

City Can't Capitalize On Bürki's Heroic Performance - Earn First Draw In Colorado

by Nathan Tucker
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COMMERCE CITY, Colo. - In martial arts, there's a saying that "styles make fights," where the contrasting abilities of the combatants shape a contest. On Saturday night, the style-clash of St. Louis City SC and Colorado Rapids largely created a stalemate, and the match ended in a 1-1 draw.

St. Louis's high-energy, high-tempo style was found to be lacking at times, whether it was a sloppy pass or just a player not making an expected run. Conversely, Colorado's approach of staying compact and attacking on the counter paid off early and often with a ton of great opportunities to score.

"We knew this was going to be a tough game," St. Louis City SC head coach Bradley Carnell said Saturday night following the draw. "We knew that we'd have to learn to suffer in some moments, we knew there'd be moments of fatigue and fight. We saw that in the first half."

City was 100 percent the second best team through the first 45 minutes, and perhaps the entire game. A lacking performance on defense saw the Rapids fire 21 shots in total, 13 of which were on target. City's star on the night was their captain and goalkeeper Roman Bürki, who stopped the majority of the onslaught on his goal.

"Roman had an excellent game," Carnell acknowledged.

"I think there were three or four offsides calls where Roman made a big save. He comes up big for us on a couple of saves, on the night he was world class. He holds onto the balls he needs to hold onto, his footwork was excellent, always got into the right spots, which makes some of his saves look easy but they were proper high-level, high-class saves. Everyone's a little bit dejected (we didn't keep a clean sheet), but we walk out of here with our heads held high and it's one point gained."

After hanging on and escaping the first half, St. Louis City brought on Indiana Vassilev for Akil Watts to start the second 45, and noticeably played much sharper in midfield. Vassilev's presence in midfield tightened City up, and they forced the issue coming out of the halftime break.

"We thought we were losing our shape and our structure a little bit (in the first half)," said Carnell. "We know we have a (US Open Cup) game coming up on Tuesday, so we had to strategically manipulate the lineup and move a few pieces. When Indy (Vassilev) comes on, he just brings a little more flexibility with and without the ball. I thought he was excellent in both phases of the game and showed a lot of energy."

The change led to big scoring chances for City. Jared Stroud found himself on the end of a Rasmus Alm cross in the 54th minute but side-footed his shot into the outside netting of the goal. Minutes later, Stroud would redeem himself with a lovely curled cross into the path of Rasmus Alm in the 18-yard box, and Alm capitalized, striking the ball with his right foot on his instep, and City were in front in suburban Denver.

“Rasmus (Alm) is growing every single day,” Carnell stated. “He’s feeling more confident in his body, he’s feeling more confident in the tactics and principles. We know what type of games where we might need his speed, his pace, and his directness. He also has final-third quality (shooting ability) as well, he’s coming on in leaps and bounds.”

After the goal would have lifted City spirits, they were brought back down to earth when Brazilian striker Joao Klauss took a seat on the Dick’s Sporting Goods Park turf in the 61st minute, clearly in pain and favoring his right quad. Carnell was quick to substitute Klauss “out of precaution” according to the coach in his post-match presser.

“He (Klauss) felt his quad a little bit,” Carnell noted. “Precautionary to pull him out, but it’s too soon to tell of the severity (of the injury). It’s too soon to tell to have a look and see, but he says he doesn’t feel that bad, whatever that may mean. We’ll just have to assess over the next 24-48 hours.”

Despite a better second half, Colorado would come back in waves to finish the contest after bringing on five different substitutes. Fresh legs changed the flow and tempo of the second half, and Colorado pressed and pressed for an equalizer, dictating possession and passing late on.

It was one of those 70 minute subs, the Colombian Michael Barrios, who found space between defenders on the City backline, and rocketed a shot high inside Roman Bürki’s near post. Bürki had stopped twelve shots at this point of the game, but simply had no chance to stop a 13th effort.

The smattering of fans who stuck through a bitter night in Colorado were treated with a stoppage time equalizer which earned the home team a point they fully deserved. While City fans may look at the standings and look at the game as one they should have won against a Colorado Rapids team that’s only won a single game this season, they’ve learned the same lesson many in Major League Soccer have: it’s hard to win in Colorado.

St. Louis City has a quick turnaround before a midweek US Open Cup game. City hosts USL League One’s Union Omaha at CITYPARK, with kickoff scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday.

CITY2 Corner

MLS NEXT Pro reserve side CITY2 collected their first victory of the 2023 season Sunday afternoon at the University of Denver, where they faced Colorado Rapids 2. 90 minutes saw no goals for either side so the teams settled the result on penalty kicks, which CITY2 won, 5-4.

In what could very well be the best performance for the reserve side this year, they held an undefeated Rapids 2 team at bay for 90 minutes. Granted, of course, they needed some stellar saves from Christian Olivares and a bit of luck from the crossbar in second half stoppage time to do so.

Olivares continues to impress in MLS NEXT Pro action and has quickly become one of the premier goalkeepers across the league. Olivares played for Union Omaha in USL League one last season, and could maybe have his name called to face his old side in US Open Cup play this week.

Of note on Sunday was the return of Ezra Armstrong to the CITY2 fold. Armstrong was a regular for CITY2 during the 2022 season and hasn't played since last August due to injury. He came on as a late sub and logged a few minutes in his return game against Rapids 2.

Next weekend, CITY2 returns home to CITYPARK to host Vancouver Whitecaps 2. Kickoff is set for Sunday afternoon at 5 p.m. All CITY2 matches are available to watch through the MLS NEXT Pro YouTube page.