States at the 2022 World Cup, has already surpassed his 2022 goals total, just six games into the Sounders season.

"Out of improvisation, putting (Jordan) Morris on the top line," said Carnell. "He's banging in eight goals, and all of the sudden you have really big-name strikers (referring to Seattle's Raul Ruidiaz) on the bench. They have a lot of depth, a lot of quality, they're a very good team."

The eight goals Morris has banged home has been a spark plug for the Sounders attack this season. He sits atop the early MLS Golden Boot race, with St. Louis City's Joao Klauss in second place with his five goals on the year so far.

However, it's not all goalscoring that's pushed Seattle to be a tough team in the Western Conference so far this season. The Sounders have only allowed three goals this season, the fewest in MLS so far, and none at home at Lumen Field.

"With Yeimar and (Jackson) Ragen, they have some really solid defenders," Bradley Carnell said of the opposition on Saturday. "Plus they're complimented well on the backline, with Nouhou and (Christian) Roldan, they have a really good, really stingy defense. But what makes them good is their transition game, they have a lot more passes, they control games a lot better at home."

Seattle's defensive efforts can be seen on the stat sheet beyond the clean sheets and one-goal games they've won. The Sounders lead the league in duels, which are 1v1 matchups on the pitch, contesting for the ball when neither team has possession.

Bradley Carnell prides his teams on winning the duels all over the pitch, and it's a category City does very well in themselves. Seattle has won 51.7% of duels they've contested in this season, while St. Louis has won 50.9%.

City paces the Sounders in defensive interceptions, another pride of Carnell's. City's 75 pass interceptions on the season are second only to FC Cincinnati in the Eastern Conference. Seattle has intercepted 64 passes in the same time frame.

"The orientation for us is always the ball," Bradley Carnell noted Thursday. "We control the things we can control. We stay compact and connected. We've come up with a good match plan, we have to mitigate (Seattle) in transition. We've worked really hard this week, correcting the wrongs of what we thought we could improve on from the Minnesota game."

The big MLS club wasn't the only team facing off against Minnesota last weekend, as reserve side CITY2 hosted Minnesota United 2 at CITY PARK Sunday afternoon in front of a few hundred onlookers. CITY2 took the lead just five minutes in, but ultimately fell to MNUFC2, 3-1.

Three minutes into the match, CITY2 was awarded a penalty as John Klein was slashed down in the box after a great run weaving through the MNUFC2 defense. Celio Pompeu, an MLS player this season who was a CITY2 regular in 2022, had his penalty saved and pushed over the goal for a corner kick.

Akil Watts, who played twenty-some-odd minutes in the City home loss to Minnesota United the night prior, nodded his header into the far corner to give CITY2 a 1-0 lead to start the afternoon. At times, CITY2 looked destined for a second goal, swarming Minnesota's box, but the visitors survived and made it to halftime trailing by just the early Akil Watts goal.

Aziel Jackson, who also played 20ish minutes for St. Louis City the night before, played all of the second half for CITY2 against his old club that he represented in the 2022 MLS NEXT Pro season. Jackson was selected by City in the MLS Expansion Draft after Minnesota United left him unprotected.

A second yellow card to CITY2 defender Josh Maher put the hosts down to 10 men for the final 20 minutes of action on Sunday evening. Almost instantly after going down a

man, Juan Mosquera leveled the game for MNUFC2, poking home a rebound off a free kick.

The visitors now had fifteen minutes of game time left, and had all the momentum on their side with the man advantage. An incredible free-kick goal from MNUFC2 midfielder Cameron Dunbar, one that likely no goalkeeper could have stopped, gave Minnesota a 2-1 lead with less than 10 minutes to play in the match.

MNUFC2 tacked on a third before the full-time whistle and took all three points at CITY PARK on Sunday. CITY2 is back at CITY PARK this weekend hosting Houston Dynamo 2, looking for their first win of the 2023 MLS NEXT Pro season.

On the MLS injury front, St. Louis City midfielder Rasmus Alm missed some practice time this week but returned on Wednesday and had a full practice Thursday. Bradley Carnell said that a decision will come on whether Alm travels to Seattle on Friday.

“He’s missed a couple days now,” said Carnell. “It’s a couple days more than I anticipated, so we’ll have to see how missing training trickles down to the next few days and how he looks.”

Njabulo Blom came on as a substitute last weekend, and Carnell believes he’s “100-percent” a candidate to start this weekend. “We’re stronger when Njabulo’s fit and healthy.”

You can follow City’s exploits on the road on Apple TV, with kickoff at 9:30 pm central time. The game will also be broadcast on radio on KYKY Y98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.