

St. Louis City SC Hosts Portland In Early-Season Rematch

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - St. Louis City SC readies for their third match in a week on Saturday night, following a 1-1 draw in Colorado against the Rapids last Saturday, and a 5-1 victory over Union Omaha Tuesday night. For the very first time, City plays a team they've already played in MLS, as the Portland Timbers come to town this weekend.

"It does and it doesn't," Said St. Louis City head coach Bradley Carnell, on whether facing Portland once this season helps them this weekend.

“Usually you wouldn’t see these teams again until Matchday 20-something (later in the season), so it’s rare to see a team for the second time around so soon. The game (in Portland) is still fresh in our memories, and fresh in theirs, but they were playing with a depleted squad.”

In their first meeting, Portland was missing some key players due to injury. Portland Designated Player and winger Yimmi Chara looks to be set to return to their starting eleven this weekend after suffering a hamstring injury during Portland’s season-opening win over Sporting Kansas City.

Timbers veteran midfielder Sebastian Blanco, who missed the start of the season with a knee injury suffered in preseason, returned to action this week in Portland’s 3-1 US Open Cup win over Orange County SC. Blanco played just a half hour, but will likely be available for selection this weekend.

Another influential player who missed the first meeting was Timbers left winger Dairon Asprilla, who was recovering from an off-season knee surgery. Since his return four matches ago, Asprilla has two goals and an assist, underlining his contribution to the Oregonian side.

Not to mention Portland has since added a new striker, Ivorian Franck Boli, who was plying his trade for Hungarian powerhouse Ferencváros in Europe before coming stateside. Boli has scored just once in his four MLS matches so far, but scored twice in six matches in Ferencváros’s UEFA Champions League Qualifying campaign last season.

“We’re expecting a strong Portland team, whichever lineup they put out there,” Carnell said during Thursday’s pre-match presser.

“They’re always an opponent to be reckoned with... It changes game-planning just a little bit, each team has a structure, each team has difference-makers and character traits. We try to observe and analyze the different formational tweaks that they make when they have certain players in and when they have certain players out.”

So the Portland Timbers team that comes to CITYPARK Saturday night isn’t the same team that St. Louis City beat on the road earlier this season. Conversely, City will be without one of their key players from that night, as striker Joao Klauss recovers from a quad injury suffered in Colorado.

Klauss could return as soon as next week, he said “didn’t feel too bad” following the match last weekend. But without their 6’3 striker who’s tallied five goals this season, City will need someone to fill Klauss’s cleats at least for Saturday night.

“He’s a really good player, so of course the team changes,” said City midfielder Rasmus Alm on Thursday. “But we have a good squad with a lot of talent, so I’m not too worried. It’s up to us, the other players, to step up when he’s injured. We have to put in the work, I think we’ll do great.”

Perhaps that someone is already in the City starting eleven. Attacking midfielder Eduard Löwen has two goals and three assists in MLS action this season, and scored a late goal in City’s 5-1 win in US Open Cup play this week against Union Omaha.

“I think he’s already inherently doing that (playing as an attacker) for us,” City head coach Bradley Carnell noted of his star midfielder. “He’s already making those contributions further up the field, he helps us in many, many ways.

“Sometimes we can attack with Edu (Löwen) joining in,” Carnell expanded. “Plus Jared Stroud, Indy Vassilev, we have a very fluid midfield. We like to play vertically, that’s not a secret, we like to play brave, that’s also not a secret. I think Edu (attacks) inherently from his instinct.”

Two young City players looking to fill the Klauss void will be Azriel Jackson and Celio Pompeu, who both aced their auditions in Tuesday night’s US Open Cup win. Jackson scored two goals, and Pompeu had three assists, including one to Jackson in the second half.

Both have featured in limited MLS roles this season, but have logged minutes with CITY2 in MLS NEXT Pro in addition to their starring roles Tuesday night. Both certainly have made their case to Bradley Carnell to be in Saturday’s starting eleven, wherever they may fit in.

“(Forward) is not a position I play often,” Celio Pompeu said Tuesday after City’s 5-1 Open Cup win. “But whatever coach says, I’m always here to help, and I’m always ready. The coach can count on me in any position.”

City will need whichever starting eleven to be firing on all cylinders Saturday facing a newly-healthy and resurging Portland Timbers team that will be on the hunt for just their third win of the season.

Kickoff is at 7:30 p.m. at CITYPARK, streaming live on Apple TV, with local radio broadcasts on KYKY Y98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.