

St. Louis City Bows Out Of US Open Cup - Loses 2-1 To Chicago Fire

by Nathan Tucker
May 11 2023 1:05 PM



ST. LOUIS - It's the middle of another busy period for St. Louis City SC. Last Saturday, City traveled to Dallas, but only played 50 minutes before the match was abandoned due to severe weather.

City head coach Bradley Carnell was optimistic about his team despite the 0-0 scoreline before the weather came.

"One of our most complete performances yet," said Carnell.

Indeed, City had definitely improved over their 2-1 loss to Portland at home the week prior.

But those 50 solid minutes are washed away with the abandonment. City's match in Dallas will be rescheduled for a later date.

"We were hoping for another great 45 minutes," Carnell said this week. "Instead we had a great five minutes (before the weather delay)"

On Tuesday, St. Louis City's inaugural US Open Cup run came to an end in suburban Chicago.

City fell 2-1 to Chicago Fire, who started a strong squad after firing head coach Ezra Hendrickson Monday morning.

"They rested six players on the weekend," Carnell noted of Chicago's MLS lineup last Saturday. "Six at least, so they are prioritizing the Open Cup run, regardless of coach."

City had a number of changes from their squad that went to Dallas at the weekend. Aziel Jackson, who scored twice in City's 5-1 US Open Cup win at home against Union Omaha, was back in the starting eleven.

Asked about how Saturday's match that wasn't affected the Tuesday squad, Carnell explained there was a lot of "trickle-down".

"There's a couple of moving parts," Carnell continued. "We're just gauging to see what loads, who can bounce back, we know Tim (Parker)'s suspended, so there's a couple of other things to think about. But we have a competitive group, always ready to go."

German goalkeeper Ben Lundt was yet again called upon for cup action, he also started in that 5-1 Open Cup win. Lundt has had limited time with the big club so far.

With City's highest-paid player being starting goalkeeper (and the highest paid goalkeeper in MLS) Roman Bürki, Lundt will likely see his starts in cup competition and in midweek action to give Bürki a breather.

Just two minutes in, Chicago opened the scoring when Maren Haile-Selassie latched onto a clearing header from Mauricio Pineda that caught the St. Louis back line asleep at the wheel. Lundt flung himself at the shot to no avail.

City was put on the back foot early, forced to create offense, which has been more of a struggle as of late. Sure enough, City had a response, but as the story has gone lately, they were lacking a finishing touch.

City's best chance in the first half was likely from Jared Stroud standing on the edge of the six-yard box in the 15th minute. Stroud pulled his effort well wide of goal. A small sample of City's woes in the final third.

City continued to battle back from a goal down and searched for an equalizer in the second half, but an error at the back in the 75th minute put the match out of reach.

Ben Lundt couldn't control a pass back to him inside the 18-yard box and turned the ball over to Chicago attacker Brian Gutierrez who fed Fabian Herbers in front of a gaping City goal.

Now 2-0 down, and unable to capitalize on scoring chances throughout the match, City was all but out of the Open Cup with 15 minutes plus stoppage time to play. A consolation goal from St. Louis local Homegrown product Miguel Perez, his first in a City shirt, was all that the visitors would take from Chicago in the 2-1 defeat.

Another consolation that Bradley Carnell and St. Louis City can take from the loss in suburban Chicago was the return of Njabulo Blom, who hasn't seen solid time in what feels like ages. Blom came on in the second half and played as a right back, his first time playing the position for City.

Blom has primarily been used as a defensive or holding midfielder in his limited time in MLS to date. During his time playing for Kaizer Chiefs in the South African DSTV Premiership, Blom grew more familiar with the right back role, playing 14 matches in the position since the start of Kaizer Chiefs' 2021-22 season.

Also seeing some game time on the defensive wing was the first City MLS signing, Selmir Pidro. The Bosnian and former FK Sarajevo right back has only seen limited action since arriving in St. Louis, only playing a full 90 minutes in the two US Open Cup matches City's had this year.

Rotation is key for City, maximizing the potential of their depth is crucial in a successful MLS season. They'll be back at it in Chicago proper on Saturday, playing the Fire at Soldier Field on the shores of Lake Michigan.

CITY2 Corner

The City reserves have been put to the sword in the 2023 MLS NEXT Pro season. They lost their first five matches, and have struggled to find consistency week after week.

CITY2 has seen improvement in the past few weeks, and that improvement is turning into results on the pitch. They won in Colorado on penalties after a goalless 90 minutes, but finally had their first win in regulation time on April 30.

A 2-1 victory over Vancouver Whitecaps 2 at CITYPARK was met with joy from the CITY2 players, and the hundreds in attendance in Downtown West that Sunday afternoon.

A standout for the reserve side in the win was Faysal Bettache, who signed with CITY2 after his contract with Queens Park Rangers in the English Championship (the second tier of English soccer) expired in January. Bettache scored one of CITY2's goals in the victory.

Bettache, born in London, most recently played on loan from QPR at English National League (the fifth tier of English soccer) side Aldershot Town. He's already played more minutes for CITY2 than he had in seven appearances for Aldershot in the 2022-23 season.

Between Bettache and CITY2 captain Michael Wentzel, St. Louis City has recruited well from the lower divisions across Europe. Wentzel played for Rot-Weiss Oberhausen in the German Regionalliga West, the fourth tier of German soccer.

Wentzel has huge upside as a promising young defender who came up through the prestigious Borussia Mönchengladbach academy. Wentzel comes with the added bonus that he was born in the US, so despite his German heritage, he wouldn't take up a foreign player slot on the St. Louis City roster.

That's thinking for the future, what guys like Wentzel and Bettache may be able to achieve with City in Major League Soccer.

On Sunday in MLS NEXT Pro, CITY2 fell back to losing ways and fell hard, losing 4-1 to North Texas SC in the stadium that used to house the Texas Rangers.

CITY2's first half was ideal on the road, they snatched a 1-0 lead right before halftime through a John Klein goal in the 40th minute. Momentum would be flipped on its head 10 minutes into the second half however, with CITY2 left back Ezra Armstrong seeing a straight red card that reduced the team to ten men for the final 35 minutes plus stoppage time.

CITY2 has had their defensive struggles with a full team out there, so somewhat naturally the shorthanded CITY2 defense was overwhelmed. Four second half goals ensued, and the reserve side lost their fourth match in regulation this season.

CITY2 looks to reestablish their momentum Wednesday night on the road in Los Angeles, facing LAFC II at 9 p.m. central time.