

# City Looks To Stay Atop MLS Against Uniquely Familiar Foe

by Nathan Tucker  
April 22 2023 12:35 PM



**ST. LOUIS** - St. Louis City SC got back on track last weekend, with a massive 5-1 victory over then-MLS best FC Cincinnati in a game that will live long in the memory of those who braved tornado warnings and hours of rain to be at CITYPARK. This weekend's opposition, the Colorado Rapids, find themselves on the opposite end of the MLS standings.

Colorado has one win through their first eight matches this season, and that 1-0 win came against current MLS bottom-feeders Sporting Kansas City. They're a team that doesn't score much, but it's a team that doesn't concede much either.

The Rapids' best game this season was likely their 0-0 draw at home against Los Angeles FC three weeks ago. The Rapids outshot a very offensive-minded LAFC team and neutralized the likes of star players Carlos Vela and Denis Bouanga.

Much like St. Louis City, Colorado was also put to the sword by Seattle Sounders at home this season. Colorado kicked off their MLS campaign losing 4-0 in Seattle, with Jordan Morris notching two goals for the home team in front of 30,000 fans at Lumen Field.

Unlike virtually all of their opponents this season, City actually has a bit of familiarity with the Rapids. In an MLS NEXT Pro game last season, CITY2 went to Colorado to face a Colorado Rapids 2 that was loaded with MLS-level players staying fresh during an international summer break. A CITY2 team with future MLSers defeated an MLS-quality Rapids 2 in an overtime penalty shootout.

"It's a great challenge to me and the coaching staff to go at it one more time against an opponent we know really well," said St. Louis City head coach Bradley Carnell in his pre-match presser on Thursday. "They rolled out their whole first team against us (CITY2) during an international window. So we have that first-hand experience, and we have a good memory of going to Colorado."

On the scoresheet for CITY2 that afternoon were Wan Kuzain (still with CITY2) and Akil Watts, who used the 2022 MLS NEXT Pro season to play his way onto this year's MLS team. Watts has mostly made his impact off the substitutes bench thus far for City.

Nicolas Mezquida, who's since been sold to Greek Super League team Volos FC, was one of two Rapids 2 goalscorers that day. The other being Brazilian forward Max Alves, who scored for the Rapids last weekend on the road at Charlotte FC.

When asked if his memories of Colorado included altitude sickness, Carnell pointed to growing up in high altitudes in South Africa.

"It's something that never really applied to me," said Carnell. "Growing up in South Africa at 5700, (feet above sea level) I think Colorado is six thousand or so. It's never really been a topic with us. There's the science behind it, you know the later you arrive, the better it is. So if you really want to be prepared and benefit, you have to go days and days prior to acclimate. For me, it's getting in and getting out."

City's itinerary this upcoming week is a busy one thanks to their first US Open Cup match this Tuesday. The US Open Cup is a tournament that predates Major League Soccer by 80 years, where teams across leagues and levels of amateur and professional soccer in the US square off. City faces USL League One's Union Omaha Tuesday at CITYPARK, but all focus is still on Saturday in Commerce City, Colorado.

"One step at a time, one game at a time," Carnell said. "It's not an easy one... we have just two days to recover and play again. So from that point of view, we feel that we can achieve both objectives of being competitive and putting out a competitive lineup against Colorado, and turning it around and putting out a competitive lineup against Union Omaha."

Taking it one game at a time and focusing on Saturday night's match against the Rapids, Carnell was optimistic about his team's efforts in training this week. Carnell and crew are preparing for City to have plenty of time with the ball against a defense-first Colorado team.

"We take it back to the away game in Portland," Carnell pointed out. "Portland's a deep-lying opponent who likes to sit back, just like Colorado. They like to absorb pressure, they like to sit back, but they're still aggressive in their defensive approach. But all their regains (of possession of the ball) are in their defensive half."

"We're going to have a bit of the ball, it's up to us now to see how we manipulate the spaces that we're given," Carnell continued. "The last two days of training have been probably the two best days of the year in terms of our application in training, our professionalism, quality, and execution. So we're really happy with the week we've put out so far, but that doesn't mean anything on game day. But I feel we've been very well prepared this week."

On the injury front, there's been a positive development for defender Joakim Nilsson, who's been on City's injury list since January. Nilsson underwent surgery on his injured knee over the winter and was ruled out "until May".

For the first time this year, Nilsson has been able to put his full body weight on his repaired knee, and was spotted out and about at City training this week, kicking a ball around. Nilsson was a free transfer from German Bundesliga team Arminia Bielefeld, yet another Bundesliga product in the City fold.

As far as Nilsson's next step to making his City debut? Carnell quickly quipped: "Have to ask the medical department on that one."

**CITY2 Corner**

CITY2's MLS NEXT Pro struggles continued last Sunday with a 2-0 road defeat to Austin FC II. The reserve side has played four matches so far and is still searching for its first victory in 2023.

The highlights of the match for CITY2 were goalkeeper Christian Olivares, making eight saves, including a few brilliant saves that kept the scoreline more respectable than it could have been. Aziel Jackson was also sharp, playing the full 90 minutes, creating a number of good chances, and completing over 75% of his passes on the evening.

The reserve squad faces a tough challenge this weekend against a Colorado Rapids 2 team that is undefeated through their four MLS NEXT Pro matches. Unlike their senior MLS side, Rapids 2 has had no problems scoring goals, scoring 10 goals in those four unbeaten.

CITY2 faces Rapids 2 on Sunday evening at 5 p.m. with streaming available on YouTube.

The big league City faces Colorado Rapids at Dick's Sporting Goods Park Saturday night, with kickoff scheduled for 8:30 p.m. central time. The match is televised through Apple TV with local radio broadcasts on KYKY Y98.1 FM in English) and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.