

City Looks To Stop Losing Skid Against MLS Best Cincinnati

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis City's five-game winning streak to announce their presence in MLS sent shockwaves around the league. On Saturday, they have a chance to shock again, hosting league-leaders FC Cincinnati at CITYPARK.

It's a Cincinnati team that learned the hard lessons of being an MLS expansion side themselves.

When FC Cincinnati jumped from the USL Championship to MLS in 2019, they were greeted by the Seattle Sounders, who thumped them 4-1 in their MLS debut in Seattle. FC Cincinnati actually lost in St. Louis in 2019, to now-defunct USL Championship side Saint Louis FC.

Cincinnati won just six games in its expansion season and won just four games each in the altered 2020 season and in 2021.

Cincy turned a major corner last season. Chris Albright came on as general manager, following his time with the highly successful Philadelphia Union. They hired St. Louis's own Pat Noonan to be their head coach. Noonan, a De Smet grad from Ballwin, was an assistant with the Union before joining FC Cincinnati.

In their first season with Albright and Noonan in charge, FC Cincinnati jumped from MLS bottomfeeders to fifth place in the Eastern Conference, qualifying for their first ever MLS playoffs. Noonan was able to get the most out of Cincy's star signings, the Brazilian striker Brenner and Argentine midfielder Lucho Acosta.

Brenner's impressive goals tally, 18 in 29 MLS games last season, drew global attention. Teams from around the world came knocking on Chris Albright's door inquiring about Cincinnati's star striker. On Thursday, MLS insider Tom Bogert reported that FC Cincinnati and Italian Serie A club Udinese reached an agreement to send Brenner to northeastern Italy.

When the deal is complete, it will be one of the biggest outbound transfers in MLS history. That puts Brenner's name alongside Alphonso Davies, Miguel Almiron, and Brenden Aaronson, all of whom made big-money moves to Europe in the past handful of years.

What does that mean for Saturday? Well, Brenner could very well be held out of the starting lineup while his deal is finalized. Brenner will stay with Cincinnati until July, when the International Transfer Window opens, but has been held out of training this week during negotiations of the transfer. Neither Cincy nor Udinese would want to see the striker get injured with the move just about set in stone.

So that's maybe a bullet dodged for Bradley Carnell and St. Louis City. Here's another: the aforementioned Lucho Acosta has been ruled out of Saturday's match by FC Cincinnati's Pat Noonan. Acosta left last week's 1-0 Cincy win over Philadelphia Union with a shoulder injury.

"A lot of it is pain tolerance," said Noonan. "And there's always going to be a risk of re-injury depending on how you're hit or landing. Knowing Lucho, if we say it's going to

be two or three weeks (until he's healed enough to play) it's probably actually going to be a week and a half."

So likely no Brenner, definitely no Lucho Acosta, and Cincinnati's other DP, (designated player) midfielder Obinna Nwobodo had missed the past two MLS games due to a lingering hamstring injury. While not as prolific in front of goal as Acosta or Brenner, Nwobodo is one of the best defensive midfielders in MLS, and shows great ability on the ball in tight spaces in midfield, picking out the right pass more times than not.

"Personnel wise, they have one or two question marks," said Bradley Carnell at City's pre-match presser on Thursday. "There's two different versions of a team that Cincinnati will put out there, I don't know if their structure changes too much. Our focus was on us this week. We don't focus as much on the opponent, for us that's very important."

Focusing on City, the team is looking down the barrel of their first-ever losing streak. Following their incredible 5-0 start, two back-to-back shutout losses have forced Bradley Carnell's team to reassess and refocus.

"There's no crisis, there's no problems, nothing's broken." Carnell said. "We just have to adjust and fine tune a few things. I wouldn't call it 'going back to basics', but we want to show the edge that we started off with in the first five games. That's not to say we've lost the edge, we just want to bring that little bit of body language, that little bit of 'prove the world wrong' mentality, I think that's where we want to go back to."

A quick note on the injury front: Njabulo Blom, who left the loss against Seattle with an apparent groin injury, has been ruled out for "five to six weeks". Blom played a big role in the middle of the park for City in their opening games, and was just about returning to full fitness after a bout with COVID. The injury is a setback for Blom, but Carnell believes his team will manage fine in the interim.

"We have four players for those two midfield positions," Carnell replied when asked if City would look at a possible replacement from CITY2 or elsewhere. "At the moment, we have Miggy Perez, Indy Vassilev, and Edu Löwen. Akil Watts has contributed some key minutes as well. We have those four for these positions, I think we still have faith in what we have."

Part of City's recent struggles have simply been running into good teams playing good soccer. Saturday is no exception to this rule, Cincinnati comes to town having won their last three. They're one of two undefeated MLS teams, the other being LAFC.

“ obviously comes from the opposition you play,” Carnell noted. “Adrian Heath’s Minnesota team is very stout defensively, Seattle hadn’t conceded too many goals either. We’re coming up against real strong opponents, and our upcoming opponent is no different. has five 1-0 wins.

“Again, the level of MLS, if anyone thought any different, it’s really difficult.” Carnell continued. “It’s really difficult to get points whether you’re on the road or even playing at home. But at home, we know we’re going to have an energized CITYPARK and tons of fans coming to support us. We’re going to need every ounce of energy and every ounce of spirit and connection, whether it’s us on the field or with our fans. We need everyone on board for this one.”

St. Louis City hopes to have everyone on board when they kick off against FC Cincinnati at 7:30 pm on Saturday night at CITYPARK, televised on Apple TV. You can also listen to the match on local radio stations KYKY 98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.