

St. Louis Returns to US Open Cup With 5-1 Win Over Union Omaha

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis made its triumphant return to the US Open Cup on Tuesday night, as St. Louis City SC hosted Union Omaha in the third round of the tournament at CITYPARK. A good mix of players who haven't seen a lot of time in MLS games this year had the chance to shine in front of the City faithful, and shine they did, winning comfortably 5-1.

A familiar scoreline (the same as the last City home game, against FC Cincinnati two Saturdays ago) against an unfamiliar opponent in Union Omaha. Omaha plays in USL League One, in what is the third tier of US Soccer. The only chance for these teams to meet in a competitive match is the US Open Cup.

What is the US Open Cup, you may ask? Well it's the third oldest club soccer tournament in the world, for one. The US Open Cup has been played since 1914, long before Major League Soccer came to be in the 1990s.

The Open Cup pits teams across amateur and professional soccer throughout the US against each other in one big tournament. Semi-professionals and weekend players in the lower rounds with day jobs can dream to compete against their MLS counterparts.

More importantly, St. Louis has a history in the competition that has extended from the 1920 to today. Seven St. Louis based teams, primarily in the early years of the competition, won 12 different Open Cups.

Those seven are teams comprised of factory workers, brewers, but most importantly some of the nation's best soccer players of their era. They are: Ben Millers (1920), St. Louis Scullins Steel (1922), Stix, Baer & Fuller FC (1933 & 1943), St. Louis Central Breweries (1935), St. Louis Simpkins-Ford (1948 & 1950), St. Louis Kutis SC (1957 & 1986), St. Louis Busch Seniors (1988).

"We spoke to the group today about what this tournament means to the city of St. Louis," said St. Louis City SC Head Coach Bradley Carnell following the game.

"We know there's been many Open Cups won here before, so we wanted to go into this game with a lot of intensity, a lot of bravery."

On Tuesday night, the supporters section on the north end of CITYPARK was adorned with banners of those Open Cup champions from the city. St. Louis soccer fans filled the Downtown West stadium yet again, with a US Open Cup third round record crowd of 22,439.

"The crowd is incredible," said Carnell of the Tuesday night turnout.

"The fans never cease to amaze us. We know what we have here in St. Louis. Teams know that they're not only playing against us, but they're playing against a cauldron of noise."

"I didn't expect a full stadium on a Tuesday night," City winger Celio Pompeu mentioned postgame. "But we know our fans are always with us."

On the pitch, City looked poised to add to those Open Cup champions banners. Three minutes into the match, Aziel Jackson made a slaloming run through almost all of Union Omaha's midfield and defense, and rifled a shot beyond Omaha goalkeeper Rashid Nuhu to put the home side ahead just moments after kickoff.

To their credit, the lower-league side responded very well, and forced a few chances themselves in response. Rashid Nuhu made a bold sweeper-keeper tackle in the 34th minute. Sensing the attack from onrushing City winger Celio Pompeu, the Omaha goalkeeper rushed a good 15-20 yards outside of his box and cut off Pompeu at the pass with a slide tackle.

Aziel Jackson had a chance at goal on the impending loose ball, but couldn't get enough power on his shot to beat the defender guarding Nuhu's goal. While City was largely dictating the game, they were still looking for goals to truly put the game beyond Union Omaha's reach.

It only took two minutes to find the first insurance goal. Celio Pompeu latched onto a ball played down the right wing from midfielder Indiana Vassilev, swung the ball into the box, and a massive deflection off a Union Omaha defender into the back of the net gave City their second.

"Hey, it's still a goal right?" Pompeu joked postgame. "It was a bit of improvisation with me and Indy (Vassilev), I was going to cross it from the free kick, but Indy told me to make the run."

Pompeu played a lovely give-and-go with Akil Watts to create City's third goal just 14 minutes later. Pompeu's pass left the Union Omaha defense standing still, and Watts blasted a shot over Omaha goalkeeper Rashid Nuhu. Nuhu had more work in the second half, unfortunately for him, much of that work was picking the ball out of his own net.

Five minutes later Aziel Jackson would tally City's fourth goal of the night, again with Celio Pompeu assisting the goal. Pompeu collected a pass from City winger Isak Jensen inside the 18-yard box, turned, and fed Jackson for his second goal of the evening.

Pompeu led City with four goal involvements, three assists and his deflected goal. Not just Pompeu, but multiple City players who don't see a lot of minutes during MLS games were given extended minutes tonight almost as an audition for Saturdays.

"We had a lot of ballers, guys playing happy," said Bradley Carnell following the victory.

"We wanted guys to play like that. We wanted guys to send me a message, like 'Hey why am I not playing more minutes'. We believe in what we have here, so it wouldn't make sense to play the same (MLS starters) again. We knew we'd have home field advantage and a hungry, hungry team."

Union Omaha did find their way on the scoresheet with 10 minutes left. A cross into the City box and some sloppy defending saw Omaha striker Pedro Dolabella give the visitors a consolation goal for the few dozen Omaha supporters who made the trip to CITYPARK on Tuesday.

City regular Eduard Löwen came on as a late sub and added a fifth and final goal of the evening. Löwen picked up the ball on the edge of the box, sent an Omaha defender the wrong way, and calmly dispatched a shot into a gaping goal.

City returns to MLS action this weekend for their third match in a week's time. They host Portland Timbers at CITYPARK Saturday night at 7:30.