

Chicago 1, City 0 - Ten Men St. Louis City Fall To Fire For Second Time

by Nathan Tucker
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CHICAGO - There was plenty of City Red in the stands at Soldier Field in Chicago on Saturday, eager to see the potential birth of a rivalry between St. Louis City SC and the hosting Chicago Fire. Instead, they were given a sloppy, disjointed game of soccer, one which City lost, 1-0.

The opening minutes were all Chicago, much like their meeting in the US Open Cup on Tuesday. Not for the first time this season, City goalkeeper and captain Roman Bürki

was forced to come up with huge saves early to keep his team from falling behind early in the contest.

In the 39th minute, St. Louis midfielder and Homegrown talent Miguel Perez committed a foul that could have seen him sent off if not for referee Filip Dujic's leniency. Perez was already on a yellow card and pulled down Chicago's Xherdan Shaqiri, setting up a Fire free kick from roughly 30 yards away from goal.

The Swiss international Shaqiri whipped in a free kick and Chicago captain Rafael Czichos waltzed past the City defensive line, met Shaqiri's cross with a toe-poke shot past Roman Bürki to put the hosts in front just before halftime.

"I thought Shaqiri was going to shoot," said Bürki postgame. "(The free kick) was in perfect position for him and I know he has a really good shot, so I was surprised that he crossed the ball. But (the goalscorer Czichos) is at the end of the line where we have to be aware of that. It cannot happen that a guy is all by himself (on goal)."

While Roman Bürki can only control what happens in his box, and what he can prevent from going in the City goal, he voiced his frustrations about the team's lack of attacking impetus, which has become an ongoing struggle since the injury to Joao Klauss.

"No, I'm far away from being happy about our performance today," Bürki stated.

"We had almost no real chance to score a goal. They had a lot. We started the game like the game last Tuesday, just not ready. It's just not good enough and that is not our standard."

The best chance City had to score all match was thanks to a run from Celió Pompeu, who latched onto a loose Fire pass, beat a Fire defender with some slick dribbling, but was pressured by another defender who forced him into a rather tame shot on goal.

"On another day he probably slots that one home," said City head coach Bradley Carnell.

"We're not blaming anyone, right? We're all in here as a team. But these are moments that define games. There's different moments that dictate the tempo and the dynamic and the outcome of the game. So, you know, we're just not finding enough of these moments."

City's day went from bad to worse in the 70th minute in the second half when John Nelson was shown a red card for his second yellow card offense of the afternoon. Now down to ten men, City was forced to change shape with substitutes Jared Stroud and Njabulo Blom playing defensive roles on the right side.

It's the second time this week that Njabulo Blom has come on as a second half substitute for City, having also done so in their Open Cup defeat on Tuesday. To his credit, Blom was the glue that kept the team together, or at least kept their hopes of salvaging a result alive, with superb defensive play, breaking up a number of Chicago's attempts to push upfield.

"He's good on the ball and he's brave and he's tenacious in tackles," Carnell said of Blom on Saturday.

"We need to get Njabulo minutes, and we knew we could progress him to at least 45 today. There's potential now for solid minutes for Njabulo to progress. And the aim is to get him turning up to 90 minutes in the next couple of weeks, so, at least we look optimistically with regards to that."

There were times with ten men in the second half that City looked their sharpest all game, but those times were fleeting at best. Really, neither side looked tremendous on Saturday. When Chicago had a man advantage, they failed to really create anything offensively despite having a number of counter-attack break attempts.

It was a relatively quiet game for City's star midfielder Eduard Löwen. He had a few dipping shots that went just wide of goal, but was mostly a non-factor.

Perhaps Löwen's biggest contribution on Saturday was being substituted for Caden Glover, the 16-year-old who's mostly played for reserve side CITY2 this season. Glover was St. Louis City's very first Homegrown signing, and he is the first player born in 2007 to debut in Major League Soccer.

Again for City, it's an MLS game with no rewards other than consolation prizes. City's last MLS win feels distant now, almost exactly one month ago was the weather-delayed 5-1 win over FC Cincinnati.

The good news in all of this is despite the fact that St. Louis City has recorded just one point in the past month, they're still third in the MLS Western Conference. Their high-flying start still sees City with the highest goals scored total in the league, despite their offensive woes as of late.

Now all eyes are on a big home matchup with a rejuvenated Sporting Kansas City team on May 20. SKC have won their last two since the return of their star striker Alan Pulido, and will be up for their first matchup with their new I-70 rivals.

Between City's need for a win to stay in the hunt at the top of the MLS Western Conference, and wanting to get a win over what seems likely to be their fiercest MLS rival, Saturday's meeting at CITYPARK is one Bradley Carnell and crew will have to be ready for.