

City Looks To Right Their Wrongs In Rematch With Fire

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - It's been a busy week for St. Louis City SC, despite playing just 50 minutes of soccer last weekend. Last Saturday they took a trip to suburban Dallas for what Bradley Carnell has said is "the most expensive training session in MLS history", as weather halted their match with FC Dallas just after the start of the second half.

A quick plane ride back to St. Louis, a few training days, and another short plane ride to Chicago on Tuesday to face the Fire in US Open Cup action. That night, City's inaugural Open Cup run came to an end, with the Fire winning 2-1 at SeatGeek Stadium.

The cup win for Chicago came less than 48 hours after they fired their manager, Ezra Hendrickson. While the Fire won, St. Louis City and head coach Bradley Carnell can take consolation in a goal for homegrown product Miguel Perez, his first in City colors.

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.

"I was really excited about getting Njabulo back," Carnell said.

"He's played as a right back before in South Africa. He can play a six (defensive midfielder) and I think you could see a lot of good progressions from him. He created a lot of danger when he came in. So, you know, to take away a positive fact from tonight, he was one of them."

Looking towards Saturday's rematch with Chicago Fire, injuries will still play a factor in the City squad, as striker and leading St. Louis goalscorer Joao Klauss and midfielder/winger Rasmus Alm will both be left out of action this weekend.

"They are still doing their rehab program indoors at the moment," Carnell updated the media on Thursday. "Slowly progressing, not as quick as we would have liked. But we're being rather cautious, we know we have a long summer coming up and those are two valuable positions up the field."

City will look for more than consolations and positives in MLS action Saturday facing the Fire for a second time this week. Instead of out in the suburbs at SeatGeek Stadium, they'll be on the shores of Lake Michigan at Soldier Field.

It hasn't been easy for any visiting team coming to the Chicago area to face the Fire this season. They're undefeated at both their homes, at Soldier Field and SeatGeek Stadium.

However, wins in MLS have been hard to come by, a reason Ezra Hendrickson was given his walking orders on Monday. Chicago sits near the bottom of the MLS Eastern Conference, with two wins, five draws, and three losses on the season.

Frank Klopas has been appointed as the Fire's new head coach, but it's not a new spot for Klopas. Klopas was a player on the 1998 Chicago Fire team that won the MLS Cup and US Open Cup, he's been their sporting director, and this isn't even his first time as a Fire head coach, having manned the post from 2011-2013.

One of Klopas's big tasks will be getting something out of his MLS-record contract star, Xherdan Shaqiri. Shaqiri, who's well-decorated CV includes stints at famous clubs like Bayern Munich, Inter Milan, Liverpool, and Lyon, has looked a shadow of his former self this season.

In his six appearances in MLS games for Chicago this season, Shaqiri has zero goal involvements of any kind. This follows his 13 in 29 appearances last season, which was curtailed by injury.

The Swiss star, a former teammate of City captain Roman Bürki on the Swiss national team, has shown glimpses of what fans became used to in Europe. His last goal was on the world's biggest stage, a goal in last year's World Cup.

As always, Bradley Carnell and City like to focus on what they do first and foremost. "(Saturday) is about us taking care of our details."

"I think we have a few different weapons," said Carnell of his plans for Saturday. "I think we'll have a different way we'll go about the game, I think we have a different mindset going into it. Not to say that the mindset was bad (Tuesday), but we all held ourselves accountable, coaches, players, staff, we just got a few things before the game wrong."

City looks to turn those wrongs into rights Saturday at Soldier Field. Kickoff is set for noon central time, streaming on Apple TV. Local radio broadcasts can be found on KYKY Y98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.

CITY2 Corner

In MLS NEXT Pro action this week, 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 on Sunday evening.

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.

Their fortunes were much better on Wednesday, but unfortunately for the reserve side, they let a two-goal lead slip from their grasp in SoCal as they traveled to face Los Angeles FC 2. CITY2 still held on for a 90-minute 2-2 draw and won in the penalty shootout 5-3 to take two points on the night.

A standout for the reserve side in the penalty shootout win was striker John Klein, right at a time where the MLS City is struggling to find goals. Klein has been making a case to be included in an MLS team sheet, and scored both of CITY2's goals in LA on Wednesday.

Also impressive on Wednesday 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 assisted John Klein's opening goal.

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.

Faysal Bettache also really impressed on April 30, where CITY2 hosted Vancouver Whitecaps 2 at CITYPARK. Bettache netted a goal and was close to another, and was constantly a threat on the break for CITY2.

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 doesn't take up a foreign player slot on the St. Louis City roster.

