

City Looks to Rebound Against I-70 Rivals Sporting Kansas City

by Nathan Tucker
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ST. LOUIS - After a few weeks away, St. Louis City SC returns home on Saturday to take on a resurgent Sporting Kansas City team. After their less-than-ideal week in Chicago, City head coach Bradley Carnell says energy is still high in the home team's camp.

"One thing about this group, I can never fault their effort or application," Carnell said Thursday at CITYPARK.

“Every time we come into training, it’s very professional, and very honest with reflections, whether it’s on the field or through video feedback, it’s been very honest. It’s one of the things I love about this group.”

City has been forced to own up to two lackluster performances in Chicago facing the Fire last week. A disjointed 2-1 loss in US Open Cup play on Tuesday, May 9 was followed by a rather drab 1-0 loss last Saturday.

Coaches and players alike voiced frustrations in those performances. “Not good enough” and “not up to standard” were constant lines from players and coaches alike following the games in Chicago.

Saturday isn’t just the start of what one can presume will be St. Louis City’s fiercest rivalry, it’s also a chance for the team to get some confidence back and find the form that took them to the top of MLS earlier this season.

“There’s something always on the line,” Bradley Carnell said, noting the impact of a rivalry matchup. “We don’t want to add extra hype, extra pressure on our players. I think there’s enough on our plate right now. The next game is the most important.”

Carnell’s pragmatic approach comes as Sporting Kansas City is truly finding its form, unbeaten in their last three MLS matches. Notably, SKC beat a Seattle Sounders team that truly thumped St. Louis City in early April, and they drew 1-1 with Los Angeles FC, who sit three points ahead of City in the MLS Western Conference.

So on that evidence, not only is Sporting KC finding their footing and starting to see their paltry win total rise, they’re performing at a high level against some of Major League Soccer’s absolute best.

Since Alan Pulido’s return to full fitness and the Kansas City starting eleven, they’ve played better, more confident soccer. Pulido might have lost a step at 32 years of age but has been a fan-favorite since he arrived from Chivas Guadalajara.

While Pulido only has one goal on the season, which proved to be the game-winner in Seattle, his presence has rejuvenated a team and a fanbase that was calling for just about anyone running Sporting to be canned after their dreadful 0-3-7 (win-draw-loss) start after ten matches.

SKC is playing their best soccer of 2023 right now, while City has been playing their worst.

Primarily, City has struggled offensively, not scoring more than a single goal per game in MLS since the weather-delayed 5-1 win over FC Cincinnati on April 15.

Playing with the high-energy, high-pressing, over-attacking style that St. Louis City wants to be known for only really works when there's an end product to the offensive attack. It's a system that is likely to give up a goal or two, which makes scoring all the more important.

"I'm feeling quite comfortable with our group," Carnell said. "We saw Klauss on the field (in training) today, which is a welcome sight and energizes the group... But it's no secret, we need to break down a team, that's been our M-O this week."

"It's called a soccer match," Carnell quipped. "We've created some respect around the league for attacking and being on the front foot. Will (Sporting KC) try to mitigate that? Sure. Do we have a plan to counter that? Sure. That's just the progression and flow of the game, and a goal always helps. Goals in games dictate outcomes, and for us, we want to race to the first goal."

As Bradley Carnell mentioned there, striker Joao Klauss was fit enough to return to full training this week, following a few week absence after going down with a quad injury in Colorado on April 22. Rasmus Alm and Joakim Nilsson are the only players ruled out to injury, while defender John Nelson is suspended following his red card in Chicago last Saturday.

The Klauss news will be a delight to City faithful, as those goals Bradley Carnell mentioned dried up once the Brazilian striker was hurt. Even when he isn't scoring the goals, Klauss's presence as a striker fits City's style of play, and plugging square pegs into round holes hasn't really worked for Carnell.

Officially, Klauss is ruled as questionable for Saturday's match at CITYPARK. Given how Carnell has slowly reintegrated injured players into the team, fans can expect Klauss to appear as a substitute this weekend, similar to how Njabulo Blom has been progressively picking up minutes as he recovered from a groin injury.

Klauss coming off the bench could give the likes of Célio Pompeu another MLS start and another chance for the young Brazilian to feature more regularly even with Klauss healthy. Célio credits his success coming off the bench to City's game plan.

"Being disciplined in my position, communicating with our guys, sticking to our principles," Célio Pompeu listed his keys to success in his MLS time this season. "That's the only way we can be successful, if everybody does their job."

Célio believes that job becomes a bit easier at home, with the 22,000-plus at CITYPARK roaring he and his City teammates on.

“Our fans are like an extra player when we play here (at CITYPARK),” said Célio Pompeu Thursday. “They give us more energy, our fans push us, we never stop running. It’s always good to have the fans screaming and supporting us.”

City will need all that support as they look to stifle a surging Sporting Kansas City team. It’s a bit of a late one, with kickoff after 8:30 pm.

This is the first St. Louis City game available on cable television, with the broadcast airing on Fox Sports 1 along with the usual Apple TV broadcast. Local radio broadcasts are also available on KYKY Y98.1 FM in English and KXOK 102.9 FM in Spanish.